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# Learning from the abolitionists, the first social movement

The British movement to abolish slavery has much to teach us about how to get the world to respond to seemingly intractable problems, argues

**Richard Smith**

**S**ocial movements are fashionable in health. Frustrated by the inability of governments and other authorities to make change happen from the top, those wanting to change the world hope for social movements that will make change happen from the bottom. George Alleyne, the former director general of the Pan American Health Organisation, thinks that a social movement is needed to get the world to respond adequately to the pandemic of non-communicable disease. Those who want to improve quality in healthcare aspire to be a social movement. But can you create a social movement and can they change the world? We can learn much from what many have called the first social movement, the British movement to abolish slavery.

## What is a social movement?

There is no universally agreed definition of a social movement, but here is a reasonable one from Wikipedia (itself a sort of social movement): “They are large informal groupings of individuals and/or organizations focused on specific political or social issues, in other words, on carrying out, resisting or undoing a social change.” Charles Tilley, an American professor of social science, defines a social movement as having three components: a campaign, a sustained, organised public effort making collective claims on target authorities; a repertoire of activities like public meetings, petitions, boycotts, statements to the media, and pamphleteering; and what he calls

WUNC (worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment).<sup>1</sup>

The civil rights movement and the women’s movement are classic modern examples of social movements, and within healthcare the movements to both promote and restrict abortion rights and the global activities against tobacco might be seen as social movements.

## The origins of the abolition movement

On 22 May 1787 12 men, nine of them Quakers, met in a printing shop in 2 George Yard in the City of London determined to end slavery. It seemed impossible. At that time more people were slaves than were free, and the great empires of the world, not least those of Greece and Rome, had been built on slavery. The British economy depended on slavery, and sugar, coffee, and rum, which people loved, were produced by slaves. Many rich men and institutions, including the Church of England, owned plantations worked by slaves, and most members of parliament had close links to slavery. Yet by March 1807 slave trading was abolished in the British Empire, and within a lifetime of when the men first met in 1787 slavery itself was abolished in the empire. It cost the British 1.8% of their gross domestic product over 50 years.

The result, said Alexis de Tocqueville, was “absolutely without precedent . . . If you pore over the history of all peoples, I doubt that you will find anything more extraordinary.” Adam Hochschild, whose inspiring and highly readable

Fig 1 | *The Slave Ship* by J M W Turner. A representation of the Zong massacre

book *Bury the Chains* I have used extensively in writing this article, described it thus: “The men who successfully abolished slavery invented many of the techniques we now associate with campaigns: national organisations with local chapters, campaigns writing to political representatives, report cards on how those representatives have voted, investigative reporting, petitions, marches, badges, boycotts, logos, fliers, books of evidence with readings in book stores, newsletters, use of the media.”<sup>2</sup>

Slavery, of course, still exists, and the Americans fought a civil war over the issue more than half a century after the abolitionists began their work. Even to abolish slavery within the British Empire was a tortured journey full of false turns and interrupted by major events like the French revolution, but those who wanted to abolish slavery never lost their outrage and commitment. “The abolitionists succeeded,” writes Hochschild, “because they mastered one challenge that still faces anyone who . . . [wants to make major social change]: drawing connections between the near and the distant.”<sup>2</sup>

There had been protestors against slavery before 1787, particularly among Quakers, and the Zong trial of 1783 fired objections to slavery among some. Zong was a slave boat that took too long to cross the Atlantic from Africa to the slave markets of the new world. Many slaves

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## Lessons for social movements from the abolitionists

- What seems impossible can be done—and in a comparatively short time
- The leaders and the followers need deep belief in the cause
- A connection between the issues and people's everyday lives is essential
- The course of the movement is unlikely to be smooth—and may well look hopeless at some point
- Powerful, first hand accounts of the issue are invaluable
- Cases that shock and capture the problem and the public's attention may be crucially important—even if swept to one side by the authorities
- Social movements should pick an achievable aim and be businesslike
- Evidence, lots of it and of high quality and impact, is important
- Performance (perhaps these days through television or social media) with stories and props is needed for success
- Successful movements have different sorts of leaders with different skills, but they must work together
- An important person, perhaps a politician, who “needs an issue for his or her own advancement” can be very useful
- Action must be constant and on many fronts
- Iconic pictures can be stunningly effective
- Evidence must be substantial, multifaceted, strong, clear, and speak for itself
- Boycotts can be powerful
- It's important to be tactically shrewd
- Success is unlikely to be complete



died on most trips, and dead slaves were worthless. Slaves were, however, insured at £30 each, and if the ship ran out of water then slaves could legitimately be thrown overboard and insurance paid. The ship wasn't running out of water, but the captain threw 133 live slaves overboard and claimed on insurance. The insurers took a legal case against the ship owners but lost. Granville Sharp, a musician, friend of King George III, and eventual prominent abolitionist, then brought a case for murder, but he too lost. The case did, however, attract a lot of publicity and stimulate feeling against slavery. J M W Turner later painted the episode.

