# Immigration into the United Kingdom since 1945

Tony Skevington

**Note on nomenclature**

Before beginning this paper I would like to discuss the question
of the term/s to use to describe the people who are at the heart of this
paper, i. e. people and their descendants from the former British
colonies in the West Indies, East and West Africa and the Indian sub
-continent who have come to live in Britain. How does one refer to
this group of people accurately and succinctly without up-setting
someone or being accused of political incorrectness? Indeed can or
should one refer to such a disparate group with one word or expres-
sion? All the commonly used terms, i. e. black, brown, coloured, non
-white, Asian, New Commonwealth, have either come under criticism
for being offensive/negative, (to some people), or do not encompass
completely people from the three main areas I am concerned with in
this paper. As I have been unable to come up with an all-embracing,
universally acceptable term I am going to be guided by my own
instinct and use what I think are the appropriate terms according to
the context; I hope this will be acceptable to most readers.

**Introduction**

This paper focuses on immigration into the United Kingdom
since 1945, more specifically immigration into England, because it is
to that country that most of UK immigrants have come. I will begin

by looking at immigration before 1945 and then will describe the reception that most post-1945 black and brown immigrants received (generally unwelcoming) and the reasons for this. I will also discuss how successive British governments have adopted a two-fold approach to the question of non-white immigration, on the one hand restricting the right of settlement, and on the other introducing some of the most anti-discrimination legislation in the world. Finally, I will discuss the claim that contemporary Britain is a multi-racial/cultural society and argue that these terms are used somewhat loosely and do not reflect political and cultural realities.

**Immigration into Britain before 1945**

The country we now call Britain has seen wave upon wave of immigrants in the last two-and-a-half thousand years. The oldest human remains found in Britain are more than 200000 years old, but the first people we know of historically are the Celts who arrived from Europe. They remained the dominant ethnic group for 1000 years. Although there is much archaeological evidence of the Celts in England, their language died out and only remains in the names of some rivers such as the Thames, the Avon and the Trent. When the Romans occupied Britain from 43-410 CE the first black people are recorded. These were Roman soldiers from Africa some of whom were given land to farm when their military service was completed and so settled in Britain.

Between 400 and 600 CE the racial composition of England changed dramatically. The country was invaded by Angles and Saxons (people from northern Germany). At first they only came to

raid the eastern sea coast of England, but gradually they stayed and spread all over England. The original Celtic population of England either fled to the 'Celtic fringe' (Cornwall, Wales, Scotland), intermarried, or were killed. The Angles and Saxons not only changed the ethnic composition of England, but also gave it its present name, i. e. Angle-Land England, and a new language, Anglo-Saxon, which later developed into English. In the 9th Century the whole of the British Isles received a large influx of Vikings, people from Scandinavia, they also mixed with local populations and also added many new words to the developing English language. In 1066 there was the last successful invasion of England with the conquest of the country by the Norman French. For two hundred years after the Conquest two languages (three, if we include Latin) were spoken in England, Norman French by the ruling class and English by the vast majority of the (English) population. Gradually the French newcomers began to speak English but they added many French words to English and this is one reason why English has such a rich vocabulary.

Although there were some foreign communities living in England during the Middle Ages we know very little about them. The Jewish community was expelled from England in 1290 and Elizabeth 1 tried to expel all blacks in the 1590s. However, it is in the 19th Century that we get the first large scale immigration of modern times with the coming of the Irish, especially after the Potato Famine of the 1840s. Generally the Irish were not welcomed by the English for two reasons, firstly, they were Roman Catholics, secondly, they were willing to work for lower wages and thus threatened the jobs of the indigenous population.

Throughout the 19th Century any foreign person could come and settle in Britain. In the 1890s and 1900s many Jews began to arrive in Britain from Russia and Poland. These new immigrants were coming to Britain for different reasons than the Irish, the Jews were fleeing religious and political persecution. They settled mostly in London's East End and in Manchester and Glasgow. Like the Irish they were not welcome and in 1905 the government passed the Aliens Act to restrict their right of entry. In the years before 1914 there were also many immigrants from Italy and Germany. After 1914 fewer and fewer people wanted to immigrate to Britain as the economic situation was not very good. In the inter-war years far more people emigrated from Britain than immigrated into it. During the 1930s about 50000 Jews came into Britain to escape Nazi persecution.

Two points to remember about nearly all these immigrants before 1945 is that, generally, they were not welcomed by the British population, but that gradually they were assimilated into the society and could not be distinguished easily from the native born British.

