

## **Setting and Retracting the Welcome Mat: An Assessment of the development of British Immigration Policy 1948 to 1962.**

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### **Introduction**

The Second World War had a devastating effect on Britain. Many people were killed; many areas of the country were in ruins. In the immediate post-war period, Britain was desperate for workers, to operate factories, help run the hospitals and maintain transport and other services. In 1948, the Government passed the British Nationality Act which effectively made all colonial and Commonwealth citizens British. This was the beginning of a recruitment drive for colonials to fill numerous available jobs. However, by 1962 it appeared that Commonwealth immigrants had worn out their welcome, and legislation pursued by the British government now sought to restrict their entry into Britain. This paper will attempt to trace key developments from the 1948 British Nationality Act (which gave colonials favourable status) to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in 1962 (which imposed certain restrictions on colonials).

### **The Period 1948 - 1950**

Zig Layton-Henry in his book *The Politics of Immigration* concludes that despite the crucial issues of possible population decline, the needs of the labour market coupled with the resumption of large scale emigration from Britain, black immigration and settlement were not really welcomed by the British government or policy makers after the war (Layton-Henry 1992, 27). The British government seemed to be concerned with two major issues surrounding immigration. The first was the ability of the newcomers to integrate and assimilate, and the other was the problem of crime which might be exacerbated by their presence. British policy makers “generally assumed that white European immigrants would be more skilled, valuable and assimilable as potential citizens than non-Europeans” (Layton-Henry 1992, 27). This was evident in some of the initiatives taken by the government in the area of manpower planning after the war.

Caribbean migration to Britain mushroomed after the introduction of the British Nationality Act, and the arrival of the S.S. Empire Windrush at Tilbury in June 1948. In October of that same year, the British government considered it necessary to convene an interdepartmental committee or working party “To enquire into the possibilities of employing in the United Kingdom surplus manpower of certain Colonial territories in order to assist the

manpower situation in this country and to relieve unemployment in those Colonial territories” (Report, Colonial Labour, 1948, 1).

The report of the committee makes interesting reading. Under the section titled “Suitability of Colonial Labour for United Kingdom Vacancies”, the committee noted that there were “several obstacles to the use of Colonial Labour to relieve labour shortages in this country.” The first was a preference for E.V.W’s (European Volunteer Workers), as they were more susceptible to stringent labour control and could be prosecuted or deported if they reneged on their arrangement with the Ministry of Labour. The committee also noted, although coloured persons did not suffer from any formal disabilities or disqualifications in the UK, “we cannot escape the conclusion that neither employers nor the workers in industry would look with favour on the introduction of coloured workers in factories and workshops where this class of labour has not previously been employed” (Report, Colonial Labour, 1948, 4).

In the section of the report that dealt with proposals for the employment of colonial labour, members of the committee stated that they were unable in the prevailing circumstances to ratify the importation of male colonials for any industry. The report also stated, “In the case of industries employing women, however, both in the textile industries and in the field of domestic employment, there are large unsatisfied demands for female labour and at the same time the possibility of providing living accommodation for imported workers.” The committee agreed that these two fields should be vigorously pursued (Report, Colonial Labour, 1948, 5).

The report also examined the nursing profession. It revealed that there were approximately 54,000 vacancies for nursing staff in the United Kingdom at that time. Yet, despite this seemingly large demand, there was no recommendation to move full speed ahead to recruit colonial women to fill the void. In fact, it was quite the opposite. The committee cited the shortage of nurses in the colonies and “the difficulty of finding Colonial women with adequate qualifications as regards education, health and general suitability for nursing” (Report, Colonial Labour, 1948, 6) as a compelling reason guiding them to make this decision. The committee’s recommendations were in fact part of the unmistakable prejudice against the recruitment of black colonial workers. They refused to endorse any male recruiting scheme, and even went as far to “suggest that Colonial workers might find unemployment benefits in the United Kingdom so enticing compared to what may obtain in the West Indies that there would be hardly any incentive for them to seek employment at all” (Report, Colonial Labour, 1948, 4). While it can be argued that committee members were more sympathetic to female immigration schemes and were willing to sponsor the same, they were much more enthusiastic about unskilled and semi-skilled occupations (textile and domestic industries), rather than those requiring professional training, such as nursing. In the eyes of the committee, black colonial migrants were only suited for menial type labour. However, the British government did not act on the committee’s recommendations; hence, migration from the West Indies continued at a steady rate (Layton-Henry 1992, 29).

