

The West India Interest and Colonial Slavery in Parliament, 1823-33

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Abstract: This paper considers the parliamentary fortunes of the British pro-slavery lobby – the West India Interest – between the advent of the anti-slavery campaign in early 1823 and the passage of the Slavery Abolition Act in August 1833. First, it explains the parliamentary strength of the West India Interest under the Tory ministries of the 1820s. Second, it examines the uncertainty of the first few years after Catholic Emancipation and under Earl Grey’s Whigs. Finally, it narrates the rapid and terminal decline of the parliamentary Interest as the result of Reform and the ultimate passage of the Slavery Abolition Act.

In 1823, there were no political parties in Great Britain, at least not in the modern sense. Robert Jenkinson, the Earl of Liverpool, might have been the prime minister in a ‘Tory’ government, but there was no Tory Party. Indeed, Liverpool demanded only ‘a generally favourable disposition’ from his affiliated MPs and had even declared that he would ‘never attempt to interfere with the individual member’s right to vote as he may think consistent with his duty upon any particular question’. On the opposite benches were the Whigs, led by Charles, the Earl Grey, but there was no Whig Party either. Rather, the ‘Tories’ and the ‘Whigs’ were loose coalitions of politicians who shared generally similar attitudes. Put crudely, the Tories were the conservative friends of the Crown and the Church of England who glorified the memory of Pitt the Younger; the Whigs were the friends of trade, finance, and nonconformist religion, cautious advocates of parliamentary reform, and the political descendants of Pitt’s great rival, Charles James Fox.

The political landscape was more precisely defined by ‘connexions’ and ‘interests’. Connexions were rooted in personal loyalty. Some were formed when electoral magnates such as the Duke of Newcastle dictated the votes of the MPs, and this was part of the ‘Old Corruption’ against which reformers railed. Others emerged when statesmen inspired loyalty among the backbenchers: through his insouciant brilliance, George Canning, the Foreign Secretary, had procured a following of ‘Canningites’. In contrast, ‘interests’ comprised disparate figures – not just politicians, but financiers, clergymen, intellectuals, and publishers – who were bound by specific anxieties. Members of the landed interest, whether Whig or Tory, united behind the Corn Laws

that protected British farmers even while the same issue split the Cabinet. Likewise, the cause of Catholic Emancipation brought together religious liberals, Irish nationalists, and pragmatic imperialists who otherwise agreed on nothing. In this way, the interest was the nineteenth-century equivalent of a political lobby and, without serious competition from the wider public – before 1832 only one in twenty Britons could vote – it was the formidable political unit of the age.

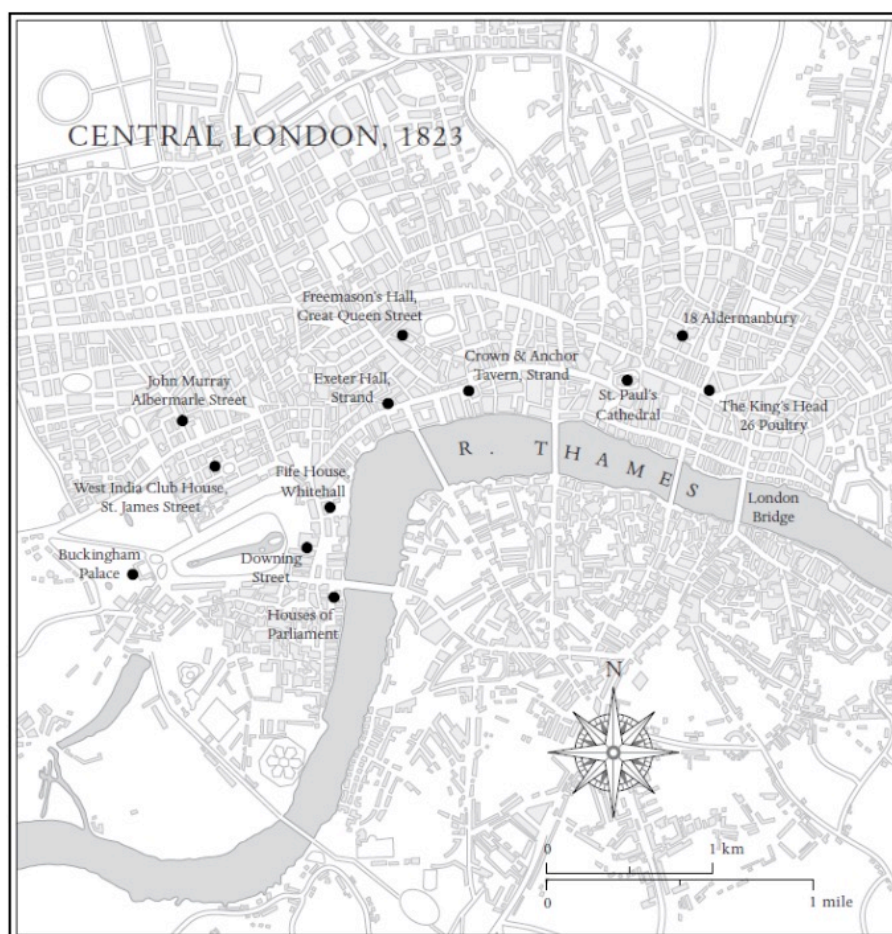
Few interests were as wealthy and powerful as the West India Interest, which sought to protect and promote the sugar- and coffee-producing slave colonies of the British Caribbean. Since the mid-eighteenth century, the concerns of the Interest had ranged widely. Its leadership lobbied Westminster for military defence from French and Spanish enemies, financial aid in the wake of frequent hurricanes, and fiscal protection from foreign sugar. All the while, the ‘sugar barons’, as the planters were known, became a byword for preposterous wealth. Even George III was stunned by the splendour of West Indian riches. ‘Sugar, sugar, eh?’ the King marvelled upon seeing the finery of a planter’s carriage. ‘All that sugar!’ Between 1787 and 1807, the Interest’s priority had been resisting the abolition of the slave trade; from 1823, from the very moment on 15 May that Thomas Fowell Buxton moved in the House of Commons for the amelioration and the gradual abolition of colonial slavery, it was resisting slave emancipation.