In 1785 stimulated by the Zong trial the vice chancellor of Cambridge University set a title for the prestigious annual Latin essay prize of *Anne liceat invitos in servitutem dare?*—Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will? The prize was won by Thomas Clarkson, who when he entered the competition had little interest in slavery. But he found himself overwhelmed with horror: “In the day time I was uneasy. In the night I had little rest. I sometimes never closed my eyes for grief.” He became one of the main leaders of the abolitionists, and Hochschild thinks him more important than William Wilberforce, the abolitionist most remembered now. Samuel Taylor Coleridge described Clarkson as “a moral steam engine,” and his tireless touring of the country and collecting of evidence was fundamental to the abolitionists' case. Clarkson's prize winning essay was published by James Phillips,

the owner of the printing shop in George Yard, and Clarkson was one of the 12 men at that initial meeting.

## Advancing the cause

Clarkson became the secretary of the 12 and Granville Sharp the chairman. From the beginning they were businesslike, opening a bank account, hiring a lawyer, and drawing up long lists of potential supporters and funders. They decided that only three people were needed for a quorum, illustrating how they trusted each other. A crucial question was whether to aim for emancipation of slaves, which they all wanted, or the cessation of trading, which was more achievable and would ultimately end slavery because of the high death rate of slaves. As practical men all but Sharp opted for ending trading.

From June 1787 Clarkson began his long trips to gather evidence on the horrors of slavery, finding witnesses, and organising sympathisers. Working 16 hours a day, he visited both Bristol and Liverpool, cities that grew rich from the slave trade. He gathered stories from 20 000 seamen, and “the very paper seemed to smoke and burn with his outrage.” Slave ship doctors provided vital information.

Clarkson began to be not just an organiser but also a performer, speaking regularly in public against the slave trade. He collected “props” for his performance—handcuffs, shackles, thumb-screws, and a speculum oris, which was used for prising open the mouths of slaves who tried to

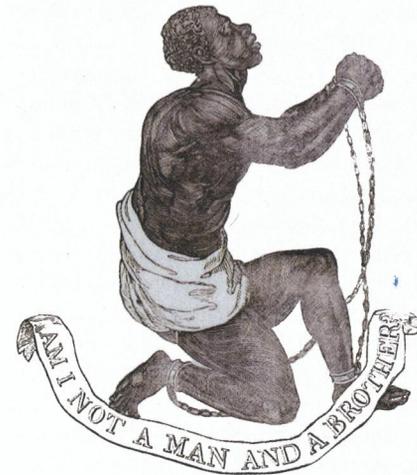


Fig 2 | Josiah Wedgwood's seal  
“Am I not a man and a brother”

**“Never doubt,” said the anthropologist Margaret Mead, “that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has”**

kill themselves by refusing to eat. In the autumn he reached Manchester, a city that tripled in size in the last quarter of the 18th century, was home to the industrial revolution, and abuzz with radical ideas. The people of Manchester supported Clarkson and sent an antislavery petition to parliament signed by 10 000 people, one of every five people in the city.

## Enter William Wilberforce

Before starting on his journey Clarkson attended a London dinner party that included the writer James Boswell, the artist Joshua Reynolds, and William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was a member of parliament, a close friend of William Pitt, the prime minister, independently wealthy, and an evangelical Anglican.<sup>3</sup> Described as “all soul and no body,” he was said with his mesmerising voice to have “the greatest natural eloquence in England.” Like all MPs he needed “an issue” on which to build his name, and by the end of the dinner after Clarkson had spoken on slavery Wilberforce said he would take up the issue “provided no person more proper could be found.” Clarkson, the agitator, needed Wilberforce, the insider. The point of social movements is to get the majority to change their views.

The movement began to develop momentum. The committee published a regular newsletter of 500-1000 copies for supporters and raised funds, including through what may have been the world's first direct mailing. The entrepreneur and potter Josiah Wedgwood produced the

famous seal “Am I not a man and a brother.”- (fig 2) The image, said Benjamin Franklin, was “equal to that of the best written pamphlet.” John Newton, a former slave trader and the author of *Amazing Grace*, turned passionately antislavery, became a prominent Anglican minister, and published his pamphlet “Thoughts upon the African slave trade.” The pamphlet was sent to every MP.

Eventually the abolitionists generated enough pressure to ensure that the Privy Council started a hearing into the slave trade, but the slavers were a powerful lobby and managed to ensure that the first hearing was chaired by Lord Hawkesbury, who owned land in the West Indies. The hearings gathered lots of evidence and heard from the slave traders and owners how “nine out of 10 [slaves] rejoice at falling into our hands.” Clarkson scoured the country for more witnesses, and doctors who had worked on slave ships gave especially powerful stories. The Plymouth committee of the abolitionists found the famous picture of the *Brookes*, a slave ship showing how little room the slaves had on the slave ships (fig 3). The diagram began to appear everywhere in newspapers, books, and pamphlets; 7000 posters were printed and hung all around the country. Iconic images are very important to social movements.

