



Nasar, S. (2020). Commonwealth Communities: Migration and Racial Thinking in Twentieth Century Britain. In S. Dubow, & R. Drayton (Eds.), *Commonwealth History in the Twenty-First Century* (pp. 101-122). (Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series). Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41788-8>

Peer reviewed version

Link to published version (if available):
[10.1007/978-3-030-41788-8](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-41788-8)

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Saima Nasar: 'Commonwealth Communities: Immigration and Racial Thinking in Twentieth Century Britain'

In 1952, the Conservative Secretary of State for Commonwealth Relations, Lord Salisbury, proudly stated that the exchange of immigrants within the Commonwealth represented 'a transfusion of blood which would eventually strengthen the whole.'¹ Reiterating Britain's commitment to imperial migrations in the 1950s, individuals and policymakers championed immigration as a means of strengthening Britain's union with the empire and its successor Commonwealth. This was especially pertinent given postwar labour shortages and the need for alternative sources of wage labour for industry, social service provision, and to assist with postwar reconstruction. As Kathleen Paul notes, 'the metaphor of the imperial family ruled, and the rhetoric of politicians from both major parties resounded with references to "kith and kin", "blood" and "family"'.²

Yet, when black and Asian 'New' Commonwealth citizens from the Indian subcontinent, the Caribbean and Africa arrived in Britain during this period, they did not receive the welcome reserved for family members. Ranjit Sondhi, born in Ferozepur, Punjab, observed: 'when I landed in England I felt almost as if I had come to a country I had known all my life, until I met the immigration officer who appeared rather cold and distant and a bit suspicious.'³ Having encountered virulent discrimination, Sondhi explained that 'the old colonial relationship, between the master and the native or the master and the slave, was reproduced with a vengeance in the "Mother Country"'.⁴ Meanwhile, racist and nationalist responses to New Commonwealth immigration were openly advocated by populist politicians who opposed the arrival of 'non-white' populations. As far-right groups warned against multiracialism and the 'dangers it presented to the British way of life', popular hostility towards black and Asian immigrants abounded. It was in this climate in the 1960s and 1970s that the *National Front* proclaimed 'it is not bigotry to oppose multiracialism since it is a natural, healthy instinct to preserve one's own kind.'⁵ It would be misleading to think that this anti-immigration sentiment was restricted to the far-right as both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party privately deliberated over the issue of 'coloured settlers'. Indeed, Lord Salisbury himself actively campaigned to introduce legislative measures to restrict 'coloured' immigration. In a letter to Lord Swinton on 20 March 1954, Lord Salisbury spoke at length about the 'antiquated rule' that allowed black and Asian subjects to 'pour in and take advantage of social services and other amenities'. Salisbury declared 'that this coloured problem is potentially of a fundamental nature for the future of our Country.'⁶

Sondhi's experience of arrival and reception in postwar Britain reveals that, in practice, Britain's attitude towards race and immigration was much more restrictive for those from

¹ Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (London, 1997), 40.

² Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 43.

³ Interview with Ranjit Sondhi, <http://www.bbohp.org.uk/node/42> (Assessed April 2018).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Labour Party Archives (LPA), People's History Museum, Manchester, Labour Party Research Department: National Front 1976-82, Box 94: National Front, Policy Towards School Pupils/Schools, Leaflet: 'Multi-racialism, a threat to our children's future'.

⁶ National Archives, DO 35/5216: Letter from Lord Salisbury to Lord Swinton, 20 March 1954.

the New Commonwealth than Lord Salisbury's 1952 endorsement of imperial migrations might suggest. Salisbury's proclamation was made in relation to the Empire Settlement Act, which was first introduced in 1922 and assisted movement between Canada, Australia and New Zealand. The British family Salisbury referred to consisted of blood relatives which excluded or marginalised members of the New Commonwealth.⁷ As observed by Paul, this was 'a community of white-skinned British stock, entrusted with the responsibility of maintaining Britishness, the imperial community and in renewing Britain's fortunes.'⁸ Competing ideas of what it meant to be a part of the Commonwealth thus reveal that there was certainly more to former Prime Minister Harold Macmillan's dream of a new, inclusive multiracial Commonwealth. While multiracialism was espoused by key political figures, it is important to note that racialised imperial ideologies created a hierarchy of suitable migrations within the Commonwealth that excluded black and Asian groups. Demonstrating the complexities of citizenship and belonging in twentieth century Britain, discourses of nation were undeniably saturated with race and its connotations.⁹

An examination of public and legal responses to Commonwealth immigration in postwar Britain was first carried out by sociologists such as Zig Layton-Henry and Robert Miles.¹⁰ These studies explored the role of the state in shaping national borders and undermining citizenship rights for Commonwealth subjects. Historians, such as Randell Hanson, Kathleen Paul, Ian Spencer and Kennetta Hammond Perry, have gone on to explicate the ways in which racialised visions of Britishness have shaped notions of belonging and unbelonging.¹¹ This chapter builds on this literature. By using party political papers, newspapers and archival material relating to community organizations, it explores what Commonwealth immigration can tell us about race and citizenship in twentieth century Britain. Despite the Commonwealth's commitment to peace, the promotion of representative democracy and human rights, shifting attitudes to multiracialism, particularly during times of political crisis, have meant that invocation of the Commonwealth has served to exclude as well as include. Specifically, with a perceived increase in population movement following the Second World War, 'Commonwealth immigration' was used to denote 'non-white immigration' and the 'colour problem' in Britain. Responses to the Nottingham and Notting Hill riots of 1958, for instance, resulted in a period of intense interest in race and immigration in Britain as growing public awareness and government unease about New Commonwealth immigration preceded calls for tighter, discriminatory, immigration restrictions. These appeals were given concrete legal form with the introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1968. The racial politics associated with

⁷ Paul, *Whitewashing Britain*, 43.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Paul Gilroy, *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack: The Cultural Politics of Race and Nation* (London, 2002), 60.

