

Commentary on: The Black Country flag row shows Britain is still blind to its colonial past, by Matthew Stallard. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/jul/21/black-country-flag-britain-colonial-past-slavery>.

Matthew Stallard, historian of class and race at the University of Manchester, has written a perceptive article criticising the British people's collective amnesia when uncomfortable truths about our colonial past are publicly raised. In this column he comments on the backlash directed at a Black MP when she raised concerns about a regional flag and the slavery connotations of its imagery.

In 2017 during her maiden speech in the House of Commons newly elected MP Eleanor Smith claimed that the Black Country's flag was offensive and that she had serious concerns about the connotations of the image with its historical association with the slave trade. Additionally, she said that the flag should represent the voices all the population in all its diversity rather than be the "only brand image of the Black Country" (Madeley, 2017b). The flag, which includes a chain as part of its imagery, "represents the manufacturing heritage of the area – specifically the chainmakers who were common during ... the industrial heyday" (Leather, 2017). However, as Hirsch (2018, quoted in Sanghera, 2021, p.306-307) has pointed out, "the foundries and workshops ... produced chains, fetters, collars, padlocks and manacles, which would be taken to the ports of Liverpool and Bristol and used on the slave ships from Africa and in the British plantations during slavery in the Caribbean and North America." The extent of the industry was such that one metalworker advertised his specialism as "Negro Collar and Handcuff Maker."

The backlash against Eleanor Smith was predictable. Dudley South Tory MP Mike Wood praised the flag in the House of Commons, as did Prime Minister Theresa May, both congratulating the designer and claiming pride in the industrial heritage the flag depicts, while relating Eleanor Smith's criticism (Madeley, 2017a) but without mentioning the complicity between metalwork manufacturers and the slavery industry. In the same article the West Midlands newspaper *Express & Star*, backed up this criticism with a Twitter quote from Black former footballer Stan Collymore: "No link (no pun intended) between the flag and slavery. None." A readers' poll conducted by the newspaper and reported by Stallard showed that 95% of people were supportive of the flag and disagreed that it was racist.

Eleanor Smith's request for an "intelligent conversation" about the flag and its connotations (Madeley, 2017b) was completely ignored in the subsequent media storm. No attempt was made to engage with her or the issues she was raising, namely the failure of the flag to represent the "collective rainbow" of diversity, and the intimate relationship between the local metalworking industries and the slave trade. But should we be surprised by this? Modern Britain has a difficult relationship with its colonial past. All too often people see a criticism of any aspect of British history as a criticism of modern-day Britain. It is not. But the reality is that slavery in Britain happened and was facilitated by the metal working industries of the Black Country.

A consequence of this collective amnesia with its failure to recognise the debt Britain owes its former colonies is reflected in conversations around Britain's attitude to the development aid it gives to the majority world. Earlier this year the BBC's James Landale (2022) reported on cuts to Britain's foreign aid budget. A debate ensued which focused on the Tory government's strategy of linking aid to promote foreign policy, with the then Foreign Secretary Liz Truss, saying that this policy would benefit the UK by "increasing jobs and growth at home." Labour spokesperson, MP Sarah Champion criticised linking aid with trade deals, while the Lib Dems' Layla Moran called the decision "callous" and a "blow for the world's poorest." The term 'aid' was used throughout Landale's article, but not one mention was made of Britain's colonial past, let alone slavery, leaving the feeling that the

assistance we provide to majority world countries is perceived as a magnanimous gift rather than an owed obligation for past wrongs.

Is aid a gift from this wealthy nation to the poor to be used in ways dictated by the donor, or is it the repayment of a debt (reparations if you like) for the devastating evils perpetrated by Britain during its colonial era? This is a conversation we need to have in this country.

Lansdale, J. (2022) 'Foreign aid: UK cuts funding to UN in change of strategy'. 16th May.
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-61466163> (Accessed: 22nd September 2022).

Leather, H. (2017) 'Black Country flag 'racism' row: What is the flag and what does it represent?', *Express & Star*, 19th July. Available at: <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/2017/07/19/what-is-the-black-country-flag-and-what-does-it-represent/> (Accessed: 22nd September 2022).

Madeley, P. (2017a) 'Prime Minister Theresa May backs Black Country flag after 'racism' claims', *Express & Star*, 19th July. Available at: <https://www.expressandstar.com/news/politics/2017/07/19/prime-minister-backs-gracie-in-black-country-flag-row/> (Accessed: 22nd September 2022).

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Sanghera, S. (2021) *Empireland: How imperialism has shaped modern Britain*. London: Penguin Books.