When the committee was reconvened to address the issue of colonial migration sixteen months later in February 1950, its recommendations included enforcing stricter immigration controls at home and in the colonies. The committee also urged the British government to tackle the problems of those colonials already resident in Britain. Three possible solutions recommended were dispersal of the migrants from their concentrated locations, finding employment and accommodation for colonials, as well as arranging for voluntary repatriation of misfits (Layton-Henry 1992, 29). This anti colonial immigration trend continued, and in March 1950, the Cabinet requested a memorandum from the Secretary of State for the Colonies on the

immigration of “coloured” people from the colonial territories. The memorandum was presented to the Cabinet on the 18<sup>th</sup> of May. It concluded that coloured immigration created problems with respect to accommodation, employment, law and order, and that the situation could only be remedied by discouraging migrants. However, since only three or four thousand people were involved at this early period of migration, the Labour government decided to take no action” (Layton-Henry 1992, 30).

In June 1950, Cabinet decided to review the immigration question once again, leading to the setting up of yet another committee, but under the auspices of the Home Secretary. This committee wisely concluded that the number of immigrants was too small to warrant any legislative remedies. However, the committee also concluded that while legislation could not be justified, any increase in the number of migrants in the near future would necessitate immigration legislative controls.

### **The Period 1953 - 1962**

Between 1953 and 1955, Liberal, Labour and Conservative Members of Parliament raised the issues of increased coloured migration and immigration controls. The government responded that it was aware of the concerns of citizens and that the matter was receiving its careful consideration. Prime Minister Sir Anthony Eden declared in Parliament in 1955 that his government was not considering taking action to control immigration, and that in any case the largest immigration was from Ireland (*Parliamentary Debates* 1955, cols. 2005-06). However, the evidence suggests that behind the scenes, the government was giving detailed consideration to what they perceived as the problem of controlling coloured immigration. They reconvened the interdepartmental committee in January 1953, with “loyal” civil servants subsequently spending months discussing and justifying the proposals. Although the settled coloured population was found to be very small and police reports to the committee did not suggest that they were responsible for any disproportionate level of crime in Britain, the committee nonetheless decided it was in favour of controls. The committee decided that legislation was necessary as administrative measures were likely to be ineffective (Layton-Henry 1992, 32).

Reports produced by various departments in the 1950s usually gave the impression that the coloured person was a problem for the society. The Ministry of Labour reported black unemployment was higher than that of whites; and for a myriad of reasons the former were perceived as both unsuitable and undependable labourers. Black women became the victims of stereotyping. They were said to be mentally slow and therefore unable to cope with the speed of work-related activities. On the other hand, these same women were praised for being reliable domestics in hospitals and elsewhere. They were also able to complete the courses of study required to qualify as nurses (Report, Employment, 1953, 7).

Based on the recommendations of the 1953 committee, it is clear that the British government was intent on controlling colonial immigration through legislative means. In July 1954, a report was submitted by one W. H. Cornish, chairman of the Conservative appointed Committee to consider certain proposals to restrict the right of British subjects from overseas to enter and remain in the United Kingdom. This report contradicts the declaration made in Parliament by Eden in 1955 that there was no move to control immigration. Layton-Henry (1992, 33) notes, “It is extraordinary that, at a time when Irish immigration was estimated to be 60,000 per year, immigration controls should have been considered in order to prevent the entry

of a mere 3,000 people who, as Commonwealth citizens were British subjects.” However, in order to guarantee success the government consulted with the opposition, thus ensuring a bipartisan approach in the drafting of immigration legislation. There was considerable discussion about Irish immigration by the committee. The committee wished for immigration to continue “because of the labour shortage and its contribution to economic growth and because of the fit young men and women being added to the population” (Layton-Henry 1992, 33). One year later, a supplementary report of a committee of Ministers concluded that there were “sound and convincing practical reasons for continuing to exclude citizens of the Irish Republic from immigration control, even if it is eventually decided to regulate the entry of Commonwealth citizens” (Supplementary Report, 1956, 1). This report also noted that coloured immigration was increasing at an uncomfortably high rate but advised the Cabinet not to take any action at this time. Their advice was accepted by Cabinet: a temporary reprieve for what was considered a growing problem.