¹⁰ Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration: Immigration, 'Race' and 'Race Relations' in Post-War Britain* (Blackwell, 1992), Robert Miles, 'Nationality, Citizenship and Migration to Britain, 1945–1951', *Journal of Law and Society*, 16, 4 (1989), 426–42.

¹¹ See Randell Hansen, *Citizenship and Immigration in Postwar Britain: The Institutional Origins of a Multiracial Nation* (Oxford, 2000), Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era*, Ian Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-racial Britain* (London, 1997), and Kennetta Hammond Perry, *London is the Place for Me: Black Britons, Citizenship and the Politics of Race* (Oxford, 2016).

black and Asian Commonwealth immigration reveals a noticeable shift from visions of a 'Commonwealth Community' composed of equal races and equal nations in the 1940s, to the exclusions and restrictions imposed on Commonwealth immigrants in the 1960s.¹² This chapter therefore shows that the history of Commonwealth immigration echoes the shifting and unstable complexities of racial thinking in twentieth century Britain.

An Imperial Hangover and the Myth of *Civis Britannicus Sum*

Britain's waning global influence in the years following the Second World War led to a radical shift in her understanding of imperial citizenship. This was demonstrably the case in 1946 when Canada's Prime Minister, William Lyon Mackenzie King, announced the introduction of the Canadian Citizenship Act. The Act effectively created a distinct national status for Canadians and rendered British subjecthood secondary to Canada's new nationality law. India, Pakistan and Ceylon similarly adopted their own citizenship laws in 1947. Signalling a worrying break from the 'common code', Clement Atlee's government responded with an attempt to preserve Britain's power and prestige on the global stage. At the 1947 Imperial Conference, a team of experts were duly convened to discuss nationality within the British empire and, after many lengthy discussions, the British Nationality Act (BNA) 1948 was conceived.¹³ The BNA 1948 set out to 'make provision for British nationality and for citizenship of the United Kingdom and its Colonies'.¹⁴ The Act sought to recognise the Commonwealth's right to create its own class of nationals – as Canada, India, Pakistan and Ceylon had done – but it also continued to recognise newly independent populations as British subjects, or Commonwealth citizens. These expressions were synonymous and were used interchangeably.¹⁵ Commonwealth citizenship, therefore, was deployed to establish a multiracial association of states with a common historical link to Britain¹⁶ – or, as one Labour Party report suggested, it was 'an excuse for still covering the map red'.¹⁷

The BNA 1948 drew strength from the notion of a common set of rights and obligations for all of Britain's subjects.¹⁸ It outlined that 'every person born within the United Kingdom and Colonies ... shall be a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies by birth...registration...[or] descent'.¹⁹ While it did not create any new rights or obligations, the significance of the Act rested in determining all eligible residents in the remaining British colonies as subjects of the Crown, and in introducing a new status: 'Citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies'

¹² See Kennetta Hammond Perry, *Black Migrants, Citizenship and the Transnational Politics of Race in Postwar Britain* (Michigan State University: 2007), p.86.

¹³ The British Nationality Act, 1948 officially came into force on 1 January 1949.

¹⁴ British Nationality Act 1948: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/11-12/56/enacted> (Accessed January 2019).

¹⁵ The blurring between 'subjects' and 'citizens' made allowances for minority groups who self-identified as Commonwealth citizens rather than British subjects. See *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate (HOC), vol 453, col 385-510, 7 July 1948.

¹⁶ Robin Cohen, *Fuzzy Frontiers, Social Identities*, vol 1., no.1 (1995), 9.

¹⁷ LPA, LP/RD/33/9: Study group on immigration: 'British Foreign Policy and our Commonwealth Role, Oct 1968'.

¹⁸ Ian Spencer, *British Immigration Policy Since 1939: The Making of Multi-racial Britain* (London, 1997), 53.

¹⁹ BNA 1948: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/Geo6/11-12/56/enacted>.

(CUKC). This meant that any person who had a relevant connection, by birth or by naturalisation, with the United Kingdom or its dependencies, were rendered citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (UKC). As set out by the Conservative Member of Parliament, Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Rawlinson, under the BNA 1948, there was no separate citizenship of the UK: 'this was a composite citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies, and such citizenship was enshrined as nationality status.'²⁰ With the passing of the BNA 1948, the concept of a shared Commonwealth citizenship was therefore confirmed. Residents of the empire and its Commonwealth allies swore allegiance to the crown – they were deemed British subjects and Commonwealth citizens first, and local citizens second.

While common status Commonwealth citizenship confirmed preexisting rights of entry to Britain, it nonetheless served to invoke a shared identity. The uncoupling of citizenship from national identity meant that British subjects from the empire and Commonwealth were in principle eligible to enter the United Kingdom as they wished. Henry Hopkinson, Minister of State for the Colonial Office, exalted the racial liberalism embodied by the Act:

...It was, I thought, a matter of pride to us that anyone who could say *Civis Britannicus sum*' had the right to enter this country and to live here.²¹

Not only did the terms of the BNA 1948 serve as a mechanism for demarcating 'British' identities throughout the empire and its former territories, it encouraged the construction of 'localised' citizenship which was subordinate to a common, transnational, imperial status. This meant that a person born in Kenya, for example, was not a citizen of Kenya in the first instance, but was a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies by virtue of his or her birth in a British dependency. Despite administrative obstacles put in place to stall black and Asian movement, Hopkinson took satisfaction in the fact that 'any man, whatever his colour, could say he was a citizen of Britain and enter the Mother Country'.²²

A decade after the BNA 1948 the significance of the Commonwealth continued to be recognised by key political figures. Labour politicians, for instance, claimed that Britain owed much of her prosperity to her position in the Commonwealth and to the contributions of Commonwealth workers. Labour Party reports into race relations extolled Britain's position as a central member of the Commonwealth community: 'The Commonwealth can become a vital arbiter of world peace, and Britain's role will depend on the confidence she establishes between herself and other Commonwealth members.'²³ Britain's position within the Commonwealth was keenly celebrated since it was, to use the words of Stanley Bruce, the Commonwealth that enabled Britain 'a great part in the realisation of the ideals for which we all stand—namely, peace, liberty, rule of law and human rights.'²⁴ Built on

²⁰ National Archives (NA), Kew, London, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), 53/279: Citizenship Problems Arising from Expulsion of Asians from Uganda: 'Extract from a speech by Rt. Hon. Sir Peter Rawlinson QC MP (Epsom) Attorney- General speaker at a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Epsom on Wednesday 30th August 1972'.

