

Activity 7: *A Parliamentary Debate* *An Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade*

Introductory Activity

- Hot Seat! Choose four pupils to take on the role of four characters listed on the right (prepare character cards in advance). Ask the class to interview them and ask questions. Finally ask all the pupils to compare all four characters in a table, as suggested below:

Reasons for the character wanting to put an end to the slave trade	Evidence – What did that person do to help abolish slavery?

The Debate

At noon on the 25th of March of 1807, after many long years of parliamentary struggle, William Wilberforce finally saw the bill passed which made the British trans-Atlantic slave trade illegal. In a move which has been little repeated in parliamentary history since, Wilberforce broke down and wept as his name and greatest achievement were cheered in the normally restrained surrounding of the House of Commons.

At first glance, the bill that passed through the House of Lords (100 votes to 34) and the Commons (283 votes to 16) seemed to indicate a relatively easy passage through to law. In reality, the debates that raged through the two chambers indicate that the bill's success was anything but a foregone conclusion. Indeed, the bill that became law was the result of political pressure which had lasted

for over 20 years. In nearly every one of those 20 years Wilberforce had proposed the same bill only to see it defeated. The pro-slavery supporters who had defeated each attempt by the abolitionists (including an attempt as recently as 1805) were confident that the 1807 bill would also be defeated. However, unlike the preceding years, pressure was building in the country and in the wider world. Revolts by enslaved workers in the Caribbean had shocked the confidence of MPs and Lords. Haiti, formerly Saint Dominique, had undergone a long and bloody revolution. Other colonies of enslaved workers were starting to follow suit; the resulting uncertainty was badly affecting the British markets, prompting some people to become more agreeable to the ideas of the abolitionists. In Britain, the Act of Union with Ireland had changed the nature of the commons, increasing the numbers of abolitionist minded MPs. Added to this, anti-slavery campaigners were lobbying hard, petitions were being signed, and national and regional debates were spreading.

It was against this background of unrest and conflict that Wilberforce tabled his motion for the "Act for the Abolition of the Slave Trade." Distribute key characters amongst the class for them to research and present arguments for their case.

The characters could include:

William Wilberforce
Anti Slavery campaigner

Thomas Clarkson
Anti Slavery campaigner

Banastre Tarleton
Pro Slavery campaigner

Alexander Falconbridge
Anti Slavery campaigner

Prince Regent
Pro Slavery campaigner
(also known as William, Duke of Clarence)

Capt. James Penny
Pro Slavery campaigner

Bristol ship owner
Pro Slavery campaigner

Edward Long
owner of enslaved workers
Pro Slavery campaigner

Olaudah Equiano
Anti Slavery campaigner

Naval Captain
Pro Slavery campaigner

Bishop Tim Rhodes
Pro Slavery campaigner

John Newton
Anti Slavery campaigner

Granville Sharp
Anti Slavery campaigner

Journalist
Pro Slavery
from The Liverpool Crusader

Journalist
Anti Slavery
from The Hull Herald

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When the research has been carried out and arguments prepared, introduce the debate to the whole class:

It is March 1807 and William Wilberforce has proposed a bill that will abolish the trans-Atlantic slave trade, the same bill that he has proposed nearly every year since 1789. Every time Wilberforce has proposed this bill the pro-slavery MPs have voted against it and defeated his every attempt. But, nothing they say lasts forever. Things have begun to change in both Britain and the Caribbean, big things. Revolution and rebellion have swept through the Caribbean; both the French and the British armies have been defeated by an army of enslaved workers led by Toussaint L'Ouverture; Tahiti has become the first ever independent slave state.

In Britain, things are changing too. The anti-slavery campaigning work of Thomas Clarkson and Equiano is beginning to take effect. In a recent petition more people signed than had got the vote. Boycotts of sugar and cotton are widespread. Plays, books and newspaper articles telling the public the facts about slavery are being produced. It is in this unstable climate that you find yourself in the Houses of Parliament to witness one of the most important debates of all time.

When each 'character' has presented their arguments, discuss the reasons for their beliefs and the possible outcomes for them when the Act became law.

Extended Work

- Pupils could create a drama based on a chosen abolitionist or pro-slavery campaigner. This could include a speech in the style and language of the person they have chosen.