The Conservative government refrained from introducing legislation in the 1950s because the number of coloured immigrants was considered too low to court controversy. By 1961, a Commonwealth Migrants Committee, which included the Home Secretary and the Lord Chancellor, observed that the flow of coloured immigrants had increased making the August figure of nearly 16,000 the highest monthly total on record. The estimate for the year was double that for 1960 and more than five times that for 1959. The Committee concluded that the time had come to control this flow by introducing legislation, despite the difficulties that might arise from such a decision. In their opinion, there was “no element of racial discrimination in the Bill itself; and the emphasis of the scheme is upon the limitation and not the elimination of coloured immigration” (Committee to Prime Minister, October 1961, 2).

The challenging question is, other than their skin colour, what did the Irish immigrant have that the Commonwealth migrant did not have? Non-British subjects were not being regulated while bona-fide British subjects were. One can only agree with the anticipated-criticism of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act by a member of the Committee cited in a letter to the Prime Minister dated 9<sup>th</sup> October 1961: “It would undoubtedly be said that we had prided ourselves upon keeping the door open to Commonwealth immigration so long as that gave rise to no significant difficulty for us but that, as soon as people of the wrong colour started coming through the door in substantial numbers we took steps to close it.”

After considering the recommendation of the Migrants Committee, the Cabinet acted as the bill was both drafted and tabled in Parliament. The Commonwealth Immigrants Act became law in 1962. Effectively from the 1<sup>st</sup> July 1962, citizens of Commonwealth countries, with certain exceptions became subject to immigration control ([www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk](http://www.ukba.homeoffice.gov.uk), 2008). It required all Commonwealth citizens, seeking employment in Britain, to qualify for an employment voucher. This limited the right of entry to the United Kingdom. Potential migrants, who possessed passports not issued in Britain, were obliged to hold a work permit to secure entry. Leroy Timothy remembers that between January and June in 1962 it was so tedious to book one’s passage to England. All the liners were filled to capacity. People were all trying to beat the June deadline; a popular term that surfaced at that time was “to beat the Ban” (Birmingham 2011). Fortunately, he got his ticket and left Trinidad and Tobago in May (Timothy 2008).

The first purpose of the Act was to dry up, or at least significantly reduce to a trickle the rush of migrants from the Commonwealth sources of India, Pakistan, Africa, and the West Indies. The same people who had answered the call to duty during and after World War II had

now become a nuisance to native white Britain. It was not only important to close the borders to stop them from coming in, but expelling as many as possible would be an added bonus. The legislation made provisions for both scenarios. Ceri Peach in his book *West Indian Migration to Britain* (1968, xv) argues that at the time the Commonwealth Immigration Policy of Britain was decided, there was no accurate knowledge of the volume, trend and distribution of the migrants. Therefore, he contends that this major aspect of British government policy, which eventually became law, was based on guesstimates.

The 1961 census showed that the West Indian-born population of England and Wales was 171,796; Indian nationals numbered 46,575, and Pakistanis 19,250. These three groups accounted for just over half of 1 per cent of the population of England and Wales (Peach 1968, xv). Since together these migrants constituted such an insignificant percentage of the country's population, one can only echo Peach's (1968, xv) conclusion that "their most disturbing characteristic was not so much their total number as their colour, rate of immigration, and their local concentrations."

### **Conclusion**

The British Nationality Act of 1948 signalled to the colonies that the mother country was once again in need of their assistance, and like loyal subjects they responded enthusiastically flocking to Britain in search of jobs. From 1948 to 1962, however, the British government shifted from the position of a gracious and generous host welcoming its subjects, to that of a frustrated landlord eager to evict his tenants. This change was due to anti-coloured immigration positions adopted by government-appointed committees operating as well as anti-coloured immigration trends in Britain during this time frame. Anti-coloured sentiments appeared to have climaxed with the passage of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962. On the other hand, white Irish immigrants for the period 1948 to 1962 were warmly welcomed and treated more humanly by the British authorities, clearly suggesting that British anti-coloured immigration policy from 1948 to 1962 was tantamount to government-sanctioned racism.

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