²¹ *Hansard*, House of Lords (HOL) Debate: 20 November 1956 vol 200 cc403-22.

²² *Hansard*, HOC Deb 05 November 1954 vol 532 cc821-32.

²³ LPA, LP/RD/33/2: Working Party on Racial Discrimination, 1958: 'Racial Discrimination, November 1958'.

²⁴ *Hansard*, HL Deb 06 July 1960 vol 224 cc1160-234.

sentiment and trade, Stanley claimed that a united Commonwealth would allow Britain to play a greater role in world politics than she could do so individually. Britain was to be symbolically and practically the heart of the Commonwealth. For Harold Wilson, this was due to the fact that all Commonwealth citizens were 'welcomed to our midst'. He recognised that 'if the position is to continue, the welcome must be wholehearted and unreserved'.²⁵

Yet, despite visions of a multiracial, inclusive Commonwealth of nations, British immigration policies operated in ways that made it enormously difficult for black and Asian Commonwealth citizens to live and settle in Britain.²⁶ The notion of *civis Britannicus sum* was impeded by obstacles specifically put in place for 'coloured immigrants', such as the requirement of travel documents and passport endorsements. The Act was, in practice, a continuation of policy that existed prior to 1948. It did not bestow new rights as black and Asian subjects of empire could, technically, reside in different parts of the empire as they wished. Spencer states that a 'clear pattern of British obstructivism' was exhibited in countries of origin. Emigration was limited by these measures which disproportionately affected poorer groups of black and Asian prospective migrants from the empire and Commonwealth. Rather than being turned away at points of entry, these racialised populations were regulated by colonial authorities and Commonwealth partners.²⁷ A clear difference between the Old Commonwealth members and the New Commonwealth meant that a hierarchy rooted in whiteness was established.²⁸ Equality of rights between the two parts of the Commonwealth failed to materialize, thus challenging the notion of a coherent immigration policy when it came to population transfers within the Commonwealth.

Restrictions on Commonwealth Immigration

If a racially inflected stance to Commonwealth immigration was a feature in the 1940s, it was only to intensify in more overt ways over the coming decades. As immigration from the New Commonwealth increased throughout the 1950s, its visibility within the public imagination helped to racialise issues of immigrant citizenship and belonging. According to sensationalist accounts, 'floods' of black and Asian migrants were entering Britain's borders every year, which inevitably stoked fears concerning a 'colour problem' in Britain. This was perceived to be the case in 1958 when a pub brawl in the district of St Ann's in Nottingham swiftly escalated into a 'race riot'. The initial scuffle involved a white man who had taken offence at a West Indian man's attempt to talk to a white woman. Within hours local West Indians were ambushed by hundreds of white residents. *The Nottingham Evening Post* described the mass violence carried out against local West Indians as a 'racial clash'.²⁹ Events in Nottingham were a prelude to further racial violence in Notting Hill, London, a few days later. Anti-immigrant sentiment in the area had already been running high as black

²⁵ LPA, LP/RD/33/9: Study group on immigration.

²⁶ Spencer, *British Immigration*, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁸ A distinction between immigrants from the Commonwealth also existed. Those from the West Indies were seen as literate, able-bodied and more suitable for integration. In contrast, Pakistani and Indian immigrants were understood to be illiterate and in need of welfare provision.

²⁹ *The Nottingham Evening Post*, 25 August 1958.

communities were targeted by groups of 'Teddy Boys'; these tensions flared on 29 August. As Kennetta Hammond Perry notes, media reports recounted the four days of violent clashes between 'gangs of white and "coloured" youths as "Negro-baiting" white mobs were heard shouting threatening racial epithets such as "We'll kill the black bastards!", "Deport all Niggers", and "Let's lynch the Niggers"'.³⁰ Calls to 'Keep Britain White'³¹ demonstrated that, while policymakers outwardly cultivated an image of multicultural conviviality, the realities of urban racial violence exposed the fault lines of a Commonwealth community of equal races.³²

These disturbances were given extensive media coverage. The media did not hesitate to attribute the rioting to the large-scale concentration of workers from the West Indies, West Africa, India and Pakistan in urban industrial centers. Although Britain's non-white population formed approximately 0.4% of the overall population at the time, anxieties connected to the latent citizenship of 'coloured imperial subjects' were reflected within broader public rhetoric. The *Evening Mail* pleaded: 'Halt all immigration for five years', *The Times* claimed that 'Repatriation of immigrants was regarded as a social service', meanwhile the *Guardian* relayed the discriminatory sentiments of a former minister at the Commonwealth Relations Office: 'Mr Sandys, demands an end to immigration'.³³ While it is difficult to measure the impact of this coverage, it is clear that black and Asian minorities were increasingly being viewed as racialised others. They were no longer depicted as British subjects or Commonwealth citizens, but were portrayed as resident immigrants that created social problems. Moreover, with the introduction of the Race Relations Act in 1965, policy initiatives began to monitor and document non-white groups.³⁴ In October 1958, Sir Alec Douglas Home, Minister of State for Commonwealth Relations, declared that 'curbs will be put in place on the unrestricted flow of immigrants from the West Indies.'³⁵ The solution to these disturbances, which targeted Commonwealth citizens in Britain, was as much to manage race as it was to manage racism.

