

LCRD Day Three (December 4, 1999)
Lord Alton's Address on Principles of Reconciliation

Your Excellency,
Distinguished Guests:

There is a story of two men who both died, and they go to heaven, and in their new celestial home one friend sees the other. And on the arm of his friend is a most beautiful young woman, and he asks his friend "Is she your reward?" And his friend says, "No, I'm her punishment."

And I feel this morning that after the addresses which you've received from my two colleagues on the platform here, that I will be your punishment, and they have been your reward.

From the Norman Conquest to Agincourt to Waterloo, you will know that the French and the English have not always been the best of friends. But perhaps because Georgina [Du Foix] and I share a platform here today, this says more eloquently than anything I can speak that there are new realities in Europe. After the Second World War, when we stood shoulder to shoulder against the forces of Nazism, we knew that we had to construct a civil and political society that would not again lead to the deaths of millions of young Europeans in the battlefields of places like the Somme and [incomprehensible] and in the Normandy landings in the Battle of Britain. And from the rubble of the Second World War came a new *anton cordiale*, again manifested, perhaps, by our presence here today. And because of Christian statesmen like Jean Monet, Jacques Maritain, the great French thinker, [incomprehensible] the Italian, and Konrad [incomprehensible] the German—because of their statesmanship there was a new reconciliation amongst European nations. And so today we argue instead about trade and agriculture and British beef, but we don't put our lives on the battlefields of Europe.

There are four points in my compass: North, West, South, and East. And I want to use this metaphor to illustrate the principles upon which I think we have to build. And my four points of my compass would be these: the first must be to remember—Remembrance; the second must be to repent—Repentance; the third must be Reconciliation, to reconcile; and the fourth must be to reform—to Reform. Remember. Repent. Reconcile. And Reform.

To illustrate the first of these points: To remember. I want to briefly tell the story of the city which I represented for eighteen years in Parliament, the city of Liverpool. And I want to tell the story of one man who, because of the stand he took, helped to make a difference. So these are two sides of one coin. One sheds darkness. The other sheds light. My own city was at the epicenter of the slave trade, part of this monstrous triangle. In 1807, in the year when slavery was made illegal, Liverpool generated seventeen million pounds in that year alone. This is equivalent to the whole of the wealth of the financial centers of Europe today in cities such as London.

As I told some of you last night, five eighths of the English trade was conducted from Liverpool in the year 1797—three sevenths of the whole of the European trade. I was very moved when we stood at the Gate of No Return yesterday and we sang "Amazing Grace." These words were penned, of course, by John Newton, who hailed from Liverpool and lived the first part of his life

as a slave-trading captain. He wrote in his *Journal of a Slave Trader* that he estimated that at that time 100,000 slaves were being deported annually, and more than half of those were in English ships. We must remember these things if we are to move on in our lives. We cannot obliterate the past in a new "Tree of Amnesia." We must learn the lessons of the past. And in remembering, we must ensure that the next generation understands, too. I can tell you that not only has my city now issued the public declaration which I read to you last night, but it has the first permanent exhibition, in a museum in Liverpool, commemorating the two shadows which hang over our city's history. And in this maritime museum is an exhibition of slavery. There is a reconstruction of the fort at Ouidah, which we visited yesterday. There are some of the artifacts. There is the terrible story so that we will not forget. So that we will not forget.

The other shadow which hangs over our history occurred sixteen years after the final abolition of slavery in 1831. In 1847, in my city, in one month, in one parish, 12,000 Irish émigrés died during the year of the potato failure, the year of the great famine, the great calamity. One million Irish people died during the exodus from Ireland. Three million others went, of course, to the United States. The population fell from eight million to four million and has never recovered. And to me, as a son of an Irish speaker, but the son also of an Englishman, reconciling this past I have found acutely difficult. But there has to be remembrance before there can be a moving on, and a vow and determination not to let these things happen again. So in our maritime museum, we remember the history of the slave trade, and we remember the calamity of the Irish famine.

And now, in our courses in citizenship, which at one of our universities in Liverpool we are devising, we are developing ideas around citizenship to show young men and women what their duties and responsibilities and obligations are. We live in a world where people say, "It is my right, my entitlement, my choice." These are selfish ideas. We have to challenge them and show people their duties, their responsibilities, and their obligations to their brothers and to their sisters.

