

## **Doing Justice to the Dead**

**Date:** Thursday 25 November 2004

**Time:** 6pm

**Venue:** Old Theatre, Old Building

**Speakers:** Lincoln Crawford OBE, David Ould and Dr John Torpey

**Chair:** Professor Conor Gearty

### **David Ould**

Thank you very much. I often feel I'm sent out by my organisation to talk at events like this because I'm perhaps the only person who is still in the organisation that looks as though they might have been a British abolitionist at the end of the 18th century! Excuse my beard!

Anti-Slavery International, we were founded in 1839, we always say we are the world's oldest international human rights organisation and I haven't found yet anybody to challenge it so I assume we're probably right and we were formed by a lot of the radicals, particularly the radicals who've been working to end the slave trade and the use of slavery in the British Empire and what they basically said was, as people did at that time, what about the rest of the world and since then that's what we've been working on.

What I want to talk about and try and do some linkage is slavery. Does it really still exist, are we talking about the same thing? I think there was something very interesting that was said earlier on, "there's nobody alive who lived through slavery". There maybe nobody alive who lived through the transatlantic slave trade but I would certainly argue that there are lots of people alive who lived through slavery. I want to look a bit about what types of slavery we work against, where in the world we're working and at the end of it a little bit about what can be done.

You've got two commemorations floating around at the moment. 2004 is called the UN International Year to Commemorate the Struggle Against Slavery and its Abolition, and 2007 will be very much in the mind of the UK, we've already heard

from the Government that they intend to do a lot on it, is the 200th anniversary of the abolition of UK shipping involvement in the slave trade so we still had slaves, we still had slaves in the British Empire, but ships could no longer carry them and make money out of them.

Recently there have been some interesting discussions at the United Nations about slavery and it is quite difficult sometimes to get the UN and other bodies to pick up slavery at senior level. Lots of what I would call middle ranking parts of the Commission for Human Rights will talk about slavery but to get it spoken about at high levels is more difficult. But both Kofi Annan and Koichiro Matsura have called for international recognition that in new and changing forms, slavery and trafficking remain serious abuses of human rights that need wider recognition and action by the international community and I think that's very much what we would agree with, that's what very much we're looking to do.

The transatlantic slave trade and slavery within the British Empire was ended by a collaboration, and it was a collaboration, of information about slavery and it's realities that came from slaves who broke away, who ran away, who stood up for their rights, who tried desperately to get other people out of slavery and that sort of, shall we call it liberal consensus, moral rectitude that was floating around in the UK at the time that were willing to lobby on their behalf, to really put pressure on the government and it took an awfully long time. We always forget this, it took something like 60 years of hard campaigning at both ends of the scale and what Anti-Slavery International is trying to do today is almost exactly the same. Here we are, we sit in London, we don't have offices all around the world but what we do have are partnerships with lots of local organisation, lots of local people working in their own countries, in their own back yards. Many of them are people who have already escaped from slavery, who were brought up in slavery conditions or around people in slavery and want to do something to end it and will seek support from wherever they can get it and quite rightly so. What we are trying of course to do is to get action, action by you, action by all sorts of people but particularly action by governments and international governmental agencies. Years ago we probably would have said send a gunboat, these days we try and look for slightly more carefully thought out answers, shall we call them. But what is slavery?

Well, that's the United Nations definition, 'the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the rights of ownership are exercised' and I think there's an interesting bit about that. To my mind the crucial area certainly in terms of contemporary slavery is this question of "any or all", any of the powers attaching to the rights of ownership and to try and put that into perspective. One of the areas that we do quite a lot of work on are issues of migrant workers and particularly migrant domestic workers and this is an issue all around the world. One way that control is exercised over domestic workers is by taking away their passports, taking away their documents and certainly, literally taking these things away from them and I would certainly argue that what this is doing is exercising some form of partial ownership over those people, because you're taking away their rights to leave. You're taking away that ability to exercise control, over your own lives, over where you work; and of course many of these people are migrant workers, they don't know what the rules are, they don't know who they might turn to and they can be very frightened and it is a very good, and I'm afraid effective, method of exercising control. I might add that the British Government has recently announced and I do mean recently, about last week, that they intend to criminalise the taking away of somebody else's passport, which does at least show that lobbying after a while does have an effect but it's taken something like 7 years to get that through.

But modern slavery, contemporary slavery, how we do we try and define it as wider than just simple partial ownership, what does it mean in reality today. The area that we've worked to most is something called the United Nations Supplementary Convention on Slavery and Slavery-Like Practices and that talks about five types of slavery. Traditional slavery, that is the ownership; bonded labour is where people agree to take a loan and in return they will work for that person to pay off the loan. Now there is nothing wrong with that, the trick comes when the only person who decides how much work you might do, what work you might do, when you might do it, is the person who lent you the money and the reasons that you take the money are many and various and almost always forced and it is a wonderful way of retaining labour when you need it. Historically it is a very old form of slavery, you'll find it both in the Old Testament and the Koran. Both talk about bonded labour and

they both say that you should release your bonded labourers after a short period of time. I think it's 4 and 5 years but don't quote me.

The point is that historically and the way it worked was very much in agricultural communities, very often people were protected from the worst excesses of it by those communities, everybody knew what the problems were. What is happening in modern life is that it is being used as another way of finding cheap and servile forms of labour, again when you need it. Numbers probably millions, probably tens of millions, mainly in south Asia but you do get it elsewhere. So for instance some women are being trafficked into the UK today who will have borrowed money in order to get them here and they are told they need to work to pay off that loan but again the amount of work, and how the loan is paid off is not something that's in their control.

