

Colonization in the Congo Activity

June 9, 1904: The Moment of Decision

Parliament held a debate to decide how to handle Leopold and the situation in the Congo. Throughout the debate it was clear that Members of Parliament were aware of the public desire for action. Casement's report had convinced all MPs that the Congo Free State authorities were committing atrocities on a mass scale. Numerous MPs remarked upon how uncommon it was for all members of the House of Commons to agree upon the nature of a problem. Opinions were not as unanimous regarding the solution. The issue involved how to create change most effectively in the Congo while also considering the diplomatic consequences for Britain's relations with the other Great Powers.

All Members of Parliament remained very conscious of the fact that public opinion strongly favored stopping the abuses in the Congo. They also recognized that their decisions had life-or-death consequences for millions of people in the Congo and would directly affect the British economy. Furthermore, they knew they were setting a precedent for future cases involving human rights abuses and colonial administration in Africa and elsewhere.

Option 3: Focus on the British Empire

As the largest colonial power in the world, we must be careful about intervening in^[SEP]the internal affairs of a foreign colony—we must be careful of the precedents we set. Britain currently administers the world's largest colonial empire. While the home islands of Great Britain cover 120,979 square miles, the colonies consist of 11,605,238 square miles. Nearly 41 million people live in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland, but^[SEP]more than 345 million subjects reside in our 74 overseas territories. Governing people is never an easy task and it imposes great burdens on those attempting to bring the blessings of civilization to reluctant recipients. We all know that agents of the British Empire have occasionally carried out actions against our colonial subjects that run contrary to our values. The last thing we want to do is give other countries an open invitation to tell us how to govern our vast dominions. Moreover, acting too forcefully against the Belgian^[SEP]King could encourage the Belgians to turn to Germany for assistance. We must refrain^[SEP]from any reckless colonial adventures that will jeopardize our position in Europe.

It is up to each government to investigate and punish such actions appropriately. While the atrocities taking place in the Congo are horrific, we also must acknowledge that Leopold's government is responsible for some positive developments along with the negative. Leopold should be encouraged to run the Congo Free State more effectively. We should supply information to the Free State that will help its government to investigate atrocities. Unlike the Congo, we have established a justice system that punishes those who abuse their power. We can help the Congo Free State to develop a similar court system. We believe that King Leopold means to administer his colony effectively, but has thus far failed to do so. Let us encourage King Leopold's government in the Congo to conduct itself in a more civilized manner. We can offer Leopold advice from our centuries of colonial experience.

As for our trade interests, we must work to tie the economies of our own colonies more closely to our home economy. At present, only 25 percent of British trade is carried out with these regions while the remaining 75 percent of our trade is with non-British nations. Nearly all of the resources needed for the functioning of our industries can be found in the lands beneath the Union Jack. The nearly 400 million people under the British Crown can be ample customers for British manufactured goods. Rather than expecting that the rest of the world adopt the British system of free trade, it is time to create a vast region of free trade among our own territories, and grant free access to those markets only to those countries that extend the same trade rights to all of the British Empire.

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Considering Your Option—June 9, 1904

As a member of the House of Commons, you must constantly remember that you are an elected official. Therefore you are expected to react to public opinion, but you are also expected to follow your conscience in making decisions that are for the good of the nation, both now and in the future.

Your goal is to persuade undecided MPs who are present at this debate. Your group will present a persuasive three-to-five minute summary of your option. Use this worksheet will help you prepare. After all three groups have presented their options, the MPs of the other groups will have a chance to ask you questions or challenge your ideas.

Questions to Consider:

1. According to your option, what primary British interests are at stake in the Congo debate?
2. How does the situation in the Congo relate to the manner in which Britain administers its own vast colonial empire?
3. How might Britain's response to the situation in the Congo affect our country's relations with the other nations of Europe?
4. How will your option affect free trade and humanitarian causes in the Congo region?
5. How has history influenced our rights, privileges, and obligation to act in the Congo?