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Author(s): Henry Locke

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The withdrawal from Empire: Post-war immigration's influence upon English society going into the 1970s

Henry Locke

English post-war immigration has a turbulent history. Surprisingly, directly after the war, immigrants were mostly welcomed into English society with Polish, Irish, and Italian communities forming across the country. This began to change by the 1950s after the arrival of HMT *Empire Windrush* into Tilbury docks saw the first immigrants from outside Europe taking up their rights as a British Citizens to emigrate to the centre of the Commonwealth. "White Riots" broke out across the country in the latter half of the 1950s as traditionally white English communities began to fear what they saw as a "disrupting coloured invasion of their identity". This caused a political backlash and saw the pushing through of the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, and 1976 through parliament which outlawed various racial prejudices and discrimination on grounds of colour, race, ethnicity or national origins. Ultimately, the friction caused by increased immigration reached a crashing crescendo in 1968 with Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech which was met with vocal support up and down the country. Today, immigration, and the political and social connotations that come with it, are an accepted part of societal life. This article aims to show how and why this came about and the disruption this caused for English society; tracing the timeline of immigration from directly after the Second World War to the early 1970s.

Following the Second World War, the decline of the British Empire caused a shift of focus to the British Commonwealth. For many policy-makers in London, the process of British withdrawal from Empire and decolonisation simply marked the beginning of a new epoch for Britain. Britain needed to sustain its current global outreach and the understood way to do so was to make Britain the "Mother country" of the Commonwealth, and so create a multi-racial society through immigration and a network of nations.[1] This had transformational and lasting consequences on British society. The initial stages of immigration were accepted due to England's need for labour and the fact that many of the incoming immigrants were ethnically white European. The 1948 British Nationality Act further encouraged immigration from the rest of the Commonwealth and led to a large increase in the numbers of incoming immigrants. By 1962, the matter of "coloured immigration" had entered the public and political consciousness and was often met with harsh criticism from many a public voice; most notably that of Enoch Powell's in his 1968 "River of Blood" speech.[2] As a whole, immigration caused by withdrawal from the Empire transformed England from a relatively isolated society in 1945 into a sometimes fractured and multi-racial society by the 1970s.

The European Voluntary Workers (EVWs) were the thousands of mostly white European immigrants who were invited to Britain by the government in the direct aftermath of the Second World War in an effort to support the struggling English labour market.[3] Additionally, the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947 facilitated the settlement and resettlement of Poles into Britain, creating a large Pol-

HENRY LOCKE is a current fourth-year history undergraduate studying at the University of Glasgow. His research interests focus on the changing role of states, historically, in the international community. Consequently, this paper concentrates on the effects of immigration upon English society during Britain's withdrawal from Empire. He hopes to undertake postgraduate work in the field of International Relations at an institution in the Netherlands with the intention of pursuing a career in diplomacy.

[1] L.J. Butler, *Britain and Empire: Adjusting to a Post-Imperial World* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2002), xiii, 104.

[2] Wendy Webster, "The Empire Comes Home: Commonwealth Migration to Britain," in *Britain's Experience of Empire*, ed. by Andrew Thompson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 159; Enoch Powell, "Speech at Birmingham, 20 April 1968," in *Freedom and Reality,* ed. by John Wood (London: Batsford, 1969).

[3] Webster, *Englishness and Empire, 1939–1965* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 154.

ish community in British society.[4] Later that year, EVWs were described in a parliamentary debate as "ideal immigrants" and "as first-class people, who if let into this country would be of great benefit to our stock".[5] There was little social resistance to EVWs, except occasional minor annoyances aimed at the intermarriages between Poles and English women, of which 4,000 occurred.[6] The transformation of English society by white EVWs was welcomed and encouraged. Bilingual road-signs were erected in Bedfordshire for the local Italian brick laying community.[7] In 1948 the British Nationality Act (BNA) was passed in which all Crown subjects were automatically entitled to British citizenship.[8] The BNA saw to open up and encouraged immigration into Britain from the rest of the Commonwealth community. This action was also aided by international incidents such as the McCarran-Walter Act of 1952 in the US, which reduced people of Caribbean decent from entering the US, and environmental crises such as the 1944 hurricane in the Caribbean. In the end it achieved its goal.[9]