II

It might be natural to think that, when Parliament abolished the British slave trade in 1807, it also abolished slavery itself. But it did not. In fact, when the Slave Trade Abolition Act came into force in 1808, there were more than 700,000 enslaved Africans in the British West Indies; in Jamaica alone there more enslaved persons than in any British city save London. Moreover, at the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars, Britain even expanded its slaving empire by taking both Trinidad and Demerara from the French. For much of the fifteen years following the abolition of the trade, the anti-slavery movement was moribund. And when the abolitionists finally stirred themselves in late 1822, emancipation was far from practicable, let alone a *fait accompli*.

When Buxton stepped out of Wilberforce’s shadow on that night in May 1823, a lesser man could have buckled, for the House of Commons was home ground for the Interest: as Wilberforce put it, the current Parliament was ‘made up of West Indians, Government men, a few partisans, and [only] a few sturdy Abolitionists’. There were dozens of MPs who were connected to the slave colonies. The ‘Jamaican’ lobby included the Tory slaveholder Alexander Cray Grant, the Wiltshire playwright George Watson Taylor, and the pro-slavery polemicist John Rock Grossett; they were joined in the House by the leading jurist Edward Hyde East, the art collector

Ralph Bernal, and Charles Long, the grandson of the racist historian Edward Long. Demerara's leading agent was a coarse and foul-mouthed Irishman, William 'Black Billy' Holmes, who as the government's chief whip had curated an intimate knowledge of the 'tastes, wishes, idiosyncrasies, weaknesses, and family connections' of other MPs. The eastern 'Spice Isle' of Grenada was represented by Joseph Marryat, 'a forceful and innovative chairman' of Lloyd's who was, in Wilberforce's words, a pro-slavery 'fanatic'. Antiguan MPs included Thomas Byam Martin, a future Admiral of the Fleet, and George Henry Rose, a diplomat whose missions included Berlin and Washington. As for Barbados, there was William Lascelles, the brother of the Earl of Harewood, while St Kitts connected two major financial figures: William Manning, a former governor of the Bank of England, and Alexander Baring, a senior partner in the eponymous bank. Family ties to Trinidad drew the radical Joseph Hume into the fight over slavery, while Tobago was represented by Lord William Douglas, a Lord Commissioner of the Admiralty. It was a dizzying, daunting roster of pro-slavery politicians who were landowners, bankers, businessmen, sailors, judges, lawyers, and intellectuals, and they were but a portion of the Interest. In an era when divisions would commonly only contain a few hundred MPs, the guaranteed attendance of the Interest on slavery matters was an imposing obstacle for the abolitionists to overcome.



