

# Why Did the British Give Reparations to Slave Owners?

The topic of slavery always evokes a flurry of emotions. Such was the case when [the British government announced in 2015](#) that it had completed the payment of a loan borrowed to compensate slave owners for their losses due to the abolition of slavery.

In an age when many are demanding that whites make reparations to blacks for the latter's time in enslavement, the idea that the British government would compensate slaveholding planters seems outrageous. Such responses are expected because people are using current moral standards to judge historical realities. Thus, it is helpful to look at the surrounding socio-political events during the time the loan was made, a fact which suggests that such a move was a feasible alternative to slavery at the time.

While the idea of owning people seems abhorrent today, this was not always the case. English laws and customs placed a premium on protecting the rights of property owners. Questioning one's right to own property provoked contention, even when the property was a human being, and British colonial planters fiercely guarded their right to acquire slaves and appropriate their labor. This principle extended to indentureship in Barbados, where white indentured workers were perceived as [property](#) and could be transferred to the heirs of their owners.

The British colonies in the West Indies valued autonomy and often resented Britain's involvement in West Indian affairs. As a result, the British government had to tread carefully when dealing with West Indian colonies or face their wrath.

The concerns of West Indian planters were voiced by [pro-](#)

[slavery](#) parliamentarians in England who were unwilling to dissolve the plantation system without a fight. Pro-slavery lobbyists galvanized the support of non-planters by arguing that abolishing slavery without compensating property owners would more broadly erode protection for property rights—an issue with great primacy in England. Their messages were carried by newspapers, journals, and pamphlets admonishing abolitionists for hesitating to compensate enslavers.

Contextualizing the case for compensation, Kathleen Mary Butler shows in her book, [The Economics of Emancipation](#), that the pro-slavery West Indies Interest sought to guilt parliamentarians into granting compensation for lost property. “The [West Indies] Interest argued that successive British governments had condoned and encouraged slave holding,” Butler writes, also noting that publications of the time “pointed out that various acts of Parliament had encouraged slave owners to spend vast sums of money to buy land and slaves.” Thus, emancipating slaves without compensating their owners would be a “flagrant breach of faith.”

Jamaican publications also weaponized the rhetoric of property rights to bolster the case for compensation, Butler explains. The editor of the *Jamaica Courant*, Augustus Hardin Beaumont, simultaneously criticized slavery and noted that enslavers deserved compensation. Beaumont blamed the British for being slavery enablers, arguing that it was only fair for British taxpayers to compensate West Indian planters.

These views were so widespread that black slave owners were also unwilling to part with slavery unless they received compensation for their lost property. In 1831, Butler writes, free people of color gathered in Jamaica to “discuss the problems of abolition” and its effect on property rights. The chairman of the meeting was Benjamin Scott Moncrieff, who himself owned 400 slaves.

This group endorsed compensation as a tool to safeguard their

property rights, Butler writes, “object[ing] strongly to comments that Stephen Lushington, the British abolitionist, had allegedly made to the effect that in Jamaica the free people of color had authorized him to emancipate their slaves.” This never happened, the group claimed, stressing “their determination to defend their property and surrender it only ‘for the most full and ample compensation.’” Their resolutions were published in Jamaican newspapers and sent to pro-slavery outlets in Britain.

Politics is futile without compromise, so to abolish slavery, the British government had no option but to negotiate with pro-slavery forces who saw abolition as a violation of property rights. Compensation was a creative strategy, and without it, abolition likely would have been delayed, causing blacks to serve a longer time in slavery. Indeed, it was likely the best tradeoff that the political climate could accommodate at that time.

Despite the complexities of the decision, many still think that the British owe blacks an apology. The truth is, the British atoned for their actions years ago, through the vehicles of the 1845 Aberdeen Act and the West Africa Squadron.

The Aberdeen Act intercepted [Brazilian](#) ships suspected of trafficking Africans and prosecuted slave traders in British courts. The West Africa Squadron, a part of the British Navy, had been in effect for many years before 1845, and sought to intercept ships and clamp down on the slave trade. [Historians](#) assert that maintaining this Squadron cost nearly \$7 million in addition to the many lives of sailors who died while manning it.

Suppressing the global slave trade incurred considerable expenses for the British and few appreciate this bold political move that came at the expense of British taxpayers. Indeed, it is ironic that the British are

instructed to atone for the slave trade when their counterparts in the Middle East and Africa were coerced into abolishing slavery due to Western [directives](#). Compared to its peers, Britain seems like a moral superstar and should be lauded for taking a tough stance when others vacillated on the question of slavery.

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