

Windrush Generation: A re-examination of Britain's Race Relations

Abdikadir D. Askar

Abstract

This paper studies the arrival of 'Windrush Generation' and how it has contributed to Britain's multi-cultural society. Drawing heavily from the historical process, which seeks to explain how the West Indians arrived in Britain and integrated into a predominately White Britons, the paper critically examines into why the immigrants' expectations of welcoming reception and a better life were not initially met. It also carefully interrogates the struggles and challenges that the Caribbean migrants went through and the racial pressures that surrounded their integration into British society. In the end, the paper further looks at the implications that their arrival had on the state of race relations and political environment that surrounded in the adaptation of Immigration Control Acts.

Keywords: *Windrush, Caribbean/Black migrants, Britain*

Introduction

On June 22 1948, the arrival of German ship SS Empire Windush at London Tilbury Port carrying 492 (mostly male) West Indians, has come to be recognised as a symbol of the commencement of post-Second World War mass migration to Britain (Smith and Marmo, 2014). The term 'Windrush Generation' was adopted since then to mark the beginning of the modern multi-cultured, multi-ethnic Britain. Alexander (2015) sheds light on that ship's arrival marked an unparalleled wave of post-war black migration from the Caribbean Islands despite the fact that there was already insignificant number of black people living England. By 1961, however, people of West Indian origin in Great Britain reached their highest number of about 172,000 (Alexander, 2015).

Bearing this in mind, I will begin with the looking at the origins of *Windrush* Generation and how they have, historically, integrated with British society. According to Vidašičová (2015), "some of these immigrants later became among other professions musicians, poets and writers". Becoming part of the British society was not, however, easy for the Caribbean immigrants but it was a moment of mixed feelings and unprecedented struggles to overcome the odds of racial prejudice encountered during the arrival.

In response to the above question, the paper is divided into main two parts and each part will be dealt separately. The first part will be an in-depth analysis of why the hopes of *Windrush* Generations were at first unfulfilled. It will critically deliberate the difficulties, notably the housing problems, searching for jobs, racial indifferences, the West Indian immigrants faced and the racist attitudes of the majority of White Britons towards the migrants.

In the second part of the paper, the implications of the *Windrush* Generation on the state of race relations will be carefully studies since their arrival in 1948 up until the introduction of the 1965 Race Relations Act. I will also have a closer look at the historical perspectives of how the Immigration Control Acts were pioneered and the political debates that were surrounded at that time.

And then finally, my argument is that *Windrush* generation's expectations of a welcoming reception were not satisfied fully, but the time went by they have played a significant role to totally transform the Britain to multi-cultural and multi-religious British society and their legacy is still visible in all aspects the modern UK.

The origin of the *Windrush* Generation

The influx of the *Windrush* was positively reported in British papers in 1948, in spite of the fact that records at the time did not present it as a crucial moment in British history (Alexander, 2015). The ship itself was not the first to arrive in Britain from West Indians but was relatively vital as it was "the first to be met by newsreel cameras and the first to raise scarlet flushes of alarm in British newspapers and the House of Commons" (Vidašičová, 2015). The meeting of the "492" that headed out to Britain on the real *Windrush* were not only honoured but also those who made a similar journey in the period known as the "*Windrush* Years" was also applauded. As such, the period from June 1948 up until June 1962 has significantly transformed Britain into a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society (Eldridge, 1989).

Today's high number of West Indians in Britain today is primarily a post-war phenomenon. This goes back to the time when several thousand military volunteers were recruited from the British colonial areas to serve in the army, work in the military factories and defend the Queen against the aggressions of Nazi Germany during the Second World War (Byron, 1999). Fighting along with the British army earned the honor of the Black Caribbean who showed courage to serve for the 'mother country' though this respect did not last long.