Until the 1820s, the meetings of the London hub of the Interest – there were also provincial associations in Liverpool, Bristol, and Glasgow – had been split between the City, where the merchant-princes reigned, and the West End, where the absentee planters made their fashionable homes. The fight over emancipation swung this territorial squabble in favour of the West End, since it now made sense to operate closer to Westminster. The Thatch'd House and the Crown & Anchor taverns on the Strand sometimes played host, but most meetings now took place at the West India Club House at 60 St James's Street, off Piccadilly, which was a leisurely fifteen-minute stroll from the Audley Square residence of the Interest's chairman, Charles Rose Ellis. The heir to five plantations, Ellis had studied briefly at Oxford before entering Parliament at the age of twenty-two after paying £200,000 in today's money for the seat of Heytesbury. Although a limited speaker and never a serious candidate for front-bench business, Ellis was a respected operative who excelled in the politics of favour and patronage. It also helped that he was the best friend of George Canning, who in 1823 was Foreign Secretary, Leader of the House of Commons, and probably the most influential figure in British politics. Indeed, Ellis was one of the few 'who at any moment could enter Canning's private room', and this friendship was invaluable to the Interest, not least when Buxton urged the House to condemn slavery as 'repugnant to the principles of the British constitution, and of the Christian religion'.

The reply that Canning made to Buxton was encouraging, at least at first. He agreed that it was 'expedient to adopt effectual and decisive measures for ameliorating the condition' of the slaves. He appeared to be amenable to emancipation itself, proposing three of his own resolutions in favour of slave freedom. 'This House looks forward,' read one of them, 'to a progressive improvement in the character of the slave population, such as may prepare them for participation in those civil rights and privileges which are enjoyed by other classes of His Majesty's subjects.' Canning urged MPs to vote for 'the accomplishment of this purpose at the earliest period' and even stated that, if the House were willing, he would take the proposals to the King at once. This could have been the immediate triumph of the anti-slavery movement, but Buxton had really walked into a trap, for Canning had attached impossibly restrictive caveats to his resolutions: even though Buxton himself had been cautious, suggesting only gradual reform, Canning stipulated that emancipation could happen only if 'compatible with . . . the safety of the colonies, and with a fair and equitable consideration of *the interests of private property*'. It was a vague and impossible test, and a mantra that West Indian planters would repeat for a decade.

Here, in the first parliamentary battle of the fight over emancipation, Buxton knew he had been outmanoeuvred and in private he would 'anathematise' Canning's resolutions in such a way

that his friends ‘challenge[d] his Quaker descent’. Still, he tried to pin Canning down on the question of when emancipation might ever be ‘safe’. The Foreign Secretary responded with classic political evasion. ‘If I am asked whether I can maintain the proposition that the progeny of slaves must be eternally slaves . . . I am not at liberty to throw out a hasty opinion upon that . . . most important question.’ Exasperated and exhausted, Buxton loosed one last arrow by demanding Canning’s thoughts on *how*, not when, emancipation could be achieved. Ever nimble, Canning ducked again. ‘I abjure the principle of perpetual slavery,’ he said, ‘but I am not prepared now to state in what way I would set about the accomplishment of the object.’ Defeated for the evening, Buxton withdrew his motion, and the House adopted Canning’s resolutions unanimously.

Even at this early stage in the fight over slavery, the West Indians knew that Canning was their champion: when his resolutions were put to the House, even slaveholding MPs assented to them because, as the abolitionists rued, the ‘enemies of emancipation [knew] . . . they were worse than unmeaning’. The government might have undertaken to do *something* about slavery, but the West Indians understood that Canning had paid only lip service to Buxton’s ideas: if nothing could be done about slavery, nothing now *would* be done. In fact, Canning had planned carefully to prevent the abolitionists from instigating ‘measures of Colonial reform’ by ‘taking the business out of [their] hands’, and George Hibbert, the colonial agent for Jamaica, purred that Canning had ‘subverted, in a Masterly manner, the arguments advanced by Mr Buxton’.

Of course, even if Canning’s resolutions were intended to forestall the serious reform of slavery, the government had nonetheless committed to do *something* towards slave ‘amelioration’. It therefore fell to the Colonial Office and to Lord Bathurst, the sixty-year-old Colonial Secretary who was ‘greatly averse to changes’, to draft a series of measures for the ‘improvement’ of the enslaved. In the summer of 1823, he announced eight ameliorative proposals concerning the religious instruction, the punishment, the familial relations, and the legal rights of enslaved people in the Caribbean. The West Indian slaveholders who were resident in London declared themselves quite content with the proposals, and so they should have been. They wrote them.

In a chilling demonstration of its influence, the Interest had taken control of the drafting process. Even before Buxton had put his motion before the Commons, the Interest and its so-called ‘Committee of 25 April’ had started working on measures that would stymie the abolitionist movement politically by *appearing* to make wide-sweeping reforms, but that would in fact cause minimal disruption to the business of sugar cultivation. Even worse, there was no guarantee of the ameliorative policies ever being enacted: when Lord Bathurst issued these measures to the colonies in a circular of 9 July 1823, he merely *recommended* their implementation. Today, we might call this

‘regulatory capture’: as Lord Bathurst confessed, his ‘Instructions contain[ed] nothing but what the Committee of West India Planters authorized me to believe was fit & right to be done’.

