

Speech by Kajsa Ollongren, Minister of the Interior and Kingdom Relations, at Slavery Remembrance Day

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Picture a three-letter logo, about four centimetres in size, on a branding iron. The letters – ‘WIC’ – stand for the Dutch West India Company. The company used a branding iron to mark enslaved men, women and children with its logo. As if they were livestock.

The branding process involved rubbing the person’s skin with oil and then pressing the hot branding iron against it. The searing wound would be cleaned with lemon juice and gunpowder. Once branded, the person became someone’s property and could be identified immediately if they tried to escape.

Enslaved people didn’t just lose ownership of their bodies. They also lost their names. The African name chosen lovingly by their parents would usually be replaced with a new name that was easy for the slave owner to pronounce. Like Klaas, Jan or Eva.

An enslaved person who was sold on to a new owner would often be given another new name. And another logo would be branded onto their body. A slave was no more than a commodity.

Eleven million enslaved people were transported across the Atlantic. Some 445,000 of them ended up in the Dutch colonies. An unknown number perished during the journey.

Today we commemorate and celebrate the fact that 158 years ago, on the first of July 1863, the Netherlands officially abolished slavery in Suriname and what were then the Netherlands Antilles. But even then, it wasn’t really over. People were forced to work the plantations for another ten years.

We can only look back on the history of slavery with horror, sorrow and shame. It’s a history to which we are all connected. Consciously or unconsciously. Openly or secretly, buried in an unknown family history.

Reckoning with this history is not a sign of weakness. It’s actually how a democracy shows its strength. By seeing our past for what it is, we can change our future. This is not an extravagance. It’s a necessity.

‘No people can reach full maturity as long as it remains burdened with an inherited sense of inferiority,’

wrote Anton de Kom.

De Kom drew our attention to the horrors of slavery and racism, but he wasn’t treated well by the Dutch authorities.

We should remember him with the respect that he deserves.

Three years ago I stood in this same place. Looking back, I can see the progress that’s been made since then. I can also see that we still have a long way to go.

Last year, after the violent death of George Floyd, tens of millions of people took to the streets to protest all over the world. Here in the Netherlands too. They were making a clear statement that the poison of racism still pervades our society. It ignited a debate that cannot be extinguished.

Nobody wants to be described as racist, but we can’t just sweep racism and discrimination under the rug. Sometimes hate and prejudice are obvious. But often they’re more subtle.

Yet another rejection when you apply for a job or traineeship.

Or when you try to get into a nightclub.

Security guards following you around a shop, wherever you go.

The chains of slavery may have been broken, but there’s still a long road left to travel. As a government, we need to lead the way. Where we see signs of open and hidden forms of exclusion and marginalisation in society, we will investigate them and take action.

We will do this with the help of a national commission and a national coordinator on discrimination and racism.

In 2023 we also want to hold an extensive and fitting commemoration marking the true end of slavery in 1873.

Today the advisory committee on dialogue concerning slavery, established by the government, issued its recommendations. It calls for the history of the Netherlands’ participation in slavery and the slave trade to be made part of our collective memory:

- by studying the role of the national government
- by providing education, and
- by establishing a museum dedicated to the history and legacy of slavery.
- The committee also wants to see a national day of remembrance.
- And last but by no means least, it wants the government to issue an apology.

There's no denying that these recommendations are compelling and crystal clear. Their urgency matches the sense of urgency that I feel. Amsterdam, Rotterdam and Utrecht have already conducted their own historical investigations of slavery. The Hague is planning its own investigation too. Officials from the country's four biggest cities recently made a joint appeal for a national day of remembrance of the legacy of slavery.

By remembering the past, we can look forward to the future and commit ourselves to a society in which there is no room for racism or inequality. But looking back is about more than investigating the past. It's also about accounting for that past.

Right now at the Rijksmuseum, there's an impressive exhibition that really brings the history of slavery to life. The exhibits include the branding iron I described at the start of my speech.

I realise that the pain that that branding iron inflicted has not gone away. That the wounds it inflicted have not yet healed. This is a process that will take many generations.

More than 1600 years ago, the philosopher St Augustine wrote: 'Hope has two beautiful daughters; their names are Anger and Courage. Anger at the way things are, and Courage to see that they do not remain as they are.'

I think that sums it up well.

To move forward together, there needs to be room for both.

Room for anger about a painful past.

For anger about the inequalities that persist to this day.

For anger that change is moving too slowly.

But there must also be room for courage.

The courage to acknowledge the anger and pain of others.

The courage to see our shared history for what it is.

And the courage to engage in dialogue with one another.

Because in the end, that's what it's all about. We need to stand next to each other, not on opposite sides. We need to learn how to see the world through the eyes of others. And to keep doing this day after day, no matter how difficult and painful it may be.

Thank you.