**Immigration After 1945**

The years 1945-70 were ones of great economic growth in Britain and many other countries. One result of this was a shortage of workers, especially to do unskilled work. Therefore, British governments and industrial leaders encouraged foreign workers to come to Britain. At first the new immigrants came mostly from eastern Europe, but with the onset of the Cold War in 1948 this source of labour dried up. The government then encouraged people from the British West Indies to come and work for such organiz-ations as

London Transport, the NHS and British Rail. The first group arrived from Jamaica on the boat SS Empire Windrush in 1948. The numbers of black workers coming into Britain was small until 1952 when the United States greatly restricted the numbers of West Indians who could go and work in the US. After that date more West Indians began to come to Britain to look for work. The reasons that West Indians wanted to come to Britain were several, firstly, they could earn more money working in Britain than at home, secondly, they were encouraged to come by friends who had already settled and wrote back to them about life in Britain, thirdly, most of them were single young men and women who wanted to try something new. Most of the immigrants had no intention of settling permanently in Britain, they wanted to come for a few years, save some money and then return home. Throughout the 1950s about 30000 West Indians a year came to Britain, mostly young single men and women.

In the late 50s and early 60s a second group of 'coloured' immigrants began to arrive from India and Pakistan, their numbers grew after 1962 when the Indian government made it easier for its citizens to emigrate, these people and their descendants from the Indian sub-continent are referred to as 'Asians' in British English. However during the period 1945-70 the largest number of immigrants were not black but white, and of these the Irish were by far and away in the majority; in this period about 800000 Irish settled in the UK. (Abercombie et al 1988)

From 1962 the number of immigrants began to decline rapidly as laws were passed to make it more difficult to settle in Britain. However, for various reasons, those people who had come as tempo-

rary immigrants did not return home, they settled permanently and began families in the UK and thus began to change the racial compositicn of Britain. Today it is estimated that approximately three million non-white people live in the UK, this represents about 5.5 % of the total population, more than 50% of these are British born.

## The Black Immigrant Experience in Britain

As stated earlier, nearly all groups of immigrants who have come to Britain have faced discrimination. The Irish and Jews especially suffered, as late as 1947 there were anti-Jewish riots in the north of England, and even in the 1950s newspaper adverts for rented accommodation would sometimes include the words "No Irish." However, the difference between the blacks who arrived after 1945 and the white immigrants is that eventually the whites could, (if they wanted), 'pass' i. e. be accepted as indigenous British because they did not look different from the host population, the blacks would always be conspicuous.

Most people coming from the West Indies had been taught in school to look upon Britain as the 'mother country', and had, living in predominantly black societies, never experienced overt racism. It was a great shock therefore to many of them when they arrived in the drab Britain of the 1950s to find that generally they were unwelcome. They found discrimination in two main areas, employment and housing. Although some immigrants came to specific jobs, most West Indians arrived 'on speck', hoping to pick up work when they arrived. However, although this was a period of full employment, when jobs

were easy to find, the new immigrants soon discovered that generally there was only unskilled work available for them. The trade unions were generally very unwelcoming and tried to restrict the number of immigrant workers as they were afraid that (like the Irish in the 19th Century) immigrants would drive down wages. Where West Indians did get better jobs, such as in the NHS or London Transport, they often faced racism from fellow workers. Housing was another area where coloured immigrants faced a great deal of discrimination. Most white people did not want to rent their property to black people or have them as neighbours. Before the Race Relations Act of 1965 it was not illegal in Britain to discriminate on grounds of race. Many of those whites who were willing to let their property to black people did so at high rents with minimal maintenance of the property. Black people therefore tended to live in the poorer parts of the city in over-crowded conditions. This concentration of blacks into the poor, run-down areas of the large cities reinforced the stereotype of blacks being inferior to the white population.

The so-called Asians who began to arrive in Britain in the early 1960s in some ways had an easier time and in some ways a harder time than the West Indians. It was easier for them to settle in Britain because Indians and Pakistanis tended to be much more supportive of each other within their extended families or (especially for Muslims) helping co-religionists. Most new arrivals from the sub-continent would live with relations and usually be found a job by them. They would pool their savings in order to buy their own houses or set up their own businesses. They were much more ambitious for their children than the white or West Indian population especially in terms

of education.

However, Asians had a much tougher time in adapting to Britain because their language and culture was so different from the indigenous population. They had to learn a new language and adapt to a culture which many found shocking in its openness, especially in its attitude to family and the roles of men and women. (Sowell, 1996) The arrival of the Asians coincided with the birth of the "Permissive Society" in Britain, a fact which probably made adapting more difficult than it would have been a generation earlier. Asian families have had to endure much inter-generational conflict as the British-born children of immigrants have accepted many of the values of the host culture which are often in conflict with their parents' value system.