I said there were two stories. One is this dark side of the city's past. The other is a story of a man who believed that this greatest of evils had to be challenged. He was elected as the youngest member of the House of Commons, for the Parliamentary Constituency of Hull [?]. He was not a believer when he was elected, and it was his expectation to become the Prime Minister of the nation, to be [. . .].

[Here the recording breaks off; the end of Alton's first point and most of his second point are missing. I tried to obtain a manuscript of the address from Lord Alton's assistant, but unfortunately, it is no longer extant. The tape resumes as Alton is finishing his exposition of Repentance.]

[. . .] and which in Britain led, only a year ago, to the death of a young black teenager called Stephen Lawrence. These racist presumptions were the edifice on which slavery was first erected. We must repent in ways which are not just token or empty gestures, but which accept responsibility across the generations for those who failed to atone either for what they did or for their unwillingness to take a stand and to speak out against vested interests and against utilitarianism.

From Remembrance and Repentance, we have to move on to Reconciliation. You always need, I think, to try and stand in another man's shoes to see where they are coming from and what their hurts and insecurities are. For some years in Parliament, I was a spokesman on Irish affairs, and for me it was a big problem to put myself in the shoes of the Protestant Ulster Unionists and to see their fears of a united Ireland. And equally, I think they had great difficulty in understanding where I was coming from because they knew that I came from a Catholic background with an Irish-speaking mother. So, we need to repent and to try and move forward into a sense of reconciliation, standing in that other person's shoes, and then embracing that person, letting their pain and their history touch your heart and soul.

And we must get out of the habit of blaming each other. There is in Britain, certainly, a culture of blame. We mustn't blame. Think of the story of Jesus at the well with the woman who had sinned, and who hasn't sinned amongst us? The man or woman who never made a mistake, never made anything. We make our mistakes, and there must be healing from the reconciliation. As we British know from Northern Ireland, it's all too easy to hide behind rhetoric and slogans, reliving old hatreds, becoming prisoners of history. Revenge—another word—means taking an eye for an eye, but if we go on doing that for long enough, then the whole world becomes blind. Being reconcilers requires us to take civic and educational initiatives which teach the truth about past events, to promote programs which recognize contemporary injustices, social and political, and which tackle policy and a lack of opportunity, particularly in this case for black people in Africa, America, and here.

Eight hundred million people, according to the World Bank, live below any rational definition of human decency, racked by despair, starvation, and hunger. Developmental issues in Africa are rooted in the past. For shedding of the manpower, the incapacitating of culture because of slavery, has its effects today, and we must recognize those in our development program and policies. And we must seize every opportunity we can to speak out against contemporary slavery in all its guises.

Reconciliation is worthless, though, unless it is undergirded by personal, political, civic, and institutional Reform. When we change ourselves, we can change the world.

As a young boy, I was given a jigsaw puzzle and on one side of the jigsaw puzzle was a picture of a man. And on the other side of the jigsaw puzzle was a picture of the world. For a seven-year-old boy, I could never get the world right. But the great thing about the jigsaw puzzle is, it was very easy to get the man right. And when you turned the jig-saw puzzle over, having got the man right, the world came right anyway. So maybe the moral of the story is that we start with ourselves and that the world may come right anyway.

In London, on the day before I came here, we had all of the leaders of the great faiths—the Muslim Imam was present, the Buddhist leader was present, the Sikh, the Hindu, the Christian Bishop, the Chief Rabbi—and we initiated what is called the Clean Slate Campaign. And anyone familiar with a slate knows that it is very easy to clean it. It's a simple thing to do. But maybe in the drama of small deeds we can make the difference. By wiping the slate clean in some personal way before this millennium ends, maybe then we will find it easier to go on to make the collective acts of reconciliation and wiping the slate clean.

So, let me rehearse those four points again. We must first Remember. We must then Repent. We must then Reconcile. And then, I believe, we can Reform.

It's been a great privilege and an honor for me to speak to you. And I will return to Liverpool with renewed determination, and I hope that in the future we will have the opportunity of hosting maybe a conference of this kind where Africans and African Americans and black people from Liverpool, especially, who often say to me, "We came here two hundred years ago, and since then all we have done is move half a mile up the road." Maybe there can then be, through a reciprocal arrangement of this kind, some pouring out of healing in our city, too. Thank you.