THE 1951-55 CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT AND THE RACIALISATION OF BLACK IMMIGRATION

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The problem of colonial immigration has not yet aroused public anxiety, although there was some concern, mainly due to the housing difficulties in a few localities where most of the immigrants were concentrated. On the other hand, if immigration from the colonies, and, for that matter, from India and Pakistan, were allowed to continue unchecked, there was a real danger that over the years there would be a significant change in the racial character of the English people [1]

Introduction

The myth of the 'invisible state' has been a recurring theme in the discussion of post war racism in the UK. This myth holds that in the 1950s the state was either absent or played a minimal role in the emerging discourse about 'coloured colonial immigration'. Other interpretations have suggested that the British state openly welcomed and encouraged Black immigration. Contrary to this view we wish to argue that by 1955 the State had developed a clear policy towards Black immigration. This policy involved direct intervention on some issues and an apparent inactivity on others. For example, whilst the government was systematically collecting information about Black people to support a draft immigration Bill, it was also opposing measures such as Fenner Brockway's' Bill prohibiting racial discrimination and refusing to respond to requests for assistance from local authorities on housing and other matters. This went far beyond the prejudiced attitudes of individuals, albeit individuals holding high office. It amounted to the construction of an ideological framework in which Black people were seen to be threatening, alien and unassimilable and to the development of policies to discourage and control Black immigration. The racism elaborated by the state in the post-war period was not simply a legacy of imperialism. Black immigration raised the prospect of a permanent Black presence in British society. Concern about the deleterious effects of Black immigration on the 'racial character of the English people' was voiced as early as 1948. Two days after the arrival of the 'Empire Windrush' a letter was sent to Clement Attlee by 11 Labour MP's calling for the control of Black immigration, since:

An influx of coloured people domiciled here is likely to impair the harmony, strength and cohesion of our public and social life and to cause discord and unhappiness among all concerned [2].

The Labour Government set up a Cabinet Committee in 1950 to review "... the further means which might be adopted to check the immigration into this country of coloured people from the British Colonial Territories" [3]. On grounds of expediency rather than principle, the introduction of legislative control was shelved; it was felt that the administrative measures already in operation were a sufficient safeguard of 'racial character'. [see Joshi and Carter 1984; Harris 1987].

When these administrative measures proved ineffective against bona fide, fare-paying Black British subjects, the case for legislative control had to be constructed anew. An inchoate public anxiety about Black immigration, and a continuing demand for labour, made more acute by the termination of the European Volunteer Worker scheme, required a 'strong case' to be made in favour of legislation. This 'strong case' was built around a racialised reconstruction of 'Britishness' in which to be white was to 'belong' and to be Black was to be excluded. This article will examine the early stages of this reconstruction in the policies of the 1951-55 Conservative government first to discourage and then to control Black immigration.

Holding the Tide.

The period between the 1948 Nationality Act and the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act is frequently characterised as one in which the principle of free entry of British subjects to the UK was only relinquished with great reluctance and after considerable official debate. This was not the case. On the contrary, the debate was never about principle. Labour and Conservative Governments had by 1952 instituted a number of covert, and sometimes illegal, administrative measures designed to discourage Black immigration.

These measures varied according to the Commonwealth or Colonial status of the particular territory. In the case of West Africa, for example, this involved the 'laundering' of the British Travel Certificate. This was issued for travel between the French and British colonies along the West African coast and confirmed that the holder was a British subject. It therefore provided a legal means of entry into the UK. "Most men now realise," despaired one Colonial Office official, "that a British Travel Certificate is the minimum document on which they can expect to be landed in this country" [4]. Accordingly, arrangements were made to omit from the documents any reference to British subject status. A holder arriving in the UK could then be sent back as an alien, despite the fact that " all concerned, including the Immigration Officer, know perfectly well that they almost certainly are British subjects" [5].

Different problems were posed by the West Indies, "where the difficulty of refusing passports to applicants whose nationality was not in doubt", required other measures. Governors were asked to tamper with shipping lists and schedules to place migrant workers at the back of the queue; to cordon off ports to prevent passport holding stowaways from boarding ships; and to delay the issue of passports to migrants [6].