## Reaction of Whites to Black Immigration

As stated earlier, most groups of immigrants who had come to Britain had faced initial hostility, but in time they were assimilated into the community. In respect to dislike of foreigners or strangers the British have been no worse than other older societies, whether in Europe or Asia, and indeed in some respects, since the 19th Century at least, they have been much more tolerant than many other societies. Especially in the middle of the 19th Century Britain was a safe haven for political refugees from Europe, and its granting of citizenship to hundreds of thousands of foreigners in the 20th Century compares very favourably with such countries as Germany and Japan, where citizenship is based on ethnicity. However, it is true from anecdotal evidence and the discrimination faced by blacks, that

many British people did not like the arrival of large numbers of people with a different skin colour and sometimes culture and religion. (I say anecdotal evidence because, unfortunately, no surveys that I know of were conducted in the 1950s and 60s to discover the attitude of the white British to coloured immigration).

The reasons for the white population's hostility were various:

1) In the 1950s, although the British Empire was quickly being shed, most people had been educated, either overtly or covertly, to look down on black people who had been conquered and ruled by Europeans. Blacks were therefore viewed as inferior to whites both intellectually and morally.

2) The life-style of West Indians was in some ways very different from most of the white working class amongst whom they lived. The West Indians were much less reserved than the British of the 1950s and 60s, many of whom were still wedded to Victorian ideas of behaviour. Most of the West Indian who first came to Britain were young, they liked to party and to enjoy themselves, they were loud and vibrant, this often led to friction with their quieter white neighbours. Also West Indian culture was less sexually inhibited than that of the British of the 1950s. One of the main points of tension between whites and blacks was jealousy of white males for what they feared was the greater sexual potency of black males. This factor has of course figured in racism in many other societies, most notably in the US before the 1970s

3) When Indians and Pakistanis arrived in Britain although they were family oriented their very different culture alienated many whites. Added to this was jealousy when Asians began to take over

small businesses such as newsagents and sub post offices.

4) Another cause of resentment, especially when unemployment began to grow after 1974 was the fear that the immigrants would take the jobs of white people. However, two points to note here, firstly, the immigrants were mainly doing the jobs that the white people did not want, and secondly, unemployment hit the black community harder than the whites, e. g. in 1989 the rate of unemployment for whites was 7 % but 13% for ethnic minorities (Hopkins, 1990).

5) Finally, something which is hard to define and to quantify, fear of change. In the 1950s and 60s many white working class people, (the least wealthy and least educated sections of society) saw the areas in which they had lived all their lives suddenly changing and becoming places where they felt like foreigners. They felt resentful of the 'takeover' of their neighbourhoods, and especially resentful of middle and upper-class people who told them to live in harmony with the new arrivals, while they themselves lived in much better housing in 'white' areas. Having admitted that there was and is a great deal of hostility towards black people in Britain it must also be remembered that most white people did live and work in harmony with their black neighbours, and although there were many cases of racial discrimination there were also many people who were working for tolerance and respect between the races. In a 1985 survey of white people 35% of people said they were prejudicecd against black people (4 % 'very prejudiced') (Hopkins, 1990) This figure is high, but it does mean that 65% are not (or say they are not) prejudiced. One worrying sign in the survey was that it found more prejudice in the under 20s than in the

over 40s.

## Government Responses to Black Immigration

It was the Labour governments of 1945-51 which gave the green light to immigration from the so-called New Commonwealth. The Conservatives when they came to power in 1951 did nothing to change the open door policy put into place by the British Nationality Act of 1948. Under this Act all citizens of the British Empire had the right to come and settle in Britain. Therefore, when immigrants arrived from the West Indies, the Indian sub-continent and other colonies they had full civil rights, this was very different from the other countries of Europe which were also taking in large numbers of foreign workers in the 1950s and 60s. In Germany, Switzerland and France the immigrant workers, mostly from southern Europe and north Africa, were allowed in as guest workers with no automatic right of citizenship.

As the 1950s progressed there was growing resentment amongst the white population where black immigrants settled and this result-ed in anti-black riots by white youths in London and Nottingham in 1958. Although the courts were very tough on those whites caught rioting there was growing pressure to restrict non-white immigra-tion. This resulted in the 1962 Commonwealth Immigration Act, which stopped automatic right of entry and introduced a system where limited numbers of people could come into Britain only if they had a job to come to. Further Immigration Acts in 1968, '71 and '88 have so limited the right to settle in Britain that today Britain has the most restrictive settlement policies in the European Union.

While governments have restricted immigration they have also passed laws to try and stop discrimination based on race. The first Race Relations Act of 1965 forbids discrimination in public places. The 1968 Act extended this to housing and employment. The 1976 Act gave Britain the strongest anti-discrimination laws in Europe and established the Commission for Racial Equality which has the task of promoting racial harmony.

