Political briefing paper - The issue of reparations for slavery

**Overview:**

The issue of reparations for slavery is a controversial and complex issue that has been debated for decades in many countries. Reparations are payments or other forms of compensation given to victims or descendants of victims of historical injustices, such as slavery, colonialism, or genocide.

The supporters of reparations for slavery argue that the legacy of slavery has resulted in persistent racial inequalities and injustices that affect the descendants of those who were enslaved, such as discrimination, poverty, poor education, and health inequality. They claim that reparations are a moral obligation and a form of justice that would acknowledge the harms caused by slavery and its aftermath and would help to heal the wounds of history and promote racial reconciliation. Some of the proposals for reparations include direct cash payments, land grants, debt cancellation, educational scholarships, health care programs, community development funds, public apologies, and monuments.

Those against reparations for slavery argue that reparations are impractical, unfair, and divisive. They argue that slavery was a historical phenomenon that ended long ago and that the current generation is not responsible for the actions of their ancestors. They also claim that reparations would be difficult to implement and distribute; would create resentment and hostility among different racial groups; and would divert attention and resources away from addressing the present-day problems facing many disadvantaged communities. Some of the challenges for reparations include determining who is eligible to receive them, how much they should be worth and how they should be funded and administered.

According to Reparations for Transatlantic Chattel Slavery in the Americas and the Caribbean, Britain owes a sum of £18.6tn in reparations. Other nations with a history of slave owning, including the US, Portugal, Spain, and France, are also accused of owing trillions. The total economic cost is thought to be as high as $131tn (£103tn). The idea of reparations is controversial, especially in countries that have not acknowledged that centuries of racial inequality have contributed towards the large economic and social inequalities of the present. The British government has never formally apologised for slavery or offered to pay reparations. Reparations start with acknowledging this.

Debates over reparations are pressing and have been happening for a long time. Enslaved people have been demanding reparations since the 15th century, not a long time after European colonial enslavement started. One of the earliest recorded cases of reparations in the US dates back to 1783, when Massachusetts ruled that a formerly enslaved woman, Belinda Royall, should receive a pension from the money made by her former enslaver’s estate, for her unpaid labour.

Calls for reparations have increased since 2020 due to the Black Lives Matter protest which has highlighted many failings. The role of reparations in making amends for slavery and its impact on many generations was highlighted by UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet after the murder of George Floyd, which led to mass protests across the world. “Behind today’s racial violence, systemic racism and discriminatory policing lies the failure to acknowledge and confront the legacy of the slave trade and colonialism,” she said in a discussion on racism and police brutality in 2020. In her address, Bachelet emphasised the need to “make amends for centuries of violence and discrimination, including through formal apologies, truth-telling processes, and reparations in various forms”.

**Points to consider:**

* Should reparations be paid?
* Who should fund reparations?
* Who should be eligible to receive reparations?
* How will reparations be administrated?
* How much should reparations be worth?

**Links for further research:**

[The arguments for and against slavery reparations | The Week UK](https://theweek.com/news/uk-news/956268/the-arguments-for-and-against-slavery-reparations)

[More than money: the logic of slavery reparations | Slavery | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/news/ng-interactive/2023/mar/31/more-than-money-the-logic-of-slavery-reparations)

[Don’t listen to the critics: reparations for slavery will right historical wrongs | Kenneth Mohammed | The Guardian](https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/aug/21/dont-listen-to-the-critics-reparations-for-slavery-will-right-historical-wrongs)