This last measure was also adopted by India and Pakistan where the "... Governments refused passports if migrants had no firm prospect of establishing themselves" [7]. Police reports were carried out at the request of the Home Office to establish the basis of these prospects [8].

These ad hoc administrative measures had their limitations and indeed, some were of questionable legality. Above all they failed to prevent an increasing number of Black British subjects coming to the UK. By the early I950's, therefore, some Government departments had come to favour restrictive legislation. The Welfare Department of the Colonial Office, for example, felt that "...it would be far better to have an openly avowed policy of restricted immigration than fall back on rather devious little devices" [9].In effect this argued for the de jure legislative recognition of the progressive de facto administrative denial of the rights of Black British subjects freely to enter Britain established by the 1948 Nationality Act. Such a move would assuage the fear that the dubious methods would be exposed in Parliament and cause political embarrassment. Legislation, however, required a convincing case to be made.

Building a Strong Case from Broken Reeds

In April 1954 a confidential meeting of Ministers took place at the Colonial Office. The case for legislative control, it was stressed, needed empirical demonstration. This meant gathering information about unemployment and National Assistance, 'numbers', housing, health, criminality, and miscegenation, which it was hoped would confirm that Black immigration posed insoluble problems of social, economic and political assimilation. The already widespread surveillance of Black communities by the police was supplemented by surveys undertaken by the Ministry of Labour, the National Assistance Board, the Welfare Department of the

Colonial Office, the Home Office, the Commonwealth Relations Office, the Departments of Health, Housing and Transport as well as voluntary organisations. A Working Party on 'The Employment of Coloured People in the UK', set up by the Cabinet in December 1953, used the findings to produce a report which assessed the strengths and weaknesses of the 'strong case'. This report formed a central part of Cabinet discussion in 1954-1955 concerning the need to control Black immigration.

Early attempts to build a case which would be strong enough to focus public anxiety deployed the issue of numbers. Two concerns were prominent : the accelerating rate of Black immigration and the size of the Black population. Ministers were particularly alarmed that West Indian migration for 1954 was running at the level of 10,000 compared to 2,000 in previous years.. However, an examination of these figures by Betty Boothroyd at the Board of Trade revealed that while West Indian migration was "... going up pretty fast, the overall immigration from coloured empire countries has not increased in any dramatic way in the last few years" [10]. Nevertheless, Ministers and civil servants continued assiduously to collect newspaper clippings which suggested that Britain would have to brace itself for an influx of Black immigrants. Even the judicious New Statesman was of the opinion "... that we must prepare ourselves either to accept no fewer than 200,000 immigrants in the next ten years- and possibly many more- or to face a political explosion in the Caribbean" [11].

There was real uncertainty, too, about the size of the Black population, with figures of 60,000 and 70,000 being bandied about. These estimates were contradicted by figures from the police and the Ministry of Labour. "It is interesting," noted one civil servant wryly," that the police estimate of the number of coloured people now in the United Kingdom gives a total of less than 25,000 Colonials, as against our unofficial estimate of 50,000 to 60000" [12]. Whatever the figures it had to be admitted in late 1955 that "...Colonial immigration was not an acute problem at the moment" [13].

In struggling to impose some coherence on these disparate, even conflicting, accounts, the Working Party found its own Report deprecated as "unnecessarily negative" by the Lord President of the Council, the Marquis of Salisbury. He went on to complain that "There appears to be no recognition of the dangers of the increasing immigration of coloured people into this country" [14].

These dangers coalesced around the fear that the "gathering momentum" of Black immigration would bring about "a significant change in the racial character of the English people". The Working Party had failed to appreciate that the real issue for the Cabinet was not the question of numbers but the very presence of Black people in Britain. Keith, the Welfare Officer at the Colonial Office, in conceding that "... the 'coloured' problem in the United Kingdom remains a small one, e.g. in Lambeth there are said to be 650 coloured persons among a population of 230,105", significantly went on to add that "...it would be better to stop the influx now to forestall future difficulties" [15].