The events of the spring and early summer of 1823 set the tone and tempo for parliamentary handling of colonial slavery for the best part of seven years. In 1824, when Canning presented the Commons with an Order in Council that would implement amelioration in the crown colony of Trinidad without affecting any other island in the West Indies, he maintained the pretence of acting without substantively affecting the sugar economy. By explicitly comparing the enslaved African – ‘a being possessing the form and strength of a man, but the intellect only of a child ... in the maturity of his physical passions, but in the infancy of his uninstructed reason’ – with Frankenstein’s monster, Canning also delivered what was arguably the most racist speech in the history of the British parliament. ‘The Slavery question looks wretchedly,’ reflected Buxton. ‘I begin to think that, opposed as we are by the West Indians, deserted by the Government, and deemed enthusiasts by the public, we shall be able to do little or nothing.’ Soon afterwards, upon the completion of a parliamentary commission which had investigated the condition of liberated Africans in the Virgin Islands, the pro-slavery commissioner Thomas Moody succeeded in sabotaging first the work and then the reputation of his anti-slavery colleague John Dougan. Moody’s conclusions – that black men were peculiarly suited to tropical labour, but would never work as free men – were laid before the House and repeated as gospel; Moody himself was rewarded with a position at the Colonial Office under his patron, Robert Wilmot-Horton.

Not content with protection in high office – for the West Indians could also number Peel, Huskisson, and Wellington among their allies – the Interest also sought to expel their most troublesome foes from the Commons. At the general election of 1826, pro-slavery Tories paid special attention to the constituency of Weymouth, where voter intimidation was their chosen weapon against the candidacy of Thomas Fowell Buxton. The only polling booth in Weymouth had been placed in the furthest corner of the town hall and, on the first day of polling, a raucous mob stationed itself between the door and the booth. This Tory barricade was so effective that only six votes were cast that day. ‘No Whig voter reached the table without a violent struggle and very rough treatment.’ On the second day of polling, the town hall now guarded by the local cavalry, the Tory hordes scaled the walls of nearby houses, clambering onto the roof of the building and lowering themselves into the hall through its windows. Special constables were sworn in and then garrisoned in the hall, but ‘on two successive days the mob broke all their staves to pieces, and drove them out’. Buxton was horrified, regretting that ‘the election is carried on with the utmost violence’. But even if Weymouth returned James Gordon *and* the pro-slavery Masterton Ure, the abolitionist leader prevailed: he finished top of the poll by sixty-nine votes.

Even so, when Parliament met in late 1826, the political condition of the anti-slavery campaign was parlous: before dissolution that spring, Buxton had consented to give the colonies a 'year of grace' to prove their compliance with the government's pseudo-policy of amelioration, but this meant another year without progress; before long, Henry Brougham, Zachary Macaulay, and Buxton himself would be seriously ill and the abolitionists left without a leader. In later reflections, Buxton's son would refer to 1827 as the 'year of anxiety'. Nor would the high political instability of 1827-28 assist the anti-slavery campaigners. The period between Lord Liverpool's resignation in the spring of 1827 and the summer of 1828 would be remarkably unstable. In fourteen months, there were four prime ministers, four Colonial Secretaries, three Foreign Secretaries, three presidents of the Board of Trade, and five Chancellors of the Exchequer. Two factors, however, rendered this ministerial churn obnoxious to the abolitionists, and favourable to the slaveholders. First, without stable leadership, it was practically impossible for Parliament to embark upon the awesome task of emancipation. Second, regardless of who held which office and when, none of the major figures of this period were in any way sympathetic to abolishing slavery: Huskisson went from the Board of Trade to the Colonial Office, but he was MP for the key West Indian constituency of Liverpool and the slaveholders rejoiced at his ascent; Viscount Dudley and Ward, who took the Foreign Office in 1827, was a slaveholder himself; and when Wellington's High Tories took over in the early months of 1828, the Interest was gladdened and relieved. The absentee planters praised the Duke's 'sagacity' and their favourite pro-slavery attack dog, James MacQueen, entertained the hope that Wellington would 'put an end to [the] dangerous proceedings' of the Anti-Slavery Society altogether.

III

The narrative of the Tories' political demise in the late 1820s – and the collapse of Liverpool's conservative consensus – is well known. Impelled by Daniel O'Connell's election to Clare, and fearful of civil war in Ireland, Wellington and Peel consented to Catholic Emancipation in the spring of 1829; denouncing this betrayal, eighty or so Ultra-Tories promptly abandoned Wellington and took up in spiteful opposition. Consequently, at the general election of 1830 that was called upon the death of George IV, the Tories could muster only 250 seats and Wellington's minority government soon foundered upon the prime minister's truculence over Reform. Stunned by a Commons defeat over the Civil List, Wellington resigned and was replaced by Grey and the Whigs. After seven years of safety under the Tory watch, the West India Interest was now vulnerable to attack not only from an energized abolitionist lobby, but also from the Whigs.