Indeed, in October 1961, R. A. Butler, the Home Secretary, presented a motion to introduce legislation to control Commonwealth immigration to Britain at the Conservative conference of Parliament members.³⁶ This followed the findings of an Interdepartmental Working Party

³⁰ Kennetta Hammond Perry, "'Little Rock' in Britain: Jim Crow's Transatlantic Topographies', *Journal of British Studies*, vol. 51, no.1 (January 2012), 155.

³¹ Harold MacMillan recalled in his memoir how Winston Churchill 'rather maliciously observed that perhaps the cry "Keep Britain White" might be a good slogan for the next election'. CPA, CPD: PUB 2/6/6: 'The Conservative Party, Immigration and Race Relations by Zig Layton-Henry'.

³² The Nottingham and Notting Hill riots expose fears relating to interracial relations. A Gallup poll conducted soon after the riots found that the most common resentments expressed by white respondents were that black immigrants should not be allowed to compete equally for jobs and that they should not be able to enter housing lists on the same conditions (54%). The percentage of respondents that opposed racial intermarriage however trumped the former at 71%.

³³ *The Evening Mail*, 7 May 1971; *The Times*, 18 June 1971; *The Guardian*, 25 September 1967.

³⁴ As well as restricting immigration, the riots also galvanised anti-racist progressive politics in Britain. See Camila Schofield, "'Whatever community it is, that is not it": Notting Hill and the Reconstruction of Race in Britain after 1958', *Journal of British Studies*, 58 (2019), 142-173.

³⁵ CPA, CPD: PUB 2/6/6: 'The Conservative Party, Immigration and Race Relations by Zig Layton-Henry'.

³⁶ Perry, *London is the Place for Me*, 161.

that was summoned to develop an evidence-based case for the regulation of Commonwealth migration. The final report found that despite increasing numbers of non-white Commonwealth migration, there had been 'no serious racial disorder and there was remarkably little unemployment'.³⁷ Perry argues that the Working party could not pinpoint any concrete conditions necessitating immediate controls over Commonwealth migration.³⁸

Similar findings were reported in *The Sunday Times*' feature on Commonwealth immigration. Titled 'Immigrants Help Boost Britain's Wealth', the feature explained that 'coloured immigrants have bought Britain more economic gains than loses'. Based on a study conducted by the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, it observed that in the balance sheet of postwar immigration, many hospital and transport departments would not have been able to meet public needs without immigrants.³⁹ The Institute of Race Relations (IRR) contributed to this campaign with supporting figures. It claimed that the cost per head in pounds for social services was particularly illuminating: in 1961, the total population accounted for £60 per head in social services costs in comparison to £47.50 for Britain's immigrant population; by 1966, the total population cost £62 per head in comparison to £52 per head among Britain's immigrant population. These studies found ample evidence to suggest that immigrant groups contributed more and took less out from social services than the wider population. Moreover, what those advocating for restrictions on black and Asian immigration failed to mention was that areas such as London, Birmingham and Manchester, where many immigrant groups concentrated, were areas with the lowest unemployment rates.

In these cities, populations from the New Commonwealth increased between 1961 and 1966, but these immigrants were not adding to overcrowding because former residents were leaving or moving to the outskirts. While a vocal minority claimed that immigrants were depressing wages and were taking away opportunities from white workers, this too proved to be a myth. New Commonwealth immigrants had a significantly different spread of jobs from the total population and from earlier immigrants: they would often work in foundries, factories, schools and hospitals. New Commonwealth immigrants at the time could, therefore, be understood as 'replacements rather than additions'.⁴⁰

While the official statistics did not support claims that immigrants were a strain on social services, this did not stop Butler from arguing that 'coloured others' posed an alarming threat to the social and economic life of the nation. This set into motion the declining significance of Commonwealth citizenship as repository of legal rights. In political circles, popular hostility directed towards Commonwealth citizens eventually culminated in the steady erosion of the progressive ideals of imperial unity, and resulted in increasingly restrictive immigration legislation. Specifically, Britain passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, which anti-racist activists, such as Ambalavaner Sivanandan, argued

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *The Sunday Times*, 15 March 1970.

⁴⁰ Indian Workers Association Papers (IWA), Birmingham Library, MS 2141/A/7/16: 'Newspaper Cuttings on the Issue of Immigration Control'.

served to ‘enshrine state racism in law’.⁴¹ Sivanandan was Director of the IRR for forty years and was a leading intellectual thinker in Britain. On the Act’s significance, he contended:

With that first bit of racist immigration legislation, state racism was born. And it is the racism of the state – in legislation, in government, and in the criminal justice system – that put the imprimatur on institutional racism and gave a fillip to popular racism.⁴²

Under the Commonwealth Immigrants Act (CIA) 1962, immigration control was applied for the first time to Commonwealth citizens. In broad terms, the only persons to whom the 1962 Act did not apply were those who were born in Britain, or citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies holding a United Kingdom passport issued by the British Government, as distinct from the Government of a dependency.⁴³ In other words, after 1962, not only citizens of independent Commonwealth countries, but also citizens of British dependencies became subject to immigration control. A quota system was instituted and entry permits were required. Eligibility for the vouchers needed to enter Britain often depended on either an offer of a specific job, or the possession of certain professional qualifications. Job vouchers were contingent on three categories: whether the applicant had a job, whether the applicant possessed a special skill set, or whether the applicant was part of a group whose numbers would be set according to labour needs.