British governments, unlike those in some other countries, e. g. Holland, Sweden, Canada, did nothing to help immigrants to integrate into British society (at least until the 1970s). There was certainly no legislation for positive discrimination as happened in the United States in the 1970s. On immigration policy governments usually reacted to public opinion rather than led it. Governments have tended to see the problems of a multi-racial society as being caused by the unwillingness of the immigrants to assimilate rather than seeing it as a result of white racism. Some politicians, most notoriously Enoch Powell in 1968, have tried to use the known racism of their constituents to further their political careers. However, today any overt or even covert racist tendencies are unacceptable in public life and spell political suicide. Powell himself was dismissed from his post in the shadow cabinet after his infamous 'Rivers of blood' speech and even though there are probably some racist MPs, especially in the Conservative Party, they have been silenced by the change in public attitude, i. e. it is no longer possible to be openly racist and serve in public life.

In 1967 the National Front Party was established with an anti-black agenda. Although the party gained some support amongst skin

heads and groups in the East End of London, as a political force it is totally insignificant. In the 1992 general election The National Front and British National Party between them gained under 12000 votes out of an electorate of 32 million. (Johnson, 1994).

The establishment of avowedly racist parties such as the National Front led to counter organizations such as the Anti-Nazi League in the 1970s and Rock Against Racism in youth culture. There was also amongst the younger generation of blacks, especially those born in Britain, less willingness to accept everyday racism from the general public or the institutional racism of the police. Relations between the police and young black steadily deteriorated in the 1970s leading to anti-police riots in many cities in 1980, 81, 85, 88 and in the 1990s. Although these riots were seen by some as black youth responding to police harassment, many white youths joined in attacking the police and there was also a criminal element taking the opportunity to loot. The government responded to these riots by trying to improve police training and police relations with the black community. However, probably the main reason for these riots was the polarization of British society in the 1980s with the growth of an alienated underclass many of whom are black.

## Is Britain a Multi-Cultural Society?

Is Britain a multi-cultural and multi-racial society today? This depends what we mean by these terms. If we mean do many different ethnic and cultural groups live in Britain, then obviously the answer is yes. However, as Hoggart (1995) says, 'the claim that Britain is a multi-cultural society is often employed out of ignorance or as a form

of linguistic bullying' (p. 165) The term multi-cultural society is often used as if the different ethnic cultures had equal weight and equal power, this is simply not the case. We have to remember that the black and brown members of the British population only comprise 6. 5% of the whole population. If we add to this the Europeans, (Irish, Polish, Greek, etc.) Chinese and others we still only arrive at a 'non -British' ethnic total of 10% of the whole population. This means of course, that 90% of the population is of Anglo-Saxon or British Celtic descent, this is the dominant cultural group in the United Kingdom.

However, we then come to the very vexed and vexing question of what we mean by 'culture'. One writer (Abercombie et al, 1988) described culture as 'the symbolic aspects of human society so as to include beliefs, rituals, customs, conventions, ideals or artistic en-devours' (p. 395) This is a very wide definition and would cover most aspects of our lives. Under this definition it can be said that white-British culture is dominant in the UK, and that the many other cultures while equally valid are minority cultures.

However, the word culture is also used to mean the complete artistic and leisure activities of a group or nation. In this meaning a distinction is often drawn between 'high' and 'popular' culture. So-called 'high' culture would include classical music, painting, and 'great' literature. Popular culture would be sports, pop music, dancing (not 'dance') and most of the mass media. In Britain it is true to say that high culture is a product of, and mostly patronised by, the indigenous middle and upper classes. However, popular culture, especially since the 1960s, has been greatly influenced by the post-

1945 immigrants and their descendants. Much of British professional sport is dominated by black athletes. Popular music too has far more than the 5.6% of its leading stars from the black community. In literature black and Asian writers are growing in number, indeed Benjamin Zephaniah (a poet of Jamaican descent) was put forward as a candidate for the post of the Poet Laureate. In theatre and TV more and more coloured actors appear. All of these trends mean that Britain, like many other countries, is moving towards not so much a multi-ethnic popular culture, but more an international culture, very much dominated by the United States

## Conclusion

We can see that the arrival in Britain of approximately two million immigrants since 1945 (the majority of whom were white) has had a profound impact on British society and popular culture. Many of these immigrants (especially the non-whites) have faced, and do face, discrimination. Even though they have contributed positively to many aspects of British life there is still one-third of the white population which admits to being racially prejudiced. However, if we want to be optimistic this means that over 60 % is not prejudiced. Also successive governments have taken measures to make discrimination illegal. The mass media (generally) and the education system promote racial harmony and cultural diversity. Despite all the examples of racism and prejudice from both the white and non-white population, I believe it can be said that Britain is slowly moving towards a society where one day, as Martin Luther King said, people 'will not be judged by the colour of their skin, but by the content of

their character.'

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