The Pro-Slavery Lobby

Information taken from: The Abolition Project http://abolition.e2bn.org/slavery_110.html

Background Information

What was the Pro-Slavery or West India Lobby?

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the production of sugar in Britain's West Indian colonies saw money pouring into Britain. The sugar production came to be controlled by a small circle of wealthy planters and merchants.

By the 1670's, London had became the centre of colonial decision-making and the West Indian planters, living in England, formed an association with the London merchants and agents responsible for colonial legislation. By 1733, the West India Lobby had grown to included associations from all the principle trade cities (Bristol, Liverpool, Glasgow, and London). Together, they nurtured ties with members of both houses of Parliament and eventually a number became MPs.

Once the planters became part of the government, they had the opportunity to influence policies that affected the colonies. The rise of the sugar industry also saw the rise of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and, with it, attempts by individuals to create a similar influence on the governmental economic policy, in line with slave trader interests.

Those involved in the industry eventually controlled a considerable proportion of Britain's wealth. The money from the plantations also generated commerce and shaped the British economy, as new banks and financial institutions developed. The planters and merchants invested in industry and the profits they made allowed them to build stately homes in the countryside and have enough wealth to acquire immense political power.

Many ‘absentee' plantation owners and merchants involved in the Slave Trade, rose to high office as mayors or served in Parliament. William Beckford, for example, the owner of a 22,000 acre estate in Jamaica, was twice Lord Mayor of London and, in the mid to late 1700's, over 50 MPs in parliament represented the slave plantations.

For 200 years, supporters of the Slave Trade were successful in opposing any opposition. The lobby won major concessions from the British government and proved tough opposition to the abolitionists.

What tactics did they use?

The West India Lobby used very similar tactics to the anti-slavery lobby (see Campaign Section). They wrote pamphlets and other literature arguing that the Slave Trade was necessary and, in fact, beneficial to the Africans. They lobbied parliament

and produced witnesses to testify to parliament. They had the power and wealth to buy votes and exert pressure on others.

They also used delaying tactics, for example, suggesting the need for further time or investigation, before consideration of the issue by the House, or supporting compromise solutions. On April 2nd 1792, when Wilberforce again brought a bill calling for abolition, Henry Dundas, as home secretary, proposed a compromise solution of 'gradual abolition' over a number of years. Although this was passed by 230 to 85 votes, the compromise was seen as little more than a clever ploy by the pro-slavery lobby. Gradual, in their view, meant never.

Another response to attacks by the anti slavery lobby was to show themselves as reformers, by revising slave codes and offering improvements to conditions. In 1823, for example, pressure for total abolition saw the Government outline a reform programme, drawn up in close consultation with the committee of West Indian Planters and Merchants, known as 'the amelioration programme'. The committee was chaired by an influential absentee plantation owner, Charles Ellis.

The programme involved revising the laws which regulated the number of hours enslaved people could work and the food they were provided with. It gave enslaved people basic legal rights, including the right to own property, and also provided for religious instruction. The idea was for a legally-regulated abolition of slave status, over an unspecified time period. Although the programme led to some improvements in conditions, by the early 1830's, many had still not implemented these changes.

Document

'The history of the British West Indies'(published 1819), Mr Edwards writes

I spoke to a girl named Clara, who told me that in Africa after the death of a great man named Anamoa... twenty others were killed at his funeral. I asked her which country she liked best, Jamaica or Guinea? She replied that Jamaica was the better country, "for that people were not killed there, as in Guinea, at the funeral of their masters".