**Debates begin in parliament**

On 12 May 1789 began what was to be a long series of debates in parliament on the slave trade. Wilberforce delivered what some think the greatest parliamentary speech ever. He spoke for three and a half hours, and Edmund Burke, himself a great speaker, said that the speech was “equal to anything . . . ever heard . . . in modern oratory; and perhaps . . . not excelled by anything to be met with in Demosthenes.” Wilberforce was polite, humble, and non-accusatory: “We ought,” he said, “all to plead guilty.”

But the abolitionists were outmanoeuvred by slave interests, who played for time and insisted that the House of Commons must have its own hearing into the slave trade.

**Investigative journalism**

So the abolitionists started on a “feverish collective editing marathon,” and the result was the 160 page abstract of *Evidence delivered before a select committee of the House of Commons in the years 1790 and 1791*, on the part of the petitioners for the abolition of the slave trade. It became the most widely read piece of non-fiction antislavery literature of all time, a masterpiece of force and clarity. It included statistics, documents, and sworn testimony by military officers, planters, sea captains, physicians, and businessmen and has been described as one of the first great works of investigative journalism.

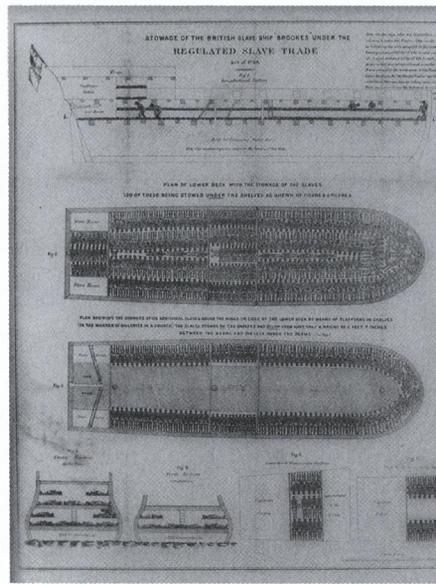


Fig 3 | The diagram of the slave ship *Brookes*

Next came a sugar boycott. Although the British loved sugar, half a million people joined the boycott. Sugar laid bare “the dramatic, direct connection between British daily life and that of slaves.” This was the first major boycott and allowed people who had no vote to express themselves politically.

There was another vote in the House of Commons in 1792, and by this time every town had an abolition movement that sent petitions and contributions and received books and pamphlets. The committees were run by clergymen, shopkeepers, merchants, skilled workers, and professionals. Parliament received petitions signed by 390 000 people, more people than could vote at that time. It received only four petitions favouring slavery. The debate on 2 April ran through the night. Henry Dundas, the home secretary who said he was in favour of abolition, proposed inserting the word “gradually” into the motion. The House of Commons voted in favour of the motion with “gradually” inserted, but the House of Lords talked out the bill.

**A new leader and a breakthrough**

Although they had a silver tongued parliamentarian, a moral steam engine, and a friend of the king as leaders, the abolitionists lacked a first rate thinker and strategist. But now James Stephen, a lawyer, writer, behind-the-scenes adviser, and conservative, became a leader in the cause. He had a visceral hate for slavery after living in the West Indies. To abolish slavery was the “central, driving passion of his life.” Stephen searched for a tool that could work and argued not for banning slave trading but for a bill that banned British subjects from participating in the slave trading of France and its allies. In the debate in parlia-

ment slave trading was barely mentioned, and Wilberforce didn't speak. But it was impossible to argue against a bill stopping people supporting the country's enemies. It was well understood by Stephen but unknown to most MPs that two thirds of the slave ships that sailed under the American (enemy) flag were actually British. The slave traders were split, and the bill passed.

In the parliamentary elections of 1806 slavery was a major issue, and in 1807 the bill to abolish slave trading in the British Empire was again debated. Military men were in favour because they had seen the horrors of slavery first hand, and powerful descriptions from an army doctor of atrocities he had seen were crucial in the debate. The bill passed, and on 25 March 1807 at noon was given royal assent.

The *Edinburgh Review* pointed out that the bill came not from the rulers but rather “the sense of the people has pressed abolition on our rulers.” This is what social movements can do.

**The aftermath**

Now that slave trading was abolished younger groups of abolitionists began to work for full emancipation, but progress was slow and there were splits in the movement. Eventually in the summer of 1833 after a three month debate an emancipation bill passed both houses. Wilberforce died three days after the bill was passed. This still wasn't quite the end as slaves became “apprentices” working without pay for another six years.

Finally on 1 August 1838 nearly 800 000 black men, women, and children became free, and the occasion was marked in a Jamaican church with a coffin inscribed “Colonial Slavery, died July 31st 1838, aged 276 years.” The coffin contained an iron punishment collar, a whip, and chains.

Of the 12 men who met in the print shop in 1787 only Clarkson was alive.

**Conclusion**

The box shows some of the lessons that I have drawn from the inspiring story of the abolitionists, but the central lesson is that a small group of determined people can achieve what seems impossible. “Never doubt,” said the anthropologist Margaret Mead, “that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.” The British abolitionists show us that with the commitment, cunning, and tirelessness we can overcome seemingly intractable problems like climate disruption and global poverty.

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