Still, the abolitionists understood that nothing was likely to happen in the immediate future: the legislative priority of the Whigs was the reform of Parliament, not of the colonies. In Staffordshire, for example, anti-slavery activists concluded that ‘men’s minds [were] so taken up with the great question of Parliamentary Reform’ that it was wiser to let the moment pass without ‘wearying our friends in useless endeavours’. It followed that, in a move which pained the less patient abolitionists such as George Stephen, the Anti-Slavery Society bided its time in the 1830s. Still, there was hope, and principally because the prospect of Reform struck terror into the West Indians. As Parliament was constituted, the slaveholders could guarantee the return of maybe sixty pro-slavery MPs. ‘The wealth of these men,’ it was explained, ‘enabled them to send many members to the House when rotten boroughs were as plentiful as blackberries’; that is, the slaveholders could buy as many seats as they could afford. A *reformed* Parliament, however, was infinitely more likely to tackle the colonies directly. Tellingly, Wellington feared that ‘a reformed House of Commons [would] immediately attack . . . the West Indies, that all property [would] become insecure’, while Demerara’s *Royal Gazette* reported a ‘prevailing fashion . . . to look upon the passing of the Reform Bill as the precursor of future evil to the Colonies’. Richard Vyvyan, a reliable supporter of the Interest in the Commons, complained that ‘the West India Colonies . . . were to be governed and controlled by the delegates of the inhabitants of the shops and the factories, and even of the watering-places of the United Kingdom’.

Following the passage of Reform, and during the subsequent election of 1832-33, the newly founded Agency Society of abolitionists worked fervently to realise the worst fears of the slaveholding Interest. On one level, they appealed directly to the better angels of the electorate’s nature, persuading first-time voters to press for emancipation as the most ‘noble exercise of their newly acquired privileges’. On another, and perhaps more significant level, the abolitionists focused their energies not on voters but on candidates. The practice of obtaining pledges from candidates was frowned upon by the elder abolitionists, who believed that parliamentary business ought to be deliberative and that MPs should be ‘unbiased and unfettered’ in their approach to policy, even policy on slavery. The younger abolitionists disagreed entirely and sought to bind candidates ‘hand and foot’ to a promise that, ‘in the event of their becoming members of the ensuing Parliament, they will strenuously promote and vote for the immediate and total abolition of British colonial slavery’. The preachers of Hull urged their flocks ‘to Refuse their Votes to any Candidate, however plausible his Professions, who has not yet unequivocally pledged himself to use his utmost endeavours to procure . . . IMMEDIATE EMANCIPATION’.

The effect of the pledge campaign was remarkable. At Nottingham, the local anti-slavery association called on the candidates, ‘as men, as Britons, and as Christians, to prove it to the world,

that your hands are clean from a crime so base and iniquitous'. The Lincolnshire MP William Ingleby reported that 'all the way through [canvassing], instead of the Corn Laws or anything else, slavery was the cry'. He told Buxton what one new voter – with a somewhat limited understanding of the parliamentary system – had said to him: 'I care not whether you be for Lords or Commons, but you shall have no vote of mine unless you promise me yours to set the negro free'. In Carmarthen, when the incumbent MP refused to take the pledge, the resulting outrage forced him into retirement. Elsewhere, truculent candidates caved when they realised that the local anti-slavery association could and would swing its weight behind their rivals. 'There was scarcely a contested election throughout the country,' recalled the Agency's leader, George Stephen, 'in which the result did not virtually turn on the proslavery or antislavery promises of the candidate.'

All the same, the primacy of slavery did not make this an easy campaign to win and, as the West Indians began to understand their peril, pro-slavery mobs sought to force the abolitionists from the field. When the Agency Society organised lectures in Borough Market and Whitechapel, the slaveholders rented mobs of sugar-bakers and dockers whose livelihood depended on the colonies to surround the venues, storm the doors, and shout down the speakers. In the nearby neighbourhoods of Hoxton, Poplar, Mile End, and Islington, 'many broken heads occurred'. The same tactics were used at Bristol, where an abolitionist meeting was 'broken up by the preconcerted violence of the West Indian party, and the gentlemen on the platform were compelled to quit to escape personal injury'. Stephen himself was assaulted three times and received by post a thirteen-inch dagger engraved with the message 'Death to the Abolitionist!!!'