By 1950, the number of migrant citizens in Britain was at 429,329, almost double the amount present in 1939.[10] Furthermore, a Royal Commission in 1949 called for the need to attract 140,000 immigrants annually in order to meet the economical demands of the capital.[11] However, it was around the same time that cracks began to show in British society and questions surrounding colour and cultural identity were forced to the forefront of English consciousness. The switch of outlook towards incoming migrants occurred when the first passenger ships carrying "coloured" British colonial subjects arrived in Tilbury docks; *Empire Windrush* was the most iconic, having left Kingston, Jamaica with 492 passengers in the summer of 1948.[12]

Despite influxes of white immigrants post-1945, by the mid-1950s the term "immigrant" came to be exclusive to denoting Black or Asian persons.[13] As a result, the term "immigration" soon began to be linked to the idea of a "colour problem" which was touted both publicly in the media and behind closed doors.[14] As Wendy Webster highlights, it was only after the 1940s that continental Europeans, Irish, and Jews gained comparative "invisibility".[15] "The arrival of 'coloured immigrants' created a characteristic opposition between Englishness as white, and 'immigrants' as 'coloured".'[16] This stereotype persisted despite the fact that in the late 1950s twice as many Irish arrived in Britain annually as migrants from the Commonwealth.[17] British legal legislation in the 1940s and 1950s did not create a distinction between European and non-European British subjects. Regardless, discourse surrounding racial identity and the issue of race became more explicit in political and public debates throughout the period.[18]

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Diana Kay and Robert Miles, *Refugees or Migrant Workers? European Volunteer Workers in Britain 1946–1951* (London: Routledge, 1992), 54.

[6] Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 156.

[7] Ibid, 154.

[8] Dominic Sandbrook, *Never had it so Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006), 295.

[9] Ibid, 294.

[10] Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 155.

[11] Sandbrook, *Never had it so Good*, 295.

[12] Ibid, 293.

[13] Webster, "The Empire Comes Home", 159.

[14] Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 149.

[15] Webster, "The Empire Comes Home", 159.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid, 128.

[18] Sarah Ansari, "Subjects or Citizens? India, Pakistan and the 1948 British Nationality Act," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 41, iss. 2 (2013): 285.

As a result of increased "coloured" immigration into England, "White Riots" broke out in Nottingham and Notting Hill in the summer of 1958 with an aggressive, racially motivated narrative painting "colonial war imagery of 'Englishness' under siege on the home front by the issue of immigration"; In the minds of some British citizens, London was becoming the new Khartoum.[19] Between 1950 and 1961, while there was clear social unrest in what were traditionally white communities focused around the issue of immigration, the number of immigrants involved never seemed significant enough to the British government to bring in legislation to combat the disruptions being caused; this is despite cabinet discussing "coloured" immigration on 37 separate occasions.[20] This lack of political action is likely to do with the ideological image of Britain as a liberal and tolerant society in a multi-racial "Commonwealth family" that the Queen spoke of her 1954 Christmas Broadcast.[21] Henry Hopkins, Minister of State for Colonial Affairs, also espoused this ideal in 1954 when he compared British citizenship with that of Roman citizenship in the days of Cicero:

> In a world in which restriction on personal movement and immigration have increased we still take pride in the fact that a man can say *Civis Britannicus Sum* whatever his colour may be, and we can take pride in the fact that he wants and can come to the Mother country.[22]

However, British citizenship by no means protected the individual from the mounting disdain towards the "coloured" immigrant population in Britain in the 1950s.

In 1962, for the first time legal framework of restrictions on immigration was enacted with the Commonwealth Immigration Act.[23] Despite the cabinet's efforts to tarry immigration control, it begrudgingly saw it as a sad necessity due to the increased pressures on housing resources and the danger of social tension arising from large numbers of unassimilated immigrant communities.[24] By 1962, non-white British subjects were arriving at the rate of more than 130,000 annually in comparison to the early 1950s when the figure had been less than 10,000.[25] This did not go unnoticed. Academics, such as the Modern History Professor James Tumelty at Glasgow University commented in 1962, "in the last few years growing immigration from the West Indies and Pakistan has caused concern to some people," despite stating the influx was small at less than 1 percent of the total population of Britain.[26] Tumelty argues that the reason for this social resistance was due to immigration being concentrated in a few areas of London and some Midland cities and the feeling that immigrants were complicating the problems of jobs, housing, and health.[27] It is clear that, by 1962, all classes in British society, from the intelligentsia, the political elite to the working class, were being forced to deal with the realities of a multi-racial society. Some high-minded advocates for the Commonwealth in government continued to be supportive of the multi-racial project as "British people's finest contribution

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[19] Webster, *Englishness and Empire,* 164–165.

[20] Ronald Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire: The Road to Decolonisation, 1918–1968* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 315.