The CIA 1962 was roundly criticised for racial discrimination. Hugh Gaitskell, then leader of the Labour Party, described the Act in parliament as a ‘plain anti-Commonwealth measure in theory, and a plain anti-colour measure in practice.’⁴⁴ Gaitskell recognised the damage inflicted on the unity of Commonwealth communities and called for a more cautious, considered approach. This response was shared by Commonwealth leaders. Jamaica’s Prime Minister, Norman Manley, stated: ‘the Commonwealth will never be the same again. Britain has failed when for the first time she had had to cope with the problem of assimilating a fairly substantial number of persons of difference races and colour.’⁴⁵ Meanwhile Pakistan’s President Ayub Khan said: ‘The bill has damaged the psychological advantages of Britain as the base of the Commonwealth.’ The Indian Government protested against the ‘colour bar’ and promised to retaliate by controlling British transit in and out of India.⁴⁶ In many circles, restrictions placed on Commonwealth immigration were understood as the act of a racially-intolerant Government. What this meant for the Commonwealth was that the idea of a common status, in terms of rights and obligations, no longer had any substantial meaning. Commonwealth citizenship was rendered symbolic. The Act’s move to close the door to the free flow of traffic was perceived, in the words of Labour politician Barbara Castle, as ‘a violation of the very idea of the Commonwealth.’⁴⁷

⁴¹ http://www.westagainstracismnetwork.org/?page_id=37 (Accessed May 2019).

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 1962, Section 1, Clause 2: <https://www.freemovement.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/04/CIA1962.pdf> (Accessed May 2019).

⁴⁴ *The Times*, 17 November 1961.

⁴⁵ Conservative Party Archive, CPD: PUB 171/16: ‘Immigration and the Commonwealth’.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ CPA: CPD: B/16/3: Immigration Bill HOC/71/2.

Despite Gaitskell's condemnation of the CIA 1962's 'colourism', in the lead up to the 1964 general election, the Labour Party manifesto declared: 'Labour accepts that the number of immigrants entering the United Kingdom must be limited. Until a satisfactory agreement covering this can be negotiated with the Commonwealth, a Labour Government will retain immigration control.'⁴⁸ Now under the leadership of Harold Wilson, the Labour Party felt the need to respond to growing numbers of net Commonwealth immigration. According to the 1965 'Immigration from the Commonwealth Government White Paper', in 1959 the net inflow of Commonwealth immigrants was 21,600. In 1960, it was 57,000. By 1967, it stood at 136,400. This sharp increase can be attributed to a rush to 'beat the ban' before the CIA 1962 came into force.⁴⁹ It was accompanied by a stark shift in attitudes towards the Commonwealth. The Indian Workers Association speculated whether an agreement between the two major parties had been made: 'the race now seems to be about who will keep the most number of Blacks out'.⁵⁰ When Labour came into power in 1964, it did not relax existing controls as Gaitskell and Gordon Walker pledged. Instead, the Labour party applied them more vigorously. This formed part of a dual strategy which linked anti-immigration measures with anti-discrimination legislation. Labour MP, Roy Hattersely, neatly summed up the elite compact in his famous statement: 'I believe that integration without limitation is impossible; equally, I believe limitation without integration is indefensible.'⁵¹ The government attempted to institutionalise multiracialism, but it did so while attempting to manage race in the face of populist tensions.

In many ways, legal responses to Commonwealth immigration channelled the two speeches delivered by MP Enoch Powell on Commonwealth Immigration: the first was delivered in Birmingham on 21 April 1968 and the second was delivered at a conference of the Rotary Clubs of London at the Burlington Hotel in Eastbourne on 16 November 1968. Powell criticised Commonwealth immigration in his now notorious 'River of Blood' speech. In a much-quoted passage, he claimed: 'We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependents'.⁵² In doing so, Powell opened the flood gates to a wave of racial abuse and intolerance, which in the words of David Ennals, was 'reminiscent of the early growth of anti-Semitism in Germany'.⁵³ This is particularly striking since the CIA bore resemblance to the Aliens Act of 1905, which was the first attempt to enforce immigration controls and restrictions in Britain and can be understood as a major antecedent to legislative moves to restrict immigration on racial grounds. The Aliens

⁴⁸ The 1964 Labour Party Election Manifesto, 'The New Britain': <http://www.labour-party.org.uk/manifestos/1964/1964-labour-manifesto.shtml> (Accessed April 2018).

⁴⁹ HC Deb 28 October 1965 vol 718 cc90-1W

⁵⁰ Hull History Centre (HHC), MS2141/A/3/3: Statements, 'Statement to the Press: For release at 4:00pm on March 24, 1966'.

⁵¹ HC Deb 23 November 1965 vol 721 cc262-378.

⁵² Enoch Powell's River of Blood Speech: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643826/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html> (Accessed May 2019).

⁵³ The Modern Records Centre (MRC), Warwick, MSS.202/5/J/3/2/173: 'Powell and his Allies'. David Ennals was Minister with special responsibility for immigration policy. For more on Powell, see Camilla Schofield, *Enoch Powell and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Cambridge, 2013); Shirin Hirsh, *In the Shadow of Enoch Powell: Race, Locality and Resistance* (Manchester, 2018); Bill Schwarz, *The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011).

Act was outwardly designed to limit numbers of 'undesirable immigrants', criminals and paupers from entering Britain but its key objective was to stem Eastern European Jewish immigration. Anti-immigrant attitudes congealed with anti-Semitism and led to efforts that restricted entry to minority Jewish populations and to regulate borders.⁵⁴

It was in the tense socio-political climate of the 1960s that the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 was introduced. As Africanisation policies in Britain's former East African colonies sought to squeeze out its minority South Asian population, Britain's liberal values were put to the test. Since the majority of the East African Asian population possessed UK citizenship and were not subject to immigration control because their passports were issued by UK authorities, the British government introduced legislation to stall large-scale immigration.⁵⁵ Together, the Commonwealth Acts served to amend earlier statutes that bestowed Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC) with an automatic right of entry into Britain. The Labour government restricted the entry of East African Asians each year to 1,500 heads of families and their dependents.⁵⁶ The Act was rushed through parliament in order to explicitly prevent Kenyan Asian migration. East African Asians were thereby restricted from entering the UK despite holding British passports. The CIA 1968 is thus another example of how state law was devised to specifically restrict non-white immigration to Britain.