Such comparisons revealed the Cabinet's difficulties of building a strong case solely around numbers. They therefore sought to extend the argument for legislative control in other directions. These focused on three particular areas: employment; housing; and crime.

Employment

The failure of an earlier propaganda campaign to persuade Black workers that it was not 'in their interests' to migrate to the UK, led to efforts to show that those who did migrate were unemployable and represented a burden on public funds. A questionnaire circulated to Labour Exchanges in 1954 asked inter alia:

- "Is it true that coloured people, or certain classes of coloured people, are work shy?"
- "Is it true that they are poor workmen?"
- "Is it true that they are unsuited by temperament to the kind of work available?" [16]

The returns from the exchanges were contradictory. While recognising that Black workers were not workshy or poor workers, they also reflected the views of some employers that they were a problem on the grounds of "...their relatively low output: their high rate of turnover: their irresponsibility, their quarrelsomeness and lack of discipline and the objections of white employees" [17]. The unsuitability of 'coloured' labour was a common theme in the Working Party's Report:

The unskilled workers who form the majority, are difficult to place, because they are on the whole physically unsuited for heavy manual work, particularly outdoors in winter or in hot conditions underground and appear to be generally lacking in stamina. There is also some indication that they are more volatile in temperament than white workers and more easily provoked to violence, though the evidence of this is not conclusive [18].

In contrast to 'coloured' men:

Coloured women are said to be slow mentally, and the speed of work in modern factories is said to be quite beyond their capacity [19].

But these characteristics appeared not to deter their giving "... reliable service as domestics in hospitals, institutions and private domestic employment."

The Working Party confidently concluded that, because the fields in which 'coloured' immigrants "... are suitable for employment are somewhat limited by their physique and the reluctance of some employers, for various reasons, to take them on, the proportion of unemployment tends to be higher than in the case of white workers and coloured people are principally, for that reason, rather more liable than white people to become a charge on National Assistance" [20]. This overlooked the fact that recent Black immigrants, like the 60,000 Irish who were also claiming National Assistance, were ineligible for unemployment benefit since they would not have paid the statutory fifty weeks of National Insurance contributions.

Housing

In the mid 1950's Britain's housing stock was still desperately short of the level of demand. Black immigration was held to aggravate this by making the shortage more acute and by creating "conditions described variously as primitive, squalid and deplorable." A statement prepared by the Cabinet for publication in 1955 asserted that:

The most serious problem arising at present from coloured immigration is undoubtedly in the field of housing. The bulk of the coloured immigrants have congregated in relatively few areas, mainly in London and the Midlands, where there is already an acute housing shortage [21].

The document then expanded on the grave problem this congregation posed for local authorities:

Their resources are quite insufficient to enable them to undertake rehousing on the scale required and they would in any case be seriously embarrassed by having to give priority on the basis of need to these newcomers over long term residents who have had their names on the housing list for many years [22].

The Cabinet even considered making suitable housing accomodation a condition of permanent settlement for Black immigrants. As The Times bluntly put it:

...what are likely to be the feelings of more than 50,000 would be white tenants in Birmingham, who have waited years for a decent house, when they see newcomers, no matter what their colour, taking over whole streets of properties? [23].

This 'common sense' correlation of housing shortage with Black immigration was dubious. In the first place, there was the assumption that Blacks and whites competed for the same housing, whereas it was clear that the former were not eligible for council housing. Secondly, if Blacks were 'taking over whole streets of properties', this begs the question of why those properties were not attractive or available to white buyers. Finally, the housing shortage in the Britain of the 1950's, as now, was a product of Government policies and market forces, not of levels of immigration. In 1954, for example, Macmillan, then Minister of Housing, announced that only 160,000 council houses would be built in 1955 instead of the 235,000 of the current year. At the same time rent controls in the private sector were lifted.