[21] Elizabeth II, HRH, Queen. "Christmas Broadcast 1954", The Official Website of the British Monarchy, *The Royal Household,* last modified 25 December 1995. https://www.royal.uk/christmas-broadcast-1954?page=2.

[22] Quoted in Kenan Malik, *The Meaning of Race: Race, History and Culture in Western Society* (London: Macmillan, 1996), 21.

[23] Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire*, 315.

[24] Ibid, 317.

[25] Butler, *Britain and Empire*, 169.

[26] James Tumelty, *Britain Today* (Glasgow: House of Grant, 1962), 15.

[27] Ibid.

to a happier human civilisation".[28] However, as the campaigning for the 1964 General Election shows, the rest of society were having serious reservations.

During the early 1960s, Labour voiced loud opposition to the Commonwealth Immigration Bill brought in by the Conservative government.[29] However, they soon realised that this stance would be detrimental in winning over potential swing-voters when Labour's long standing seat holder Gordon Walker lost out to the Conservatives' Peter Griffiths in Smethwick.[30] Smethwick was an industrial town outside Birmingham with c.70,000 residents; 4–7,000 of which were immigrants.[31] Griffiths won the seat at Smethwick on the back of a heated, racist campaign aided by the slogan "If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour."[32] Elizabeth Buettner succinctly summarises the value of this Labour defeat when she stated:

> Early 1960s Smethwick provides a striking example of decolonisation's metropolitan impact, drawing into its web the local, the national and the global at the time of Britain's transition from Empire to Commonwealth.[33]

Within a year of Harold Wilson's marginal election victory, Labour saw to it to tighten provisions of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants legislation.[34] As Richard Crossman noted at the time, the 1964 General Election made it clear to the political elite that immigration was the new "hottest potato" in politics and could be "the greatest potential vote-loser to all political parties".[35] From all this, Labour found it best to abandon its opposition to immigration restrictions and fall in line with public opinion.[36]

It became clear to all that a protectionist "Little England" attitude was being adopted by the public towards immigration. Kathleen Paul further argues that the political elite are to blame for allowing this archaic transition in English society to occur with the government imposing unfair immigration control on British subjects while the more liberal politicians voiced no opposition in fear of public backlash.[37] Nonetheless, efforts were made to stem the racial tension and discrimination and instead promote racial equality. The Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968, and 1976 outlawed various racial prejudices and discrimination of grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origins.[38] These acts were not symbolic either. In January 1967, the first conviction under the legislation brought about by these acts led to a 17-year-old male being found guilty, and sentenced to 18 months in prison, on the back of racial discrimination charges.[39] In actual fact, the politicians nearly always caved into the

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[28] Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire,* 353.

[29] Gavin Shaffer, "'Till Death Us Do Part' and the BBC: Racial Politics and the British Working Classes, 1965–1975", *Journal of Contemporary History* 45, no. 2 (April 2010): 455.

[30] Ibid, 456.

[31] Elizabeth Buettner, "'This is Staffordshire not Alabama': Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration in Early 1960s Britain," in *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 42, no. 4 (2014), 710.

[32] Kathryn Edwards, "Powell's 'rivers of blood' legacy," BBC News, *BBC,* 18 April 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/west_midlands/7343256.stm.

[33] Buettner, "Racial Geographies of Commonwealth Immigration", 711.

[34] Shaffer, "Racial Politics and the British Working Classes", 455.

[35] Richard Crossman, *The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister: Minister of Housing, 1964–66* (London: Hamilton, 1975), 149–150.

[36] Shaffer, "Racial Politics and the British Working Classes", 455.

[37] Kathleen Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: Race and Citizenship in the Postwar Era* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 131–135.

[38] Webster, *Englishness and Empire*, 180.

[39] Unknown, "Colin Jordan sent to prison for 18 months on Race Act charges", *Glasgow Herald,* January 26 1967, 7.

pressure of public opinion. For example, in 1968, under the Africanisation policy of the Kenyan government, 150,000 displaced Kenyan Asians could have potentially used their legal right to come and live permanently in Britain.[40] Labour's reaction was a knee-jerk one of fear. Under Wilson, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 was rapidly introduced and effectively ended the freedom of entry of Asian—not white settlers—from East Africa.[41]