Commonwealth representatives responded with a campaign geared towards damage limitation. In 1969, at the Commonwealth Conference, a three-point plan was put forward to urge an amendment to the controversial British Immigration bills. It called for a multilateral approach to immigration between Commonwealth countries, amendments to the 1968 CIA, and a new approach to the question of UK citizenship. In respect to the CIA, the committee wanted all citizens of the UK and Colonies who had no alternative nationality to be given unrestricted entry into Britain. This referred to the Asians of East Africa who were facing population displacement and forced migration. It also called for all Commonwealth countries including Kenya to confer citizenship on people settling in their territories after a qualifying period of residence. The proposal called on the Commonwealth conference to establish permanent machinery within the Commonwealth Secretariat to deal with various aspects of Commonwealth immigration with a view to remove inconsistencies and anachronisms.⁵⁷ Irrespective of these measures, the National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants (NCCI), which was headed by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Michael Ramsey, stated that the Commonwealth Acts had put back race relations work in Britain by ten years. Nineteen staff members and two committee members of the NCCI

⁵⁴ See: James Hampshire, *Citizenship and Belonging: Immigration and the Politics of Demographic Governance in Postwar Britain* (Basingstoke, 2005); Alison Bashford and Jane McAdam, 'The Right to Asylum: Britain's 1905 Aliens Act and the Evolution of Refugee Law' *Law and History Review*, 32, 3, (May, 2014), 309-350.

⁵⁵ Saima Nasar, 'We refugees: redefining Britain's East African Asians' in *Migrant Britain* ed Jennifer Craig-Norton, Christhard Hoffman and Tony Kushner, (London, 2018).

⁵⁶ CPA: Conservative Research Department Papers, CRD 4/9/3: Citizenship/Nationality 1972-78, 'Citizenship, Immigration and Integration'.

⁵⁷ National Archives, FCO 31/378: Kenya, Social Matters, Immigration, Entry into the UK, Commonwealth Asians (Holders of UK Passports): 'The East African Standard: Asians Press Summit to Change All Laws on Immigration, 6 January 1969'.

resigned, stating that they felt the Committee could no longer do any meaningful work.⁵⁸ The Commonwealth's dedication to racial inclusivity was placed under the spotlight, especially in light of two long-running crises: the racial politics of apartheid in South Africa and the Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) in Rhodesia. It was no great surprise then that the Commonwealth Premiers' Conference ended in acrimony, with four African states boycotting Britain's proposed immigration study group.⁵⁹ Commonwealth members externalized their long-standing frustrations and sought to expose the hypocrisy of Britain advocating for multiracial communities in a decade marked by attempts to reinforce racialised conceptions of citizenship, nationality, and rights of belonging.

From a policy of 'free passage' to controlled migration, policymakers not only entered the complex political game of citizenship that would go on to have profound consequences, but they also tinkered with the goalposts of Commonwealth belonging. Through legislative change, a shift from a pan-British imperial identity espoused in the 1940s to 'national' affinities in the 1960s meant that Commonwealth citizens were rendered as resident 'others'. With persistent and enthusiastic attempts by successive governments to contain those from the New Commonwealth, the cracks in Britain's multiracial Commonwealth community deepened.

Multiracialism and Managed Migrations

What does this history of Commonwealth immigration tell us about racial thinking in twentieth century Britain? It is clear that a coherent idea of what it meant to be part of the Commonwealth in postwar Britain did not exist. On the one hand, the vision of a multiracial Commonwealth of nations was used to signal Britain's liberal credentials. Commonwealth citizenship was frequently celebrated as a great and unprecedented experiment in human relationships.⁶⁰ On the other hand, however, treatment of Commonwealth immigrants exposed Britain's racial liberalism as little more than a rhetorical device. A public image of conviviality was advocated through an ostensibly open-door policy. Yet, while the language of empire was displaced with the ideal of Commonwealth unity, racial proximity did not translate into racial tolerance.⁶¹

Virulent discrimination, racial violence and legal measures to prevent black and Asian New Commonwealth citizens from entering Britain became prominent features in postwar Britain. On this issue of racial exclusion, scholars of histories of race and the immigrant experience in Britain are indebted to Peter Fryer and Stuart Hall.⁶² Hall, for instance, called for critical attention to be paid to the question of race and its impact on broader social, cultural, economic and political structures. In *The Young Englanders* and then *Policing the Crisis*, Hall explored the mutual exchange and understandings of immigrants and their

⁵⁸ LPA, 'Study Group on Immigration: Minutes and Papers: 6 June 1968 – 14 May 1969'

⁵⁹ MRC, MSS.21/1571/50, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism/JCAR: Socialist Commentary (April 1969): 'Thought on Immigration by TR Fyvel'.

⁶⁰ HL Deb 05 May 1965 vol 265 cc950-1025

⁶¹ Webster, *The Empire Comes Home*.