After Britain's victory of Second World War, the ex-servicemen (mainly from the West Indians) were very disillusioned to return home as the economic situation in the British Caribbean territories worsened during the war (Byron, 1999). According to Byron (n.d.), the unemployment, particularly among youth, was exceptionally high in Jamaica and the fact that they could not migrate to their neighbouring states was not possible at that time (Byron, 1999). BBC (2008) reported that the USA, for instance, which was a 'preferred destination' for West Indians, because of the employment opportunities which was available through The Farm Work Programme, shut their doors up for the West Indians. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 (or McCarran-Walter Act) passed in the USA restricted the number of farm workers from West Indians to enter the US, and this ultimately increased the number of jobless youth in the Caribbean Islands (Bryce-Laporte, 1983).

On the other hand, the high unemployment in the Caribbean's Islands in the 1950s had inspired Jamaican youth to look for jobs elsewhere, probably outside of their home country. Britain then caught their eyes since there were labour shortages that were created as a result of the Second World War. With this in mind, West Indian job seekers were motivated to come to Britain (the mother country) as their admiration was particularly aroused by the advert stories published by Jamaican newspaper The Daily Gleaner (Alexander, 2015).

Furthermore, Bloch (2002) holds the view that the 1948 British Nationality Act has given a room for migrants from the British colonial subjects (Bloch, 2002). The 1948 Act provided citizens of all Commonwealth countries equal rights to enter, settle and work in Britain.

"Every person who under this Act is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies or who under any enactment for the time being in force in any country mentioned in subsection (3) of this section [Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Union of South Africa, Newfoundland, India, Pakistan, Southern Rhodesia and Ceylon] is a citizen of that country shall by virtue of that citizenship have the status of a British subject."

Windrush Generation: The Unfulfilled Expectations

According to Francis (1998), the 1950s became a pivotal decade for Britain's mass migration from Caribbean Island. Most of the immigrants were running from the worsened economic situation in their countries to fill up the labour shortages in Britain. However, the chains of reluctance to receive the new arrivals were unfolded by the fact that Britain's would not have stood alone by its feet again without the support of mass labourers from outside Britain (Vidašičová, 2015).

A small number of the Caribbean migrants could, therefore, guess what troubles they might come across or the path their lives could take. Vast majority of Jamaican migrants assumed that they would be back their home in few years with lots of fortunes and yet they had not critically anticipated of what the future may hold for them (Phillips, 1998). However, (Bloch, 2002) argues that a significant number of the new arrivals were given jobs, primarily in unskilled occupations, and their anticipation of 'heaven' was not easily attained.

Despite the exceptionally initial warm welcome from the press, racial tension amongst fellow citizens was endemic. Most of the print media published positive and pleasant stories about the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and its passengers. For example, 23rd June 1948 the headline of the *Evening Standard* read "Welcome Home! Evening Standard plane greets the 400 sons of Empire". Few months later, the media tone dramatically changed and the published stories conveyed a dehumanising picture about the black migrants showing them as a threat to the White Britons, often citing well-constructed propagandas about that blacks' kidnapping young women (Winder, 2013).

The Caribbean immigrants were faced with unpredicted discrimination in important areas such as labour market, housing and access to public services (Whitfield, 2006). The new arrivals were then much disillusioned by the country's indifference, and the colour of their skin triggered inauspicious reactions from White Britons (Archives, n.d.). The insulting signs and colour bars such as "No dogs, No Blacks" was a total dehumanising message of which they were repeatedly told that they are not even 'human being'. Thus the difference they encountered went more in-depth than changes in the weather, culture and lifestyle and such racial attitudes towards them intensified their sense of isolation.

'You're not thinking of your skin, but you feel other people are thinking of it. And every little thing that you do reflect on your reaction. Like, if you get on the bus, and there's an empty seat, you sit down, and somebody comes in, pass and go down the back and didn't sit with you, you're saying, maybe they want to sit on the back. But when the bus fills up, and you find you're the last one to have somebody beside you, then you know something is wrong. I wish I could be back home so bad it hurts, and tears came into your eyes because you missed the sort of freedom and companionship that you used to have.'- *Interview with Sam King*. (Phillips, 1998)