Perhaps the most emblematic contest in this election was for the new constituency of Leeds. The Radical candidate in one of the industrial swamps that the slaveholders decried was Michael Thomas Sadler, another champion of factory reform who had been apathetic at best about slavery. Indeed, one pamphleteer questioned 'whether till of late, and with reference to the prospect of the Leeds election, Mr Sadler has . . . ever showed the least sympathy with Negro oppression, ever taken a single step to promote Negro freedom'. Conversely, the Interest feted Sadler, with one West Indian publication claiming that only Sadler's 'unprecedented exertions' had prevented the scandal of 'factory children' from 'being hushed up'. Sadler's Whig opponent at Leeds was the abolitionist Thomas Babington Macaulay, and this month-long campaign was bedevilled by bad-tempered slander and mud-slinging. Neither the ordinarily effete Macaulay nor his Whig managers refrained from accusing Sadler of an addiction to profanity, of attending scandalous Sunday parties hosted by a former mistress of George IV, and of being 'the Hyaena who, when it wishes to decoy the unwary into its den, has a singular knack of imitating the cries of little children'. The dirty tricks worked: Macaulay beat Sadler soundly.

IV

The general election of 1832 was one of the most crushing landslides in British political history. The Tories, the natural allies of the West Indians, were vanquished; the Whigs, the only party who would entertain slave emancipation, now enjoyed a Commons majority of more than 250 seats. Moreover, this was an avowedly anti-slavery Parliament: of the 217 candidates who had taken the pledge in favour of emancipation, only *five* had been defeated at the polls. Even better, the West India Interest had been routed. Pro-slavery luminaries such as the former chief whip William Holmes and John Atkins, the former lord mayor of London, lost their seats, but the most notable casualty was William Burge, the colonial agent for Jamaica. With his pocket borough of Eye in Suffolk being disfranchised by the Reform Act, Burge stood again for the new constituency of Oldham, where he broke out into ‘a violent pro-slavery philippic’ on the hustings. But when the Agency Society sent George Stephen to stand against Burge as a spoiling candidate, and when the formerly pro-slavery William Cobbett performed a remarkable volte face and campaigned for Oldham *as an abolitionist*, Burge came fourth in the polls. Jamaica’s leading representative in London was thus banished from Parliament. Nor was there any room at Westminster for Frederick Marryat, the Grenadian slaveholder who had used children’s literature to evangelise for the pro-slavery Interest. He stood for the London seat of Tower Hamlets, declaring on the hustings that he would rather ‘protect the British seaman before he thrust his philanthropy upon the African negro’, and he was beaten handsomely by the abolitionist grandee Stephen Lushington.

Nonetheless, pro-slavery candidates were not defeated universally and the new House of Commons contained as many as twenty leading West Indians. In Glasgow, the city’s West India Association threw its weight behind its chairman, James Ewing of Strathleven, who became one of the city’s first two MPs. At Newark in Nottinghamshire, the voters backed a straight Tory ticket of William Farnworth Handley and the scion of a major slaveholding dynasty, William Gladstone. The young Gladstone was targeted by his Whig opponent as an avatar of the slaveholding class, and this was fair comment: Gladstone had written recently that ‘in what it really consists [of], slavery [is] not necessarily an evil’. It made little difference to the result. When he topped the poll, the future prime minister used his victory speech to embrace his West Indian connections and to defend ‘the abstract lawfulness of slavery’: immediate emancipation, declared Gladstone, would ‘exchange the evils now affecting the negro for others which are weightier, for a relapse into deeper debasement, if not for bloodshed and internal war’. It was a theme to which Gladstone returned during his maiden parliamentary speech, when he praised the unrivalled humanity of Demeraran

slaveholders. Gladstone's first days in politics show that slave emancipation was not yet a fait accompli, and that the West India Interest retained *some* sway in British politics.

The most part of their hopes rested in the report of a House of Lords select committee's investigation into the 'true' nature of colonial slavery. As Nicholas Draper has discussed, these inquiries were major set-pieces in the battle over slavery, discursive arenas where adversaries competed for intellectual authority in the public sphere. With some sixty members of the House of Lords implicated in West Indian affairs, the Interest had good reason to think that any such inquiry would recommend the preservation of slavery. Several of the more perceptive West Indians realised that deferring to the House of Lords would of course undermine the standard pro-slavery argument that Parliament had no right to interfere in the colonies, but the Interest had nonetheless pursued the appointment of such a committee throughout 1831 and 1832. A few members of the Cabinet had resisted fiercely. Henry Brougham, the abolitionist Lord Chancellor, was 'greatly against' the committee and he complained that 'the West Indians would have it all their own way and it would be all "deception"'. Yet when the slaveholder Lord Holland assured his fellow ministers that West Indians 'could not outdo the saints in . . . the propensity to lie', and when Goderich suggested that it would be 'wrong and hazardous' to postpone the creation of a committee, the West Indians got their wish. The House of Lords had therefore examined 'the several West India Colonies in relation to the Slave Population'.

