

Anthony Steen's speech delivered to mark the opening of an exhibition highlighting the hidden nature of modern day slavery which was hosted in the House of Commons on 22 April 2013

I'm grateful, Prime Minister, for your agreeing to open this exhibition on Modern Day Slavery. You may ask why the title is The Hidden Agenda? When the Slave Trade was abolished in 1807, slaves were paraded in public. But today things are different. Modern slavery is the second largest and most lucrative criminal activity in the world with human beings traded like commodities. But secretly. Victims remain silent through fear of their traffickers so no one knows they exist. No one looks for them.

What is the scale of slavery here?

There is little reliable information. What we know:

- Slaves came to the UK from 95 different countries in the last 18 months. Their numbers increasing but the numbers of traffickers convicted in the UK decreasing.
- A child a day is found trafficked in the UK
- The Serious Organised Crime Agency counted over 2000 victims last year but concluded that this was the tip of the iceberg.
- The common consensus is that for every 1 victim found, another 10 remain hidden. This makes it 20,000 people in slavery in Britain today.

Who are they?

Look around this room. Can you spot the people who recently escaped from slavery? I doubt it, they look like anyone else. There are 12 of them here. One girl here was sold into the sex industry at 16 by her mother. After her rescue by Birmingham police, and placement in a local authority care home, her traffickers tried to snatch her back. That's how hundreds of trafficked children go missing from care each year. Then the Chinese girl, who at 15 was drugged, put into a container together with 8 other girls trafficked by ship from Beijing to Britain (Her story human cargo tea chest). And a man, duped by a job advertised in Hungary, forced to work without pay, compelled to open a credit card account operated by his slave master, forced to claim benefits for non-existent children. My thanks to you all and for the NGOs accompanying you, open-minded enough to understand that many survivors want to tell their stories, and not continuously be hidden away.

So, where are slaves today?

The map highlights the hot spots in every constituency. It's not just cities, but market towns, like Banbury – as Tony Baldry knows only too well. On our high streets, there are Fagin's children shoplifting, pick-pocketing and involved in ATM theft. In the backstreets, sex trafficking. In countless 'ordinary homes', domestic slavery. In nearly every constituency, hidden behind the façade of suburban homes, are cannabis farms where Vietnamese children are imprisoned to tend crops – often treated as criminals by police, rather than as victims. 800 farms in 2007 became nearly 8,000 last year. It is a growth industry. Congratulations to

Norfolk, Suffolk and Bedfordshire constabularies for naming individual villages where cannabis farms were found. (Panel 7, tea chest 'Property of HMG').

Prime Minister, there are two things you could do which would immediately make a difference. First, take personal charge of the Interdepartmental Ministerial Group on Human Trafficking. If you did this, it would give additional impetus to the government's 2011 Human Trafficking Strategy. Every one of the 17 Ministers in the Group would attend. Things would start happening. And, you could do no better than considering the recommendations of the Centre for Social Justice's recent report on fighting modern day slavery. The second thing, Prime Minister, is through your leadership, you could take the cause of slavery from a hidden agenda to an open one. Raising awareness with the support of MPs in whose constituencies' slaves have been discovered will expose the extent of modern day slavery. Once exposed, it will start to wither.

My thanks to some amazing people who've made this exhibition possible – detailed on the flags over there – a special mention to the Central St Martin's College of Art team and our talented photographers. A special thanks to the joint chairmen of the All Party Group Peter Bone MP, the sponsor of the exhibition, and Baroness Butler-Sloss. And, above all, Lord Glendonbrook. Through the Michael Bishop Foundation, funding an entirely new venture. I'm indebted to him for his belief in me and for recognising the significance of tackling this growing evil.

Prime Minister, your being here today could begin the abolition of modern day slavery, just as this country led the world in abolishing the old Slave Trade 207 years ago.