Within less than 20 years, the rapid process of British decolonisation lead to a tidal shift from acceptance of "white" immigration, to a vocal denouncement of "coloured" immigration and the rise of xenophobia in English society. The rise in English xenophobia can be explained, in part, by looking at assimilation patterns of immigrants into English society. Prior to 1945, immigrants were expected to adapt to "Englishness" and the traditional British identity and as a result their entrance into British society was likely less noticeable. However, "coloured" immigrants were often more culturally separate from the "English" identity. Upon their arrival they often created a hybrid identity combining British colonial and their own regional identities; such as British Bangladeshi. They drew particularly on common religion and language, or a conferred Pan-Afro-Caribbean identity created from the colonial regions in the British West Indies.[42] This in turn created a much more visible and culturally diverse immigrant community which bred intolerance, fear and contempt among the White English communities.[43]

On the 20 April 1968, Enoch Powell addressed the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham criticising mass-immigration in his infamous "Rivers of Blood" speech. The speech attacked the influx of immigrants, primarily from the West Indies, Africa, and Southeast Asia, stating it as an attack on English values and made the native English "Strangers in their own land".[44] Moreover, Powell directly linked the social problems affecting Britain, such as pressures on the National Health Service (NHS) and education sector, with immigration.[45] The political backlash to the speech was quick. Powell was immediately sacked by the leader of the Conservative party, Edward Heath, and Labour criticised him for inciting racist sentiment.[46] Additionally, the national press stopped short of supporting Powell's rhetoric in fear of going against Britain's self-imposed reputation as a liberal and tolerant society.[47] Powell found some political support, coming mainly from the rebel Conservative Monday Club, a political pressure group. Sir Ronald McMillan Bell further supported Powell at the Race Relations Bill vote in parliament three days later for not steering the "middle line in politics" and using "[un-]muted language" to tackle the issue of immigration.[48] Powell's speech had a specific appeal to working class voters.[49] Vocal critics, such as Paul Foot, claimed Powell was acting opportunistically in appealing to existing anti-immigration sentiment and as a result led to confirming the "ugliest fear of people who knew nothing of immigrations problems" and making those fears politically respectable.[50]

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[40] Hyam, *Britain's Declining Empire,* 352.

[41] Ibid, 352–353.

[42] Tobias Brinkmann, "Immigration and Identity in Britain", in *National Identities* 4, no. 2 (2002): 181.

[43] Ibid, 183.

[44] Powell, "Speech at Birmingham, 20 April 1968".

[45] Ibid.

[46] Amy Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell," *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 3 (July 2009): 717.

[47] Webster, *Englishness and Empire,* 179.

[48] Sir Ronald M. Bell, Talking on the "Race Relations Bill," 23 April 1968, in *Hansard Parliamentary Debates*, Commons, 5th series, vol. 763, columns 109–110.

[49] Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell", 718.

[50] Paul Foot, *The Rise of Enoch Powell: An Examination of Enoch Powell's Attitude to Immigration and Race* (London: Cornmarket Press, 1969), 116, 140.

Public support for Powell contrasted heavily with that of the political spheres. Opinion polls calculated at the time put the percentage of agreement with Powell's narrative at 74 percent and 67 percent of the nation.[51] In addition, Powell received over 100,000 letters of support from across Britain in the month following his speech and London dockers began a strike in his honour.[52] Amy Whipple also suggests that for many, the criticism and repercussion taken by the political elite only elevated Powell from the position of champion to martyr.[53] By 1968, as the realities of the Empire washed-up on the shore of mainland Britain, an identity of "Englishness" that was opposed to immigration, Empire, and the Commonwealth had firmly developed and made root in much of society.

In conclusion, immigration after the Second World War and leading into the 1970s went from a non-issue to a primary concern for many in English society. The extent of the Empire meant that when Britain withdrew from it in the post-war years, huge numbers of British subjects were handed the opportunity to often seek a better life in the Commonwealth "Mother Country"; and many took it. Stuart Hall observed that this created a "tremendous paradox […] where the very moment Britain finally convinced itself it had to decolonize, that it had to get rid of the colonies, the colonised began flooding into England."[54] In this sense, the withdrawal from Empire opened up the possibility of migration to Britain from the colonies and consequently forced British society to meet the multi-racial and multi-cultural nature of the Empire face-to-face. Inevitably, British society was transformed perpetually and immigration became, and has since become, a leading issue in political and social thought. ■

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[51] Douglas E. Schoen, *Enoch Powell and the Powellites* (London: Macmillan, 1977), 37.

[52] Whipple, "Revisiting the 'Rivers of Blood' Controversy: Letters to Enoch Powell", 717–718.

[53] Ibid, 717.

[54] Stuart Hall, "The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity", in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives,* ed. by Ann McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 176.

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