The Interest could not have wished for a more favourable panel of investigators. Among the twenty-five appointed peers were the Earl of Harewood, the Marquess of Sligo, Viscount St Vincent, Lord Holland himself, Viscount Combermere, and the Earl of Selkirk, all of them slaveholders. Even more perversely, the Marquis of Chandos and Lord Seaford, the current and former chairmen of the West India Interest, sat on the committee too. The only avowedly abolitionist appointee was Edward Harbord, the Earl of Suffield, and when seven 'neutral' peers declined to take part in the hearings, the slaveholders found themselves in a majority. They would abuse this power flagrantly, even calling upon Seaford to give evidence about his own slaves to his own inquiry. George Hibbert assured colleagues in Jamaica 'that the Results of the Committee's enquiries will tend to check the endless agitation of this Question by irresponsible persons'.

The abolitionists had been anguished, Buxton plaintively asking Suffield 'whether the Anti-slavery party, that is yourself, will have any authority or control in the Committee', but he knew the answer. He also knew that the slaveholders would use the committee as 'a pretext for delay, and nothing else', and he reported to the Anti-Slavery Society that the inquiry was 'a calamity for our cause'. Zachary Macaulay was no more optimistic, complaining in the *Anti-Slavery Reporter* that the committee had been 'obtained [only] by the importunity of the Colonial Interest', whose

ambitions were clear: ‘to show that the recent Order in Council is injurious in its tendency’, to sustain ‘the awful national guilt of longer upholding the system of colonial slavery’, and ‘to enable the West India planters to persist in their insane career’.

By early 1833, however, the Interest had been sorely disappointed in its hopes for this committee. The West Indians had hoped for absolution, but the committee instead ‘postpone[d] the Consideration of any detailed Report’ and simply published 1,400 pages of ‘Evidence collected before the House’. Some of it was ‘of the most contradictory Description’ and, with his customary ‘hawk-eye’, Zachary Macaulay was exposing the lies of pro-slavery witnesses in the *Anti-Slavery Monthly Reporter*. It emerged that William Burge, the colonial agent for Jamaica, had ‘marshalled the array of the pro-slavery host for the late conflict’ and, in Macaulay’s view, had ‘not shown himself [to be] an able tactician’. The Interest’s star witness had been the Duke of Manchester, the former governor of Jamaica, and Macaulay struggled ‘to conceive anything more meagre and unsatisfactory than the testimony given by this nobleman’. Even worse, the ‘evidence’ furnished by the Lords’ select committee stood in stark conflict with that procured by a counterweight committee in the Commons. That inquiry, secured by Thomas Fowell Buxton, now exposed the countless lies, deceptions, and half-truths that were peddled by the Interest. The Baptist missionary William Knibb was among the witnesses who testified powerfully to the iniquity of the colonial system, and Zachary Macaulay delighted in the fact that Sir James Graham, the First Lord of the Admiralty and the chairman of the select committee, had become ‘a perfect Aldermanbury man’ despite ‘never troubl[ing] himself about [slavery] till this Session’.

The Interest was now reliant upon ‘events’ and not its inherent strength to stave off slave emancipation. And while the abolitionists, paranoid upon the apparent eve of their victory, perceived the still-powerful hand of the West Indians in state affairs, there really were two such ‘events’ that delayed the government’s adoption of emancipation as a banner policy. The first was the potential for a constitutional crisis in Jamaica, where the Earl of Mulgrave – fresh from putting an end to the pro-slavery vigilantes of the Colonial Church Union – had dissolved the island’s House of Assembly following violent disagreement about, of all things, the Assembly’s right to examine witnesses under oath. The Christmas Rebellion among the enslaved people of Jamaica in 1831-32 had convinced the Whigs in London that slavery was unsustainable but they were not yet willing to risk rebellion among their white colonial subjects; for this reason, slavery and emancipation had been excised from the King’s Speech of 1833. The second ‘event’ was a crisis in Cabinet which centred on Edward Smith-Stanley.

When the Whigs came to power in 1830, Stanley had been appointed Chief Secretary for Ireland, where he had armed the Protestant yeomanry, empowered the Lord Lieutenant to declare

martial law where he saw fit, and prescribed the immigration of the English gentry as a cure for Irish ills. Almost inevitably, he made a serious enemy of Daniel O'Connell. Yet by early 1833, Stanley's star had waned so far that he needed two things: to relinquish the Irish office, and then to restore his 'standing as a sincere reformer, refuting the charges raised by his draconian measures in Ireland'. Grey also needed to keep Stanley in the government: as probably the most conservative of his ministers – indeed, as the Earl of Derby he would be a Conservative premier – Stanley was vital to retaining the support of moderate Whigs and liberal Tories.