⁶² See Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain* (London, 1984).

hosts.⁶³ He argued that in the postwar years, the state stoked fears concerning national and racial crisis. Non-white immigrant populations were framed as violent, dangerous and threatening to community cohesion. Despite considerable effort devoted to projecting an image of Britain as a nation wedded to the virtues of liberty and tolerance, black and Asian immigrants, as Colin Holmes argues, remained locked in cycles of racial discrimination, income disparity, and housing and educational disadvantage.⁶⁴ Debates on multiracialism therefore demand thoughtful reflection on what Philip Cohen and Harvart Bains have termed as multi-racism: where racial differences lead to racial inequality.⁶⁵ In an era where multicultural ideals about racial unity coexisted alongside multi-racism, we can see that both the Old and New Commonwealth were not treated as equal races or equal nations. While movement between the New Commonwealth took place at a fairly consistent rate, it was not something that was actively welcomed in political circles. These private concerns, which can be traced in political papers since Commonwealth immigration began in earnest, were seldom publically acknowledged. There had always been, as Ian Spencer notes, a disconnect between 'the government's publicly expressed tolerance of black immigration and its private regret and hostility which was established right at the start of the post-war debate'.⁶⁶ This indicates that there was no golden era when multiracialism prevailed, and when a Commonwealth community of equal races existed.

Celebrations of Britain's multiracial social landscape have not only obscured the levels of intolerance and hostility directed towards Britain's non-white populations, but they have also underplayed the fact that the majority of immigrants and refugees that arrived in Britain after 1945 were white. Wendy Webster has observed that the number of black and Asian immigrants before the Commonwealth Acts were introduced, and indeed in the late twentieth century, did not match British Dominion or European migration from or to Britain.⁶⁷ Immigration within the empire in the twentieth century, for at least the first half of the century, mainly consisted of white British groups moving between the imperial metropole and periphery. Webster notes that British census data reveals that in the 1950s there were 30,000 Australians living in Britain whereas 140,000 people emigrated from Britain to Australia under the Free and Assisted Passages Scheme.⁶⁸ Migration to Britain prior to the Second World War was predominantly from Ireland and continental Europe. This movement of people can be attributed to government labour schemes for Poles, or refuge of people from displaced persons camps in Germany, Austria, and Italy.⁶⁹ Meanwhile, despite a long history of black and Asian diasporic movement to Britain, long-term settlement from the New Commonwealth corresponded with an era of decolonisation and nation-building in a new postwar order. Webster presents these figures to suggest that

⁶³ See Stuart Hall, *The Young Englanders (National Committee for Commonwealth Immigrants, 1967)*; Stuart Hall et al, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (Basingstoke, 1982); Claire Alexander, 'Stuart Hall and Race', *Cultural Studies* 23, (2009), 457-482.

⁶⁴ Colin Holmes, *A Tolerant Country? Immigrants, Refugees and Minorities* (London, 2015), 15.

⁶⁵ Philip Cohen and Harvart Bains, *Multiracist Britain: New Directions in Theory and Practice* (Palgrave Macmillan, 1998).

⁶⁶ Spencer, 53.

⁶⁷ Webster, 'The Empire Comes Home: Commonwealth Migration to Britain' in Andrew Thompson (ed.) *Britain's experience of Empire in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford, 2011).

⁶⁸ Wendy Webster, *The Empire Comes Home*, 123.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Commonwealth immigrants to Britain therefore consistently included mostly white people from the Dominions, yet this was viewed as a process of internal migration. 'Commonwealth immigrants' were not associated with Australians or other white Commonwealth migrants but with black and Asian people arriving in Britain who were rarely deemed 'as moving within a common British world – from one part of the empire to another'.⁷⁰ Calls for legislative control had little to do with numbers or race relations.

In this context, Commonwealth communities in Britain were not, in practice, considered British subjects or citizens. In the East African Asian case, their human rights, as the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants noted in a case presented to the European Commission of Human Rights, were curtailed due to their categorisation as Commonwealth immigrants rather than British passport holders.⁷¹ Significantly, they were considered postwar immigrants rather than imperial subjects with a long history connecting them to Britain. This is what Ugandan Asians found when they reached Britain: the term Commonwealth or Commonwealth immigrants was used to efface a long history of imperial interactions.⁷² British perceptions of the Commonwealth failed to acknowledge the history that bonded Britain to the Commonwealth in the first place.⁷³

How can we explain this retreat or reduction in status? A number of observers have noted that Britain's withdrawal from the Commonwealth coincided with Britain's application to join the European Economic Community (EEC). *The Socialist Commentary*, a Labour pro-Common market journal, recalled: 'One remembers the applause at the Labour Party Conference when Hugh Gaitskell declared that he could not turn his back on the Commonwealth to join the Common Market. The next phase of Labour politics saw Mr Wilson and Mr Brown travelling from European capital to capital with precisely this aim.'⁷⁴ Britain's relationship with the Commonwealth certainly changed from the 1950s to the 1960s. In the 1950s, Britain's tariff system, defense commitments and immigration policies signalled a unique position in relation to the Commonwealth. Britain led the way in opening its doors and in fixing itself as a central member of the community. This meant that even when politicians, such as Lord Salisbury, cautioned against the dangers of 'coloured immigration' and advocated for legislative measure to control immigration of black and Asian subjects in the 1950s, Britain relied on administrative controls managed within the Commonwealth. These administrative controls proved effective in the absence of legal controls. However, during the 1960s there was a fundamental change in policy which altered this relationship. The system of Commonwealth preference dwindled as patterns of British trade altered. In the mid-1950s, the Commonwealth accounted for nearly 45% of British exports and imports. By the mid-1960s the figures were down to approximately 25%. During the same period, Britain's trading links with Western Europe were growing increasingly strong. The Conservative government's decision to apply for membership of the

⁷⁰ Webster, *The Empire Comes Home*, 124.

⁷¹ See Saima Nasar, *Subjects, Citizens and Refugees: The Making and Remaking of Britain's East African Asians* (University of Birmingham, 2016).

⁷² Mahmood Mamdani, *From Citizen to Refugee: Ugandan Asians Come to Britain* (Oxford, 2011).

⁷³ Bill Schwartz, *West Indian Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester, 2003), 7.

