

The New Commonwealth Migrants 1945-62

One of the most important but unforeseen results of the upheavals caused by the Second World War and the long post-war European economic boom, which was fuelled by reconstruction and American investment, has been the creation of substantial immigrant communities in most West European countries. The war was a major factor stimulating migration. In Britain the mobilisation of people in the armed forces, the expansion of the Merchant Navy and the harnessing of industry and agriculture for the war quickly caused serious labour shortages. These were only partly met by the recruitment of women, young people and Irish workers. Colonial workers were therefore recruited and brought to Britain, and others came voluntarily. The major examples of official government recruitment schemes were firstly a group of 1,200 British Hondurians who were recruited to fell timber in Scotland. Secondly, about 1,000 West Indian technicians and trainees who were recruited for service in munitions factories in Merseyside and Lancashire. Mr Learie Constantine, later Lord Constantine, was employed by the Minister of Labour as welfare officer to look after this group of men during their war service. Thirdly, 10,000 West Indians were recruited for service in the Royal Air Force to work in Britain as ground crews. Finally, thousands of colonial seamen were either recruited or voluntarily enlisted in the Merchant Navy. Some of these were based at British ports.

After 1941 there was also a substantial increase in the number of colonial passengers and stowaways coming to Britain. These came mainly from the West Indies and West Africa. In 1942 it was made easier for colonial subjects to enter Britain as restrictions on landing without documentary evidence of British nationality were lifted after representations from colonial governments. It was felt that all British subjects were contributing equally to the war effort and that there should not be restrictions on particular groups. Due to the shortage of labour caused by the war these colonial migrants had no difficulty in finding employment.

The war was a crucially important catalyst for post-war migration. Large numbers of people were uprooted from their home communities both in Europe and the Empire. India, for example, provided 2,000,000 men for the Allied forces, some of whom served in North Africa and Europe. Colonial men serving abroad had their horizons widened and some saw opportunities for work in Europe. Those colonial servicemen who came to Britain during the war did so under particularly favourable circumstances. They were well received and well treated by members of the British public who regarded them as allies in the struggle for national survival. Colour prejudice and discrimination in housing and employment, which had been a serious factor facing black people who had settled in Britain in towns like Cardiff, Liverpool and London during the First World War, was greatly reduced.

Most of the men recruited under the special war schemes were eligible for gratuities and repatriation at the end of the war but, although persistent efforts were made to induce as many of them to return home as possible, a substantial number preferred to remain in Britain. Nearly half the 1,200 British Hondurians, for example, preferred to settle in Scotland and the North of England. One fifth of the West Indians who were repatriated to Jamaica, finding themselves unemployed and with little prospects of finding jobs, immediately spent some of their gratuities on returning to Britain in empty troopships on their return voyages.

It is clear that the post-war Labour government was not enthusiastic at the prospect of recruiting substantial numbers of colonial workers even though post-war reconstruction and economic recovery was being held back by a desperate shortage of labour. In fact the government was making considerable efforts to recruit European workers from a variety of sources. German ex-prisoners of war were being persuaded to stay on, workers were being recruited from the displaced persons camps in Germany and also from Italy. Migration from Ireland was also occurring on a substantial scale.

Ireland continued to be a major source of labour for the British economy. Irish workers were recruited for civilian jobs during the war and substantial uncontrolled immigration continued during the 1950s and the 1960s. But European sources of labour were quickly absorbed and in fact were offset by the emigration of Britons to Commonwealth countries, especially Australia, and also to the United States.

Some colonial governments, particularly Jamaica, believed that British manpower requirements could be met by recruiting workers in those colonies which suffered high levels of unemployment, and pressed their views on the British government. In October 1948 an inter-departmental working party was established to:

Inquire 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.

The Committee did not consider there was much scope for further labour recruitment and considered colonial labour less attractive than European Volunteer labour as the latter was subject to more stringent controls. It was also concerned that colonial labour might find unemployment benefits so generous that they would not bother to seek work.

