

Reparations: A conversation worth having

The debate on when it is relevant to apologise and pay reparations for misdeeds and human rights violations tells us that the past is never dead



JORGE G CASTANEDA

Three weeks ago and 500 years after the arrival of Hernán Cortés in Veracruz, President Andrés Manuel López Obrador of Mexico sent a letter to the king of Spain. In it, he demanded an apology for the abuses inflicted on the indigenous peoples of Mexico by Spain, in view of what the Spaniards now consider "human rights violations."

And last week the prime minister of Belgium apologised in Parliament for the kidnapping, deportation and forced adoption of thousands of children born to mixed-race couples in its former African colonies.

National apologies for misdeeds, crimes and odious behaviour are not new. The West German government of Konrad Adenauer paid billions in reparations to the state of Israel and Jewish people for Nazi crimes. Former President Jacques Chirac of France apologised for deporting thousands of Jews to Nazi death camps.

The reparations debate in the United States continues. A bill known as H.R. 40 was introduced

in the House of Representatives by Rep. John Conyers every year from 1989 until his resignation in 2017. It called for a formal study of the impact of slavery on African-Americans living today and the development of a proposal for reparations, among other things. The bill was reintroduced this year by Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee.

Most recently, several contenders for the Democratic Party's presidential nomination, most notably Elizabeth Warren, have expressed some level of support for reparations for the descendants of enslaved men and women.

What all of this tells us is that the past is never dead and that no matter how anachronistic some demands may seem, historical grievances abound.

The past five centuries of world history have featured conquests, plunder, torture, genocide, slavery, occupation and worse. The trend towards asking forgiveness and making reparations is overall a good thing. It acknowledges history while pointing a way forward, whether it be consolidating a national identity in Mexico, apologising for atrocious colonial misdeeds in Africa or addressing inequality between blacks and whites in America.

The debate over the Spanish and Portuguese conquests of what is now called Latin America took on a new meaning after 1992,

when the former colonial powers and former colonies met to revisit and discuss Columbus's arrival in the New World.

The Mexican case is especially complicated. Several polls showed Mexicans disagreed on López Obrador's call for an apology as well as the issue's relevance. Historians also made several points against his stance.

First, the historians stated that Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, was captured thanks as much to Cortés' allies among the other indigenous peoples of the time as to the Spaniards themselves. Then they recalled that the Aztecs were no choir children: They resorted to cannibalism, human sacrifice, local wars to subjugate other peoples and violent repression of their enemies. Finally, and most important, they noted that Mexicans have always held an ambivalent position on their own national identity.

During the past decades, children's textbooks have implied that today's inhabitants of Mexico are descended from indigenous people and not from the Spanish. The official narrative for more than a century now in Mexico is that it is the mestizo country par excellence. As the nameplate at the National Anthropology Museum and Tlatelolco Square, where the final defeat of the Aztecs occurred, proclaims, "Neither a victory nor a



Supporters of American slavery reparations

Brexit heads for that riveting bla



ROGER COHEN

A friend sent me a BBC Scotland video of Jay Lafferty, a Scottish comedian, summing up the Brexit situation almost three years after Britain voted to leave the European Union:

"So the way I understand it is that Parliament have said no to Theresa's deal," she says, referring to Prime Minister Theresa May of Britain. "And they've said no to no deal, but some of them said yes to no deal but no to Theresa's deal, but not as many that said no to no deal and no to Theresa's deal, but they don't actually have a deal of their own, which is a big deal because without a deal then no deal is more likely to be the deal that's dealt, and the people who want the deal can't be dealing with that."

Or, as Tom Baldwin, director of communications for the People's Vote campaign for a second referendum, put it to me: "The problem with Brexit is not Theresa May. The problem with Brexit is Brexit."

Here we are. Brexit is not doable because it makes no sense, whatever the prime minister's scattershot efforts or offers to resign. You can hoodwink people — but not if you give them three years to reflect on how they were hoodwinked before doing the deed the hoodwinking was about.

The British cannot actually go through with something that will lower their incomes, make them



The Union Flag gives an anti-Brexit campaigner little shelter from the rain outside Parliament in London.

poorer, lose them jobs, drain investment, expose their market to trade deals over which they would have no say, and — just an afterthought — lead to the breakup of Britain.

They cannot even if President Donald Trump calls the European Union "brutal" as he enfolds gentle Kim Jong Un of North Korea in a love embrace. To live is also to think again. That is what

Britain is doing, confronted by its most important decision in decades.

The European Union's extension of the exit deadline, originally set for March 29, until the end of October looks to me like the beginning of the end of Brexit. It may still happen, but for the first time the odds on it happening are not better than even.

The momentum is with the

"Remain" camp. More than six million people have signed a petition in favour of staying in the union. A million people recently marched. Brexiteers are defecting. Nick Ferrari, an influential radio broadcaster, announced this month that he'd changed his mind. "Just bloody stay and we'll move on to other things," he said. "Enough is enough."

The extension averted the

over-the-cliff Brexit favoured by Tory hard-liners whose absolutist demands have ensured May's proposed "deal" (in reality a kick-the-can fudge) never had a chance. It opened up a six-month period of reflection during which all sorts of things could happen. Most are likely to be inimical to Brexit.

The cost of this madness is sinking in. As Martin Fletche

The British cannot actually go through with something that will lower their incomes, make them poorer, lose them jobs and drain investment