There was a further element to the housing issue that lent itself to the 'building of a strong case'. This was the creation of 'new Harlems' in the heartlands of British cities. The key features of the 'new Harlems' were luridly portrayed by the Liverpool Group of the Conservative Commonwealth Association in their pamphlet 'The Problem of Colonial Immigrants' :

Liverpool is admittedly one of the chief centres of coloured settlement and a new Harlem is being created in a decayed residential quarter of the City, where rooms in large and dilapidated houses are sub let at high rentals to coloured immigrants who exist in conditions of the utmost squalor. Vice and crime are rampant and social responsibilities are largely ignored. Hundreds of children of negroid or mixed parentage eventually find their way to the various homes to be maintained by the corporation, to be reared to unhappy maturity at great public expense. Large numbers of the adults are in receipt of unemployment benefit or National Assistance and many are engaged in the drug traffic or supplement their incomes by running illicit drinking dens or by prostitution [24].

This document was circulated widely within the Conservative Party. Landlordism, declining property values, spiraling rents, overcrowding, dilapidation and decay were cited as the inevitable consequences of Black settlement. Black people not only created slums, it was argued, but these 'new Harlems' had their provenance in the 'racial' character of the inhabitants. Indeed, their very way of life was seen to pose a fundamental threat to social order.

Criminality

In the House of Commons in November 1954, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, Alex Lennox-Boyd, was asked by Sir Jocelyn Lucas "...what machinery exists to ascertain the proportion of Jamaican immigrants who have police or criminal records" [25]. This was not the first time that the issue of alleged Black criminality had been raised in the House.

In its 1952 survey of the Black population in London and the Provinces, the Colonial Office drew heavily on police accounts and reports. These dwelt upon the size of the Black population, the degree to which it had been assimilated and the extent to which it was involved in criminal activity. In Sheffield, for example, the Chief constable had deputed two police officers to "...observe,visit and report on" the Black population [26]. A card index was compiled, listing the names, addresses, nationalities and places of employment of the City's 534 Black inhabitants.

This concern with criminality emphasised certain types of deviance, pre-eminently drug trafficking and living on immoral earnings, and the ways in which these endangered the social and moral fabric of British society. In its evidence to the Working Party the police claimed that there had been "...a marked number of convictions of coloured men for living on the immoral earnings of white women" [27]. The Working Party's own Report hinted that "this practice is far more widespread than the few prosecutions indicate" [28].

Such alleged criminality merged into a general condemnation of "...the associations formed between coloured men and white women of the lowest type." Such associations were seen to undermine the sanctity of white British womanhood (and, of course, the white patriarchal structure on which it rested). Drug trafficking completed the picture of an alien wedge whose exotic features were graphically presented by Sheffield's Chief constable:

...the West Africans are all out for a good time, spending money on quaint suits and flashy ornaments and visiting dance halls at every opportunity. The Jamaicans are somewhat similar, but they have a more sensible outlook and rarely get into trouble. They take great pains with their appearance and use face cream, perfume etc. to make themselves attractive to the females they meet at dances, cafes etc. One feels, however, that they only attract a certain type of female by reason of the fact that they have more money to spend than the average young Englishman [29].

These stereotypes were never supported by any evidence that Black people were involved in disproportionate amounts of crime. In his report to the Working Party, the Chief Constable of Middlesbrough noted that "...on the whole the coloured population are as well behaved as many local citizens" [30]. The Times similarly observed: "Everywhere they have appeared the police and magistrates are ready to say that the West Indians make no trouble, which is more than some are ready to say of Irish workers" [31].

"The idea, I take it, is to conceal the real purpose of the legislation." (Viscount Swinton, Commonwealth Secretary) [32]

The failure of the Conservative Cabinet to garner empirical support for their 'strong case' did not deflect them from the conviction that Black immigration could not be contained by the administrative measures mentioned earlier. Legislative action still needed to be pursued. In the absence of any evidence connecting Black people with intractable social problems a different kind of case had to be made which conveyed to the public the deep anxieties felt by the Cabinet about the threat to the 'racial character of the English'.
To this end the Home Secretary, Gwilym Lloyd George, proposed a Committee of Enquiry in November 1954. The nature of the Committee was explained by the Cabinet secretary, Norman Brook, in a briefing note to the Prime Minister:

Its purpose would be, not to find a solution (for it is evident what form control must take), but to enlist a sufficient body of public support for the legislation that would be needed. [33]