⁷⁴ MRC, MSS.21/1571/50, Campaign Against Racism and Fascism/JCAR: Socialist Commentary (April 1969): 'Thought on Immigration by TR Fyvel'.

EEC was an indication of Britain's changing economic and political role.⁷⁵ Policymakers and individual politicians were no longer concerned about loosening relations between Britain and the Commonwealth because Britain's priorities lay elsewhere: Europe.

The turn to Europe was reinforced by then Prime Minister Harold Wilson when he spoke at the Royal Commonwealth Society on 23 May 1969:

We are a European country. We have an inescapable duty to assist in the constructive process of unity in Europe. Europe is our natural base and offers the most fruitful opportunities for technological advance and economic growth. From Europe, we look outwards.⁷⁶

In the wake of decolonisation, Britain could not rely on administrative controls in the Commonwealth to regulate the number of black and Asian immigrants moving to Britain. Wilson advocated for the need to reassess Britain's world role. By the late 1960s, Wilson called for the need for Britain's armed forces to embark on a 'transformation from policeman into good neighbour'.⁷⁷ Indicative of a wider shift, the declining significance of the Commonwealth in terms of Britain's global status and its trade relations meant that by the late 1960s Britain's interest in the Commonwealth was relegated to largely empty and tokenistic gestures.⁷⁸ The New Commonwealth was described as a 'dud institution' and in an article in *The Sunday Telegraph* it was labelled as an 'assorted mango dictatorship'.⁷⁹ Commentators were no longer concerned with the political disadvantages of loosening the ties of Commonwealth unity. British identity was tied to an emergent European identity and its discriminatory immigration policies demonstrated its abandonment of multiracialism ideals.

Conclusion

Recent experiences of those immigrants who arrived in Britain in the immediate postwar years, referred to as the 'Windrush generation', capture not only the long complex history of Britain's relationship with the New Commonwealth, but they also speak to the reconfiguring of boundaries of who belongs in the postcolonial metropole. These immigrants, like Ranjit Sondhi, were greeted with racial hostility and social exclusion, and now face threats of deportation. A need to re-examine Britain's historical relationship with the New Commonwealth is therefore as timely and urgent as ever.

Notwithstanding calls for racial tolerance and multiracial conviviality, shifting attitudes to Commonwealth immigration demonstrably re-energised racial thinking and paved the way for new forms of racism. While the BNA 1948 meant that the terms 'British subject' and 'Commonwealth immigrant' were used interchangeably, Commonwealth immigrants' rights

⁷⁵ LPA, LP/RD/33/9: Study group on immigration: 'British Foreign Policy and our Commonwealth Role, Oct 1968'.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ Cohen, *Fuzzy Frontiers*.

⁷⁹ Holmes, *A Tolerant Country?*, 13.

to live and settle in Britain were significantly curtailed thereafter. The ways in which New Commonwealth immigration was framed in the 1960s, for instance, reveals that there was a campaign to reconstruct British subjects and Commonwealth citizens into a 'colour problem'. Fears relating to growing racial violence, increasing unemployment, and the strain placed on housing, schools and medical services led to calls for greater immigration controls. Immigration restrictions were subsequently put in place to construct new borders – these legislative borders acted as sites from which black and Asian Commonwealth citizens, and in some cases British passport holders, were denied legal status. Thus, the entrenchment of racial thinking led to a bifurcation of white and non-white British subjects.⁸⁰ This coincided with Britain's application to join the European Economic Community. By the 1960s, Britain was uniquely positioned at the intersection of two distinct geopolitical formations: the empire and Commonwealth; and Europe.⁸¹ As such, Britain's priorities leaned towards Europe, and New Commonwealth immigration strongly heightened a desire to draw the criteria for citizenship and belonging more severely.

The Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 therefore demonstrate the fragility of the ideal of a Commonwealth community of equal races and nations. A narrow understanding of Britishness was applied to first administrative and then legislative responses to New Commonwealth citizens. Accordingly, an examination of statecraft and citizenship in an age of decolonisation reveals that rights to national belonging were undercut by racial classifications. Immigration controls became overdetermined by considerations of race.⁸² Despite the Commonwealth's open door policy articulated in the 1940s, the vision of a multiracial Commonwealth was, as Webster observes, 'rarely matched by any vision of a multiracial Britain'.⁸³ Britain's shifting attitudes to Commonwealth immigration suggests that by the 1960s its commitment to multiracialism was largely symbolic and declaratory.⁸⁴ The fact that the Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 were titled so in a move to restrict entry to Britain testified to the centrality of race and racialised thinking within twentieth century British immigration policy. On the one hand, these immigration restrictions tell us that the Commonwealth certainly had symbolic significance: 'the good name of Britain' was tied to its treatment of Commonwealth immigrants.⁸⁵ On the other hand, however, the racialised reconstruction of Britishness in this period challenges Britain's image as a central member of a multiracial

⁸⁰ David Cesarani and Mary Fulbrook, *Citizenship, Nationality and Migration in Europe* (London, 1996), 7.

⁸¹ See Paul Gilroy, *After Empire: Melancholia or Convivial Culture: Multiculture or Postcolonial Melancholia* (London, 2004), 121.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ Webster, *The Empire Comes Home*, 128.

⁸⁴ See Zig Layton-Henry, *The Politics of Immigration: Race and Race Relations in Postwar Britain* (Oxford, 1992), 217.

⁸⁵ The White Paper 1965, titled 'Immigration from the Commonwealth' declared: 'The good name of Britain, our relations with other members of the Commonwealth, and, above all, justice and common humanity, demand that CW immigrants in this country should be absorbed into our community without friction and with mutual understanding and tolerance.'

<http://filestore.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pdfs/small/cab-129-122-c-109.pdf> (Accessed September 2019).

Commonwealth. Commonwealth unity, therefore, was more an ideal than an achieved reality.