Given Stanley's personal abhorrence of slavery, the Colonial Office appeared to be the solution to all these issues, and so a minor reshuffle was on the cards. The only problem was that Stanley's arrival at the Colonial Office would require Goderich to move elsewhere, and he did not want to go. Moreover, Stanley was set on bringing in his own plan for emancipation and his own under-secretary, meaning that both Howick and his scheme – meticulously crafted over long months with James Stephen – would be laid aside. This presented Earl Grey with a painful choice. He could either sack Goderich and Howick, his own son, or he could risk Stanley leaving the Cabinet and with that the stability of the whole government.

In the first week of April 1833, the prime minister chose the lesser of the two evils, politically speaking. Stanley went to the Colonial Office, the newly-converted abolitionist Viscount Goderich was fobbed off with an earldom, and Howick resigned from the government in disgust with his father. Having 'slaved his life out for the last two years on the question of the niggers', as his brother put it, Howick even took a seat on the opposition benches, a move that 'wounded' the prime minister. Nonetheless, the ministry was saved. As Edward Littleton, Stanley's successor in Ireland, recorded in his diary, 'All these changes are generally approved by *all* Parties. Stanley's, because he is hated by the Irish, Goderich's because he is hated by the planters . . . and Howick's because he has been arrogant and waspish'. But Stanley's arrival at the Colonial Office did not hasten emancipation. In fact, by early April, the strain and fatigue of Stanley's time in Ireland had caught up with him. Laid low by influenza, which in turn triggered his first acute attack of gout, Stanley needed to rest before he could even consider drafting a bill for emancipation.

It was not, therefore, until May 1833 that Stanley presented his plans for emancipation to Parliament; and the fact that such major legislation was passed by both the Commons and the Lords within three months is perhaps the strongest evidence that the parliamentary power of the West Indians had diminished. Of course, the government's offer of £20,000,000 to the slaveholders – compensation for the confiscation of their 'property' – could be interpreted as an enduring signal of their influence, but two key themes of the summer of 1833 militate against such a reading. First, the West Indians' greatest quarrels were internal: just *how* the compensation money

was to be distributed was undecided, and so the Jamaicans and the Demerarans, the resident colonists and the absentee planters, and the London Interest and the provincial associations all fought amongst themselves for a greater share of the spoils. Second, the most serious threat to the passage of the Slavery Abolition Bill was not the slaveholders, but the abolitionists. Furious at the award of such an enormous sum of money, and even less happy with the imposition of years of ‘apprenticeship’ – that is, unpaid labour for the former slaveholders – upon the freed Africans in the colonies, Buxton had to be talked down by Macaulay from spearing the bill in the committee stage of the legislative process. Notwithstanding this intervention, and hours before the expected third reading of the Bill, Buxton proposed withholding one half of the compensation money until the expiry of the apprenticeship, at which point Stanley threatened to resign and to relinquish the Bill entirely: ‘If the House . . . adopted [Buxton’s amendment], they would certainly endanger the Bill, unless the hon. member for Weymouth [that is, Buxton] was prepared to take it out of the Minister’s hand’. Buxton did not withdraw his amendment, but the House voted him down. Within days, the bill had passed.

V

This potted history of the West India Interest’s parliamentary struggle against slave emancipation has been notably lacking in much consideration of the grassroots abolitionist movement, of events in the Caribbean, and even of slavery itself. This might seem peculiar, but it is deliberate. It has been a long-standing feature, and perhaps a failure, of the historiography on slavery and abolition to divorce emancipation from high politics. Yet there is a narrative of Tory guardianship, the contingency of events, and personal intervention by leading parliamentary figures that is essential to the last few years of British colonial slavery’s existence. Perhaps, in the popular imagination, there has been a tendency to explain slave emancipation as the work of sweeping moral sentiment alone, or as the result of a crusading imperialism. Neither is true. In reality, the British abolition of colonial slavery was the direct consequence of numerous high-political factors, some of which collided with one another, and some of which were consequent upon one another, in the late 1820s and early 1830s: Catholic emancipation and the collapse of the Tory consensus; the entry of the Whigs; the passage of Reform; the workings of select committees; targeted lobbying of parliamentary candidates; ministerial willingness to pay compensation to slaveholders; and, although not recounted here, the ability to overcome William IV’s intrinsic opposition to abolition.