This purpose would only be fulfilled if the Committee's terms of reference left no doubt that Black immigration was the proper object of enquiry and if its report were unanimous. However, an invitation to consider discriminatory proposals had the disadvantage of leaving the committee open to charges of racism. The wider terms of reference, proposed by the Colonial Secretary, Lennox-Boyd, met this criticism in a most unusual manner:

That would not by any means prevent the Committee from proposing discriminatory measures, if they saw fit to do so; and if they did, without a virtual invitation, we should be in a very good position to measure public opinion and Parliamentary reactions to such proposals, without the Government having been in any way implicated in them [34].

There was no certainty, though, that a Committee which would have to include Opposition members and Trade Union representatives would unanimously support legislation. It was also clear that "some of those who might acquiesce in such action might find it less easy to give public evidence in support of it before a Committee" [35] Consequently the idea of a Committee was abandoned in June 1955. Instead, as "a better basis for action", the Cabinet resorted to an "authoritative statement of the increasing volume of immigration, and of the social and economic problems to which it was likely to give rise" [36]. This was intended for publication but was never released because, in the absence of firm evidence, it "would not have the effect of guiding public opinion in any definite direction" [37].Moreover, to issue such a report "with no indication of the Government's intentions would be merely embarrassing." Some ministers also felt that its release should be prefaced by a White Paper giving details of controls in the Dominions and Colonies on British subjects. This would imply that the introduction of controls by Britain was merely a quid pro quo.

The White Paper, like the 'statement', was never published, principally because it would have been embarrassing to reveal that "'old' Commonwealth countries are...operating immigration controls which discriminate against British subjects who are not of European race...Some of them might well prefer that the attention of the Parliament at Westminster should not be directed in this way" [38]. Though this weakened the Cabinet's position, it is doubtful, anyway, whether the growing momentum of the Cabinet's case would have overcome the political and economic reservations that were brought to the fore in the discussions surrounding Cyril Osborne's attempt to introduce a Private Member's Bill to regulate Black immigration.

In discussions before the Commonwealth Affairs Committee it was pointed out that the measures proposed in the Bill were difficult to reconcile with Britain's position as head of the Commonwealth and Empire. As the Chief Whip summarised:

Why should mainly loyal loyal and hard-working Jamaicans be discriminated against when ten times that quantity of disloyal (sic) Southern Irish (some of them Sinn Feiners) come and go as they please? [39]

The timing, too, created problems. With the forthcoming General Election, there was a desire to avoid controversial issues which might improve the chances of a Labour victory. The celebration of Jamaica's three hundredth anniversary of British rule in 1955- at which Princess Margaret was the principal guest - also made it inopportune to present what would have appeared as an 'anti-Jamaican Bill'. This was underlined by the feeling in some quarters that colonial development and not legislation was the solution to immigration. Finally, the Bill was refused leave on the grounds that it was too important a measure to be left to a Private Member.

In fact, the Home Secretary had prepared his own Draft Bill in November 1954 which awaited the outcome of Cabinet discussion on the Committee of Enquiry. It was not until the beginning of the next Parliamentary Session in October 1955 that this Draft was presented to the Cabinet. The objections to Osborne's Bill still applied. In the Cabinet meeting of November 3, other difficulties were noted. There was a recognition that, despite the fact that the House of Commons showed itself to be increasingly sympathetic to the idea of control, the Cabinet felt that public opinion had not 'matured sufficiently'. Public consent could only be assured if the racist intent of the Bill were concealed behind a cloak of universalism which applied restrictions equally to all British subjects.

Another difficulty was that "On economic grounds immigration, including Colonial immigration, was a welcome means of augmenting our labour resources" [40]. This was the first time that arguments about the economic benefits of Colonial immigration had figured in Cabinet discussions. With hindsight this seems to sit uneasily with the conviction that Britain faced a general labour shortage in the post war period. However, although it was recognised by the Cabinet that full employment generated demands for labour in specific branches of production, including those run by the state, it was also felt that Black labour, by its 'racial' nature, would be unsuitable to meet these demands. Some Ministers too were of the opinion that full employment would not last and grave problems would be created by the presence of an 'unassimilable', Black unemployed and unemployable population. This provided a sharp contrast with the efforts that were in the late 1940s to demonstrate the invaluable contribution that European Volunteer Workers could make to the British economy.