Furthermore, most of the West Indian immigrants had no accurate and reliable information before their departure concerning living and working conditions in the mother country. The ex-servicemen who served in Britain's armed forces were the only source of information, and thereby the immigrants' decisions were solely based on those details (YouTube, 2017). For instances, the letters from relatives and friends who stayed previously in Britain contained overstated explanations of the achievements they had attained while advertisements published by some of the less-reputable travel agents aiming to commercial gain created a fake picture of British living standards (Byron, n.d.). The disappointment thus experienced by numerous workers on their entry in Great Britain renders adjustment more difficult. Further challenges emerge from the immigrants' need of information of such things as British labour legislation and national service, while their disappointment to appreciate the need for expert advice when engaging in legal or budgetary transactions has some of the time brought about in genuine hardship (Winder, 2013).

The immigrants' lack of information concerning various aspects of life in Great Britain is matched by lack of knowledge on the part of some members of the British public concerning the social and cultural background of West Indians (Byron, 1999). The consequent failure, in some cases, to understand the West Indian's attachment to the mother country and the injury to his feelings if he is treated as a stranger is said to have constituted further barriers to adjustment (Archives, n.d.). Finally, Vidašičová (2015) explains that the public was not satisfactorily alarmed of the vital role played by West Indian immigrants in relieving workforce shortages.

In post-war Britain, while the labour of the new immigrant minorities was welcomed by specific sectors of the economy, the housing sector gave a hard and unwelcoming time new arrivals. (Eldridge, 1989). However, Caribbean migrant's struggle to overcome resentment and indifference within the British social system had been a noteworthy hindrance to their housing problem. The problem of the housing for the newcomers was further exasperated by the prejudice on the part of few property owners who most of them were unwilling to acknowledge coloured migrants as lodgers. More so, Vidašičová (2015) argues that Caribbean migrants were always at the end of the housing list despite the fact that some of them had enough money to pay rent or to buy a house. According to Winder (2013), most black Caribbeans had no other options but to seek cheaper apartment in the naughty and unclean areas in the urban centres. With the overcoming of these challenges, numerous West Indian migrants had been obliged to accept insufficiently furnished-accommodation at extreme rent (McDowell, 2013).

On October 6, 1954, *Evening Standard* reported:

"Some of the white residents resent having coloured people move in as fellow tenants. To their protest, they have added second-hand stories, of 10 Jamaicans sleeping in one room, of knife fights, immoral practices and drug trafficking" (Francis, 1998)

Housing was not the only problem faced the West Indian immigrants, getting a job was equally devastating for them. They were rejected to be given jobs of favourable conditions at times; the luckiest one would accept to work in unsocial hours, or do jobs that they were overqualified (Vidašičová, 2015). As a result, immigrants who come to Great Britain expecting to breakthrough work as artisans sometimes uncovering that the duration and quality of the apprenticeship they have served falls below the standards required by British employers (Eldridge, 1989). According to McDowell, (2013), other workers who have served no formal apprenticeship find that regular employment in a particular trade over a given point is not considered an acceptable fill-in for such learning. Further trouble emerges from the truth that the hardware used in Britain to carry out individual trades is distinctive from that to which West Indian labourers have been accustomed (Byron, 1999). In spite of the fact that the fundamental inspiration of the West Indian migrants to their entry in Britain was to discover job opportunities, but they were baffled by the reality that they had a negligible level of skills for different occupations (Phillips, 1998). Hence, some of them were obliged to accept employment at a status below that which they consider their level of aptitude entitles them to expect.

Windrush Generation: the Implications for the State of Race Relations

The arrival of Windrush Generation was a landmark that helped shape immigration in the context of the tensions between preserving traditions, the pressures to integrate, and the scale between host community prejudice and legitimate debate about changing society. According to Bryron (1999), the term 'coloured immigration' was added to the dictionary of British politics. Many local politicians, notably Enoch Powell, showed no mercy towards black immigrants even though the West Indians had the right to enter England at that time. (Gilroy, 2010). As a result, Byron (1999) emphasises that because of the absence of migration laws restricting Commonwealth immigrants, political elites and masses had no influence to stop the influx of black migrants.

