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William Wilberforce made his first abolish-the-slave-trade plea to Parliament in 1789. This image depicts the House of Commons as it appeared in 1833. The painting, by Sir George Hayter, has been maintained by the National Portrait Gallery, in London, since 1858.

On the 12th of May, 1789 - exactly two weeks after Fletcher Christian led a mutiny on HMS *Bounty* - William Wilberforce used his best oratory skills to lay before Parliament the abuses of the slave-trade. At the time, speeches were attended by newsmen who recorded them - as accurately as possible - for publication in the local papers.

In this first effort, Wilberforce faced a room filled with skeptical men. What chance did this youngster think he had to end such a profitable enterprise? Undaunted, William presented his irrefutable evidence.

Who was guilty of the actions taken against slaves?

*I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others; and I therefore deprecate every kind of reflection against the various descriptions of people who are more immediately involved in this wretched business.*

Robert Norris, and others with economic reasons to maintain the slave-trade, had testified before the privy council that conditions were comfortable for the Africans. William stressed how unreliable such testimony could be:

*[I]n this very point (to show the power of human prejudice) the situation of the slaves has been described by Mr. Norris, one of the Liverpool delegates, in a manner which, I am sure will convince the House how interest can draw a film across the eyes, so thick, that total blindness could do no more; and how it is our duty therefore to trust not to the reasonings of interested men, or to their way of colouring a transaction.*

Slave-trade proponents had tried to convince Parliament that kidnapped Africans were happy to leave their homelands. Wilberforce spoke for the slaves who could not give evidence for themselves:

*The slaves who are sometimes described as rejoicing at their captivity, are so wrung with misery at leaving their country, that it is the constant practice to set sail at night, lest they should be sensible of their departure. . .The truth is, that for the sake of exercise, these miserable wretches, loaded with chains, oppressed with disease and wretchedness, are forced to dance by the terror of the lash, and sometimes by the actual use of it.*

Vast numbers of slaves died - before, during and immediately after - the transatlantic crossing:

*It will be found, upon an average of all the ships of which evidence has been given at the privy council, that exclusive of those who perish before they sail, not less than 12½ per cent. perish in the passage. Besides these, the Jamaica report tells you, that not less than 4½ per cent. die on shore before the day of sale, which is only a week or two from the time of landing. One third more die in the seasoning, and this in a country exactly like their own, where they are healthy and happy as some of the evidences would pretend.*

Showing members actual devices used to kidnap, imprison and punish slaves, Wilberforce used a model, and drawings, of the slave-ship Brookes to stress routine overcrowding conditions:

*When first I heard, Sir, of these iniquities, I considered them as exaggerations, and could not believe it possible, that men had determined to live by exerting themselves for the torture and misery of their fellow-creatures. I have taken great pains to make myself master of the subject, and can declare, that such scenes of barbarity are enough to rouse the indignation and horror of the most callous of mankind.*

Dismissing the view of slavers, and their supporters, who argued the trade was just a way to help Africans live better lives in safer places, William made clear he would stay the course. Setting up his twelve resolutions, to completely abandon the slave trade, Wilberforce gave notice he would not ignore those unable to speak for themselves:

*From every consideration I shall deal frankly with the House, by declaring, that no act of policy whatever will make me swerve from my duty and oblige me to abandon a measure which I think will be an honour to humanity.*

Concluding his speech, William put the evils of slave-trading squarely in Parliament's hands:

*Having heard all of this you may choose to look the other way but you can never again say that you did not know.*

Of the speech, Edmund Burke observed that:

*it equalled any thing ... heard in modern times, and was not perhaps to be surpassed in the remains of Grecian eloquence.*

Although his bill to abolish the slave trade was defeated, by a vote of 163 to 88, the first national public-relations campaign in history was about to begin.

[See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-FAMOUS-SPEECH-Amazing-Grace)

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## Questions 2 Ponder

### Are We All Guilty When We Allow Bad Laws to Exist?

Armed with so much evidence of slave-trading abuses that it took him three hours just to summarize it, William Wilberforce put a bill before Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

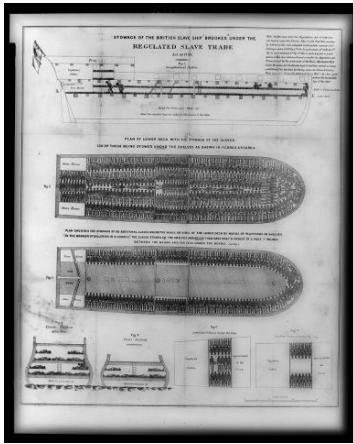
Putting the blame on every Member of Parliament, Wilberforce said (among many other things):

*I mean not to accuse any one, but to take the shame upon myself, in common, indeed, with the whole parliament of Great Britain, for having suffered this horrid trade to be carried on under their authority. We are all guilty—we ought all to plead guilty, and not to exculpate ourselves by throwing the blame on others...*

Do you think Wilberforce took the right approach by placing the blame for the effects of slave-trading on every Member of Parliament? Why, or why not?

Do you think his approach applies on all issues, across all years - reaching in the 21st century - when governments make bad laws? Explain your answer.

What if the majority of lawmakers get their way, and the minority of lawmakers cannot put forth change - are all lawmakers still guilty of allowing bad laws to exist? Explain your answer.



### Slave Ship Brookes - Legal Layout of Slave Stowage

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