Certainly the preconditions for migration existed in the West Indies. The prosperity and expansion of the sugar industry which had made Jamaica and the other islands the jewels of Empire in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had required a very substantial labour force to work the plantations. This labour force was first made up of African slaves and their progeny and later of indentured labour imported from India. The prosperity of the British sugar islands was undermined in the nineteenth century by free trade which ended their privileged access to the British market and exposed them to competition from other sugar producers, especially Cuba and Brazil. Towards the end of the nineteenth century the growth of the sugar beet industry in Europe and North America also undermined the economic position of the islands. As the West Indies fell into relative economic decline they were left with populations which were too large for their economies to support easily. Only Jamaica and mainland Guyana with their bauxite industries, and Trinidad with its oil were in a position to sustain significant rates of economic growth. Generally the islands were characterised by high population densities, high levels of unemployment, low gross domestic product per capita and low rates of economic growth.

Jamaica, which was by far the largest British island, had long had a tradition of migration. Jamaicans migrated to Panama to help to build the railways in the 1850s, and between 1880 and 1921 a considerable emigration took place as opportunities for work occurred in other parts of the Caribbean region. Jamaicans found work on the construction of the Panama Canal and on the sugar and banana plantations on the central American mainland. Many others sought work in the USA and Venezuela. The depression of the 1920s and 1930s limited opportunities for employment, and between 1921 and 1941 no net emigration took place.

The recruitment of West Indians during the war alerted Jamaicans to employment opportunities in Britain and the heavy unemployment in the island, which had caused serious riots before the war, made the colonial government in Jamaica anxious to relieve the situation. Hence its efforts to press the British government to recruit Jamaican labour. In fact the working party's deliberations had already been overtaken by events. In June 1948 the SS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury with its 492 unaided Jamaican immigrants. They had been warned before they left of the problems they might face in finding work and accommodation. However, as most of the men were skilled or semi-skilled they all found work within three weeks. In September the Orbita arrived in Liverpool with 108 intending migrants from Jamaica and again they all quickly found work. Although few realised it at the time a largely spontaneous migration of people had begun.

Migration from the West Indies was quickly followed by migration from the Indian sub-continent. As in the case of the West Indians, many of the early migrants were seamen and servicemen. Once they found they could find work and establish themselves, they then informed relatives and friends of the opportunities available. Once a tradition of migration is established it tends to gain a momentum of its own and people come drawn in through patronage and sponsorship by the early settlers and by invitation of and persuasion by friends. In the West Indies emigration to Britain caught the imagination of large numbers of the islanders and some islands quickly began to suffer labour shortages themselves. Migration for work was long established in the West Indies but the preferred destinations were the United States and Central America. However, the McCarren-Walter Immigration Act of 1952 temporarily halted West Indian immigration to the USA and Britain became the most popular choice. Once migration from India and Pakistan began it was not long before migration chains were established with earlier migrants sponsoring friends and relatives. Indians, particularly those in the Punjab, had long had a tradition of migration for work, and in the nineteenth century had settled all over the Empire. The Second World War, the violent and disruptive partition of India at independence, and (in the early 1960s) the construction of the Mangla

Dam, uprooted hundreds of thousands of Punjabis and made them more willing to migrate.

New Commonwealth immigrants came to Britain in search of work, a higher standard of living and better prospects for their children. The expansion of the British economy in the 1950s and 1960s created substantial shortages of labour, particularly in the relatively stagnant sectors of the economy, for example, textiles, metal manufacture and transport, where low pay, long hours and shift work made the jobs unattractive to British workers. These industries were unable to compete with expanding sectors for workers in short supply. In a few cases employers recruited directly from the countries of migration. The Ministry of Health had a tradition of recruiting nurses and domestic workers from the West Indies, London Transport established an office in Barbados and textile employers advertised in the Indian press. However most migrants were not recruited directly but came unaided as voluntary migrants.

