Why Reparatory Storytelling Matters

Reflections on Professor Sir Hilary Beckles Lecture at The Institute of Commonwealth Studies, University of London – 17th November 2025

By Stephen Lewis - a Depths of Paradise blog

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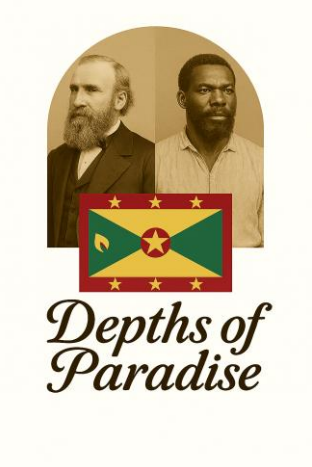

Professor Sir Hilary Beckles is the Chair of CARICOM Reparations Commission and he delivered a powerful and far-reaching lecture in London during the their first official visit to the UK this week. From the moment he started speaking, he made it clear that reparatory justice is not a fringe conversation, but in fact is likely to be **the major political movement of the 21st century**.

He began by looking back to the 2001 Durban Conference, where Caribbean delegates first tried to bring reparatory justice onto the world stage and were met with anger, denial and outright hostility. That reaction, he explained, was nothing new. For centuries, moral arguments about slavery were pushed aside in favour of economic convenience. The same resistance that abolitionists faced in the 18th and 19th centuries still colours the way the topic is approached today. And throughout all those debates, the voices of the enslaved themselves were consistently ignored.

As Beckles walked the audience through the history, he didn't mince words. Britain developed chattel slavery which was a legal system that defined Africans as property rather than human beings. This system generated enormous wealth for Britain while inflicting mass death, exploitation and generational trauma across the Caribbean. When slavery was abolished, it was not the enslaved who received compensation but the slave owners, who were paid £20 million as part of the Abolition Act of 1833. The enslaved people received nothing.

He noted that Britain transported over 3 million Africans into slavery across the Caribbean and that survival rates were catastrophic. Jamaica received around 1.3 million enslaved Africans, but at emancipation only 300,000 were alive. For Barbados 600,000 enslaved Africans were received, but only 83,000 remained.

It is estimated that 127,600 Africans were taken to Grenada between 1669 and 1808. 95% of these were taken under British rule between 1761 and 1800. Only 23,658 slaves were registered on 31st July 1834.

You would reasonably expect a population to increase over generations but this was not the experience of the enslaved. Beckles asked "How do you reduce a population by 70–85% over two centuries?" While some would have been manumitted, the economic model was to work these people to death and then replace them. He argued that Britain's chattel slavery system designed to extract maximum labour while shortening life expectancy was genocide.

He then turned to the present. The Caribbean still lives with the consequences of slavery and colonialism every day. This is visible in poverty rates, inadequate housing, chronic underdevelopment and health crises like diabetes and hypertension,

He said that diabetes is "inherited" not because Caribbean people are genetically predisposed, but because slavery created metabolic, nutritional and social conditions that still shape the health of their descendants today. Sugar was seen as a food and not as a luxury sweetener.

Beckles grouped diabetes and hypertension together as "chronic diseases of colonial origin." He explained that 60% of Caribbean adults over 60 live with either diabetes or hypertension or both. In his view, the two diseases are medical evidence of slavery's ongoing harm.

He explained that Caribbean countries struggled when they were given independence because they inherited extreme poverty created by slavery. Britain offered no development support, there was no infrastructure and no industries. Nations had to build from scratch and were reliant on high interest loans to fund their own development. On top of this they continue to be highly vulnerable to natural disasters which sets them back years. Consequently, they are left with massive debts and a global economy stacked against small nations. This, he said was the logical outcome of centuries of extraction, followed by a complete absence of support when independence arrived.

Against this backdrop, Beckles explained what CARICOM is actually asking for and what it is not. Contrary to common misconception, CARICOM is *not* demanding "millions and billions" of cash payouts. Instead, **the focus is on partnership: long-term, structured collaboration with Britain in areas such as public health, education, skills development, technology transfer, climate resilience, debt relief and sustainable housing**. This approach reflects the CARICOM 10-Point Plan, which is currently being updated to address gendered harms and diaspora concerns.

He stressed that this is not just a Caribbean conversation as it has become a global movement. CARICOM is building alliances with diaspora groups across Europe, the African Union, and countries in Latin America such as Brazil and Colombia. He noted

that universities have also stepped up, with Glasgow University committing £20 million to public health research and launching a joint MA in Reparatory Justice.

British institutions feature heavily in this history. Beckles reminded the audience that universities, churches and elite families were deeply involved in slavery, and he welcomed those who are now taking responsibility: the Church of England, the Gladstone family, the Trevelyans, and several UK universities that are confronting their historical ties.

He also offered clarity on language. “Reparatory justice” is the principle, the idea that victims of historic crimes deserve justice. “Reparations” refers to the practical measures that put that justice into action, whether through development programmes, health partnerships or educational investment. Opponents often weaponise the term “reparations” to create fear about money, but the actual vision is rooted in collaboration, fairness and shared progress.

His call to Britain was simple but profound: approach this as an enlightenment moment, not a moment of guilt. He sees this as a chance for a more humane, truthful partnership between Britain and the Caribbean. After all, as he pointed out, “we are all in this together”.

Modern Britain’s wealth was built, in part, on slavery. Acknowledging that is a foundation for honest dialogue.

The audience Q&A broadened the conversation even further. People asked about UN guidance urging the UK to apologise; comparisons with California’s state-level reparations work; the role of education in public understanding; diaspora mobilisation through groups like the Rastafari movement;

A historian in the audience talked about Britain’s promise to pay the Caribbean the equivalent of £3 billion in development aid after World War II as recognition for its wartime support but delivered almost none of it. This forced newly independent nations into debt and underdevelopment. This showed that Britain had already acknowledged the need for development support so today reparatory justice is asking Britain to complete the unfinished work it promised in the 1940s and 1950s.

Members of the Commission explained that they are volunteers working across the region and the diaspora to coordinate this global effort. Their aim is straightforward: to encourage a government-to-government conversation, not a unilateral demand. They emphasised that sustainable, respectful partnership is the heart of this movement.

Listening to Professor Sir Hilary Beckles describe the mission of the CARICOM Reparations Commission, was highly inspirational and underlined the importance and relevance of *Depths of Paradise*.

In particular;

1. **Truth-telling about history;** we are building the narratives of both the compensation claimants and the enslaved in Grenada. In so doing, we will revitalise the names, relationships and stories of people who were largely overlooked and since forgotten. We will also add context to the lives behind the compensation records.
2. **Repairing the harm through development and education;** Beckles emphasised that reparatory justice is not purely political, it is educational as well. He stresses the need to learn the true impact of slavery, colonialism, resistance and resilience. We are developing an educational programme for use in schools and will support collaborative research with historians, genealogists and universities.
3. **Reparatory justice is a moral project, not a retaliatory one;** the project is all about *illuminating*, not condemning. It will bring dignity and historical clarity with care and empathy. By naming enslaved individuals and giving voice to people who have long since been forgotten, the project strives to honour lives and bring their stories back into the light.

Stephen Lewis