The nature of British Nationality Act of 1948 was so friendly for citizens of British Colony of which under it, gave equal fair treatment to all its subjects. As Smith and Marmo (2014) highlight that the state did not bother the inflow of immigrants until they felt the pressure from the public (predominantly the indigenous White people) who suddenly developed negative feelings of incoming labour from the Commonwealth countries. Some scholars hold the view that the government was not willing to restrict the arrival of Commonwealth immigrant yet a closer study of the political responses and public opinions to the Commonwealth immigration suggests otherwise (Smith and Marmo, 2014). These scholars further state that the arrival of *Empire Windrush* on June 1948 provoked the political feeling of some right-wing politicians who tirelessly fought for strict immigration control.

Because of the continuing arrival of black migrants to England, the racial clashes become unavoidable (BBC, 2014). Racial attacks were waged against the black Caribbeans just because there were widespread ill-feeling that the immigrants were a burden to a social and economic life of White Britons (Winder, 2013). This is exemplified by the Notting Hill riots that happened in the late 1958, when an estimated 320 right-wing pro-white youth (known as 'Teddy Boys') confronted with Black West Indians while smashing their housing properties (YouTube, 2017). Smith (2014) holds the view that racial riots were not an unexpected event. Considering the prevailing racial atmosphere at the time, public was very angry with the migrants while accusing them that they had caused a burden to the housing and labour industry (Byron, 1999).

The London's Notting Hill riots against black migrants in 1958 is now referred to as a critical turning point in the re-drawing the Immigration Control Acts in Britain (Gilroy, 2010). It is undoubtedly true that the racial inspired events helped convey the racial message that was previously would not have publicly debated and it unfolded the hidden feeling that black immigrants were no longer needed in England. (Smith, 2014).

The riots consisted of attacks by whites on blacks, but this did not prevent them from being cited as examples of the danger of unrestricted immigration. By the time of the 1958 riots, however, the mobilisation of opinion in and out of parliament in favour of controls was well advanced, and the disturbance in Nottingham and Notting Hill were used by the prop-immigration-control lobby to call for the exclusion or even repatriation of 'undesirable immigrants'. They were also used to support the argument that black immigration posed a threat to the rule of law in the inner cities and endangered the 'English way of life'.

According to Solomos (1989), in September 1958 *The Times* reported that in one of the areas affected by the riots:

"There are three leading causes of resentment against coloured inhabitants of the district. They are alleged to do no work and to collect a rich sum from the Assistance Board. They are said to find housing when white residents cannot. And they are charged with all kinds of misbehaviour, especially sexual" (*The Times*, 3 September 1958)

It was about such concerns that right-wing extremist groups focused much of their propaganda during and after the riots. In this context, there was no need for their beliefs to be substantiated by evidence, and it proved challenging to counteract such stereotypes. This weakened attempts to resist the pressure for immigration control (Solomos, 2007).

The British government could no longer keep quiet but had to intervene the deteriorating racial situation by passing the Commonwealth Immigrants Act in July 1962 (Smith, 2014). This legislation was the outcome of the extended debate between 1945 and 1962 on the issue of immigration from the Commonwealth countries by both Conservative and Labour Governments. At that point, control of migration by the state, a potent force affecting the movement to the previous significant destinations within the Caribbean region and the United States, was introduced (Smith, 2014). As (Smith and Marmo, 2014) claim that the new act restricted the influx of Commonwealth immigrants

and thereby had no right to enter Britain as citizens of Commonwealth but right of those already living in United Kingdom at that time was not withdrawn.

The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act introduced immigration controls for anyone falling outside the following categories: persons born in the UK; a holder of a UK passport who was also a citizen of the UK and Colonies; anyone in the passport of either of the above (Solomos, 2003). The entry of non-visitors who did not fall within any of the above categories was subject to their obtaining one of a quota of work vouchers issued by the Ministry of Labour. However, public views was predominantly in favour of the Act despite the fact that some politicians showed sympathy toward the Commonwealth immigrants expressing their thoughts through writing articles in the print media (Solomos, 2007).