Research into migration from the West Indies to Britain in the 1950s shows that it was closely linked to job vacancies. Migration rose and fell according to the needs of the British economy, with a time lag of three months. Male migration was the most sensitive to changes in labour market conditions. Surprisingly, once the migration was under way the trends from more and less prosperous West Indian islands did not vary. All were affected by the strong external stimulus of the labour shortage in Britain. In periods of stronger economic expansion in Britain in the 1950s and 1960s the most prosperous regions of England with expanding industries quickly developed labour shortages. These were more easily filled by overseas immigrants than by recruiting people from the less prosperous parts of Britain. New Commonwealth immigrants were thus concentrated in the major conurbations of Greater London, the West Midlands, Manchester, Merseyside and Yorkshire, where the best employment opportunities were to be found. Immigrant workers were to be found in shipbuilding, vehicle manufacture, textiles, foundry work, transport and manufacturing in general. The Health Service had also recruited substantial numbers of West Indian nurses and domestic hospital staff (where they were heavily overrepresented compared to native-born English women) as well as New Commonwealth doctors, particularly from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

New Commonwealth immigrants thus formed a replacement labour force. They came in a period of labour shortage made more acute by the continuing willingness of Britons to emigrate overseas. While the other major industrial countries of Western Europe were all recruiting very substantial increments to their labour forces from Southern Europe, North Africa and Turkey to man their industries and fuel economic growth and expansion, Britain's gains to her labour force were more than offset by her high levels of emigration.

British political leaders and civil servants appeared to be much less aware of the economic importance of migrant labour in creating and sustaining economic growth and prosperity than were their continental opposite numbers. They were much more sensitive to the problems of racial prejudice and discrimination that migrants might face; the difficulties of finding accommodation in the acute post-war housing shortage and the dangers of black immigrants being forced into ghettos. They were also aware that colonial immigrants were British subjects who could not be treated as a dispensable industrial reserve army like European volunteer workers or the foreign migrants who went to other European countries as guest-workers. Even though many migrant workers, particularly Asians, came as single men with every intention of making money and then returning home to buy land or businesses, it was rightly assumed by the government that many would wish to settle. As far as West Indian migrants were concerned, women formed a high proportion of migrants from the beginning of the migration, and settlement was therefore much more likely.

The response to colonial migration to Britain by politicians and policymakers in the 1950s was hesitant and ambiguous, and little positive was done to assist their settlement, integration and acceptance. In contrast to the later migration of southern Europeans and Third World people to the continental countries, it was not welcomed as a response to manpower needs and a valuable asset in creating economic growth and sustaining higher living standards and prosperity. British policy-makers only tolerated it and would have liked to discourage it. They were aware from the beginning of the social and political costs of immigration, especially of the problems of racial prejudice that migrants would face and which might prevent the integration of black workers. The inter-departmental working party set up in 1947 had expressed concern at the possibility of an 'inassimilable minority' being created by migration and this is why it concluded that controls were the only practical solution. What is surprising is that the Labour Cabinet did not believe that this prejudice could be overcome by a positive programme of public education, legislation or administrative action. This sensitivity to the social and political costs

of migration as well as the rather earlier arrival of colonial (or post-colonial) migrants partly explains why Britain moved to a position of instituting legislative controls rather earlier than other European countries. The economic gains, however, were also not as obvious as elsewhere. The growth in the British economy in the 1950s and 1960s was relatively slow compared with the other major European economies and was punctuated by crises over the balance of payments, the role of sterling as an international currency and by worries about inflation. It was also a period of rapid withdrawal from extensive imperial commitments overseas and a realisation by British leaders and people of their country's declining world status. In this situation immigration was seen rather as an added burden than as a valuable asset.

However, the major factor leading to the introduction of immigration controls in 1962 was the popular hostility to coloured immigration which manifested itself in a political campaign for control, in racial discrimination and occasional outbursts of violence. By far the worst incidents of violence were the riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham in 1958. Given the private anxieties of policy-makers from the very beginning of New Commonwealth immigration, it could be argued that controls were introduced more reluctantly and less quickly than might have been anticipated if these anxieties had been more publicly known. On the other hand a more positive lead early in the period of migration to publicise the benefits of immigration and to aid settlement and integration might have done much to relieve public anxieties. This might have reduced the opportunities for the exploitation of immigration and race relations as political issues which was to take place in the 1970s.

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