Serfdom, the most traditional – most of us are descended from serfs. You belonged not so much to a person but to the area where you worked, the land that you worked on. It's still banned, it's pretty uncommon as a standard form of slavery and nearly always these days it would be related to bonded labour. Different I think is the issue of servile forms of marriage. Women bought or sold into marriage without the right to refuse. A difficult area, we do some work on it but again the bearded gentleman in London syndrome becomes quite difficult here. We've worked with local partners and the crucial issue as far as we're concerned in this is what the alternatives that you can offer are. What are the alternatives if you say to women that they do have the right to refuse marriage. If they are then exiled from the village, if they are then exiled from their whole community, you clearly have to be able to offer them something as an alternative before you can tell them that they're free to make those choices and to give them those choices. You might like to think about that, it's quite a difficult area in terms of how you work on these sorts of issues.

Giving or selling children into exploitation – so, if you work at home, however much your parents make you work, it's not slavery. It might be exploitative but it isn't slavery. If you're given or sold to somebody else to exploit you as a child then it can be slavery. It's certainly the most high profile area that we work on because everybody is concerned about children. But don't get me wrong, it is serious, it

affects hundreds of thousands, probably millions of children in an area that is fairly uncommonly talked about on which we've done a lot of work. Children who are bought, sold and, increasingly we hear talked about today, trafficked into domestic work. These are children who are sent away from home to work in domestic service for somebody else. They are very much abused or many of them can be. However, some of them are very well looked after, brought up and actually do better out of it. Three years ago we had a programme officer in Anti-Slavery International who came from Burkina Faso. She had actually been sent away from home to work as a domestic servant for a relative in Burkina Faso and as a result got much better education than she would have done in the village, went to university and gained very much out of it. So this is a system if its used properly can work very well but when it's abused and it is abused, means that 8 year old, 9 year olds, 10 year olds are working 12, 13, 14 hours a day, no schooling, no nothing and nobody to turn to. Increasingly these are not within a village, these are people who are sent from villages to towns, even to other countries and that's where the problems come. How do you see where they are, how do you look after them, how do you offer them any opportunities.

Historical slavery and contemporary slavery, are they linked at all? I think the answer is definitely yes and transatlantic slave trade and all that went with it was definitely one of the most terrible issues of European history. There's no doubt about that and it was a tragedy for Africa and that tragedy continues today. What we would increasingly see is that the issues that forced people into slavery or allowed people to keep slaves are similar today than they were that long ago, 200 years ago. It's to do with racism, it's to do with discrimination. They were clearly at the heart of the slave trade and I think I can argue that in lots of areas that we're working today they're at the heart of what we're talking about.

Trafficking of migrant workers to the UK – you've probably all saw the issue of Chinese cockle pickers and how they were treated by gang masters. Now, I'm not sure whether most or any of those people were in slavery, but it is certainly true that many Chinese migrant workers in the UK are bonded. Now that's straight forward bonding to other Chinese people who send them abroad from China but the problem in the UK is that we do not do very much about it and why do we not do very much

about it, because they are other people from other countries over there. If people, workers from this country were treated that way the law would clamp down very quickly. Because they are migrant workers, because potentially they are illegal migrant workers, we do much less.

Bonded labourers in south Asia – I talked about bonded labourers. The thing I didn't mention was that almost 100% of them are from the Dhalit community or the Adivasi tribal peoples or from other forms of minority elements and the reason of course they are held in bonded labour and the reason when there are perfectly good laws in all these countries that ban bonded labour, that nothing is done about it, is because they are the bottom of the caste heap, the people who are discriminated against.

Sudan – Darfur has already been mentioned, but Sudan since 1978 has had war and there has been slavery and abductions going on of Dinka people from the south into the north. It was certainly discrimination against African people. I would argue by the way, not simply discrimination by white moors in the north against black Africans from the south but rather more complex than that, but certainly discrimination against people of African descent and then something called and we are increasingly calling descent-based slavery.

This is a traditional form of slavery in areas of North Africa, West Africa, where people from communities that have historically been called the slave communities, the slave castes, are still held in the way that world has always worked. Very much nomadic communities, very remote communities often, but there are thousands and thousands of them. We did a study recently in Niger which found very quickly eleven thousand people that we actually interviewed or a partner in Niger, Timidria, interviewed. When asked questions such as, who decides whether your children should go to school, the answer was the master decides; whether and who your daughter should marry, the master, and there is no doubt that comes about because of discrimination.

An end to slavery, that's what I'd like to see but it's been a bit slow. Three things I think are needed, awareness, understanding, action. Awareness, we're getting better, lots of discussion about trafficking and lots of links within that to slavery.

When I joined the organisation in 1991 if I talked about slavery only one thing crossed people's minds and that was history whereas today you get a little bit better than that but I think it's certainly true that this awareness is not linked with very much understanding of what slavery is about and the realities that it means for life of people. What we try to do is to put information in the public domain, to tell you the realities of what it is. We publish books, we've got a website. You can see all that information there and then action, become members. We've got people around here, you can come to the library, you can see what we're doing. We're very anxious to tell you about it. We have campaigns, we want money and all that sort of thing and I think just to round it up, there was a debate as recently as the 14th October in the House of Commons on slavery and Fiona Mactaggart who is the Home Officer Minister responsible said that raising understanding and awareness of slavery issues on Britain's part in the slave trade, its abolition and how we can work to eradicate modern day slavery is the best way in which we can move forward. I can only echo that.

Thank you very much.

[APPLAUSE]