On 20 April 1968, British Part of Parliament Enoch Powell addressed an assembly of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham, UK. His speech unequivocally censured mass movement, particularly Commonwealth movement to the UK and the then-proposed Race Relations Charge, and got to be known as the "Rivers of Blood" speech (Strickland, 2011).

“We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre.”

Enoch Powell’s speech raised the eye borrows of the majority White Britons and seriously warned them about the danger of the immigration of which he said it would bring about a ‘total transformation of British history’ (Solomos, 2003). Enoch critically debated the inclusion of repatriation on the political agenda as (Smith and Marmo, 2014) state that Powell used proverbial speech to paint a picture that Britain will change its colour and its natural citizens (White people) would become ‘strangers’ in their ‘own country’ (Solomos, 2007). Though Enoch was removed from the Shadow Cabinet, his idea did not die with him (Strickland, 2011). Rather it was again adopted by hundreds of workers who showed solidarity with his extreme views against the black Caribbean immigrants. Similarly, local media exaggerated the racial issues throughout primarily focusing upon Powell’s call for action to be taken to deport black immigrants living in Britain (Solomos, 2007).

As result of the political tensions triggered by Enoch speech, it widely generated public debate about the negative implications of the black immigrants as the numbers of the immigrats continually increased. Smith (2014) contends that it “led to increased calls in and out of parliament and in the media for action to be taken to halt immigration and deal with the problems that were popularly believed to be associated with it. The combined effect of this pressure and the use of immigration as an electoral issue opened the way to further legislative measures”.

Despite the unprecedented racial tensions, British society’s make up slowly changed (Iglkowski, 2017). This was partly because the Windrush Generation were not equally fought for their rights to be part of the British society and they have ultimately added value to British cultural and religious aspect (BBC, 2014).

The immigrants, on their side, have been making an essential contribution to the adjustment process and many of them, by their work and their qualities, have earned respect and liking of sections of the community with which they have come into contact (Byron, n.d.). The majority of their employers are reported to be well satisfied with their services. After initial difficulties in some cases, West Indians immigrants have been working amicably together in various parts of the UK (Solomos, 2003).

Such as or because of the fact, British local politicians used the term ‘illegal immigrants’ more than anything else (McDowell, 2013). This was simply aimed to solicit support for their political campaigns and mobilise their supporter on the basis of racial lines (Bloch, 2002). According to the (Gilroy, 2010),

some politicians critically argued that for different ethnic groups to live in peace and harmony together, immigration control should be put in place. Therefore, the introduction of immigration controls had finally paved the way for race relations legislation.

The primary objective of the Race Relations Act 1965 was to particularly respond and contain the racial discrimination that was rife in some cities in UK, particularly Liverpool and Manchester. According to Bloch (2002), the Act prohibited any sort of racial discrimination in public places such as public transport. The Act, however, did not touch upon the critical areas outside of the public places such as housing and employment. Some scholars believe that the Act was vital in fighting against racism despite the fact that it had limitations mainly to do with its racial scope.

Conclusion

In this paper, I would conclude with the argument that arrival of the *Empire Windrush* was a turning point of transforming the British society into a multi-cultural one. Therefore the impact of the West Indian migrants have extended beyond their economic life– the influence of their children and their grandchildren is felt in all areas of the British society including education, religion, culture, politics and more importantly the sports (Voice-online.co.uk, 2017). This status was hardly achieved because the struggles they went through and difficult circumstances that surrounded them, notably poor accommodation, unemployment, extreme weather conditions and racial prejudice, was not simple to break through. Nonetheless, the story of post-1945 responses to immigration shows how popular responses and state policy-making have been shaped by specific national and local political situations, both within and outside state institutions.

To sum up, despite the fact that *Windrush* generation's history was coloured with racial riots and their acceptance by the White Britons was not as simple as they predicted, however, their arrival has shaped the make-up of the multicultural British community. As such or because of the fact, I believe that they are now equally enjoying a better life and have the same status like the majority White people.

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