Many MP's of both Parties, as well as the TUC, believed that immigration to the UK would end only if jobs were created in the Colonies. Such a solution had the advantage of not jeopardising the interests of the British business community in Commonwealth and Colonial territories. Neither would it undermine the post-war reconstruction of the Empire as a trading bloc, the basis of Britain's claim to superpower status. Unsurprisingly, the Cabinet decided to 'reserve judgment' on the Bill.

Conclusion

We have demonstrated that the common interpretation of the 'absent state' in the 1940's and 1950's is contradicted by recently released government documents and records. At Cabinet, parliamentary and Civil Service level the issues raised by a Black presence were extensively discussed. A policy of preserving the homogeneous 'racial character' of British society led to specific measures to discourage and restrict Black immigration. With the passing of the 1948 Nationality Act, a contradictory process was set in motion. The Act had proposed a formal definition of 'Britishness' which embraced Black British subjects abroad, granting them full rights of citizenship. Yet, even as it entered the statute books, the Act had been qualified by a series of 'devious little devices', designed to 'hold the tide' of Black immigration. When these proved insufficient, legislative control increasingly became a favoured option amongst Ministers and senior Civil Servants. For public consent to be won for legislation, however, a 'strong case' had to be built. A consequence of this was an extension of the control and surveillance of the Black population in the UK. Integral to the policy and these measures was the development of a racialised construction of 'Britishness' which excluded and included people on the grounds of 'race' defined by colour.

Black immigration, it was alleged, would create problems which were insoluble precisely because their provenance was 'racial' and not social. Black people were unemployed not because of discrimination, but because of their 'irresponsibility, quarrelsomeness and lack of discipline'. Black people lived

in slums not because of discrimination, but because they knew no better. Indeed, their very nature was held to predispose them towards criminality. All of these stereotypes were evoked vividly in the concept of 'new Harlem', an alien wedge posing an unprecedented threat to the 'British way of life'. So powerful was this racialised construction that anti-discrimination legislation was seen as irrelevant to the 'social problems' of housing and employment. This was evident from the consistent opposition to Fenner Brockway's Bill seeking to proscribe racial discrimination and from the rejection of appeals for assistance from local authorities such as Birmingham and Lambeth.

In building its strong case, the state undertook nothing less than a political project in which notions of 'belonging' and 'community' were reconstructed in terms of 'racial' attachments and national identity organised around skin colour. This reconstruction simultaneously involved the deracialisation of the Irish who "...are not- whether they like it or not- a different race from the ordinary inhabitants of Great Britain" [41]. Only by arguing "...boldly along such lines" could Irish exclusion from the 1955 draft Bill avoid political criticism. This was not without its inconsistencies, since it involved playing down the significance of Irish neutrality during World War Two and erasing the Black contribution to the Allied war effort.

The racialised reconstruction of Britishness also posed problems for Britain's image as the 'Mother Country' of a 'multiracial Commonwealth':

...it may well be argued that a large coloured community as a noticeable feature of our social life would weaken the sentimental attachment of the older self governing countries to the UK. Such a community is certainly no part of the concept of England or Britain to which people of British stock throughout the Commonwealth are attached [42].

Whilst wishing to prevent Black British subjects from entering the UK, the Cabinet was concerned to preserve the right of white 'kith and kin' in the Dominions and to free entry.

Our argument clearly points to the need to recover the history of the state's central role in the construction of post-war British racism. This racism was not simply the product of an Imperial legacy, even less the consequence of a popular concern in the 1960's about numbers. Before Black workers had begun to arrive here in significant numbers, Black immigration was already being racialised. To use Hall's phrase, 'race' was becoming a lens through which people experienced and made sense of their everyday lives. This development was to displace the responsibility for Notting Hill 1958, Brixton 1981 and Handsworth 1985 onto the Black population and in so doing render the role of the state invisible.

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