

UK government's racist targeting of Caribbean migrants provokes backlash

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The forced apology by UK Prime Minister Theresa May and her Home Secretary Amber Rudd concerning the government's deportation and persecution of Commonwealth citizens who have lived in Britain for decades should be treated with contempt.

Rudd's mea culpa in parliament, announcing a task force to investigate the issue, and May's subsequent apology to the leaders of Caribbean nations on Tuesday, constitute an attempt to portray the deliberate result of a government policy to victimize and expel migrants as mistakes by a few over-zealous civil servants.

In recent months, many Commonwealth migrants have been contacted by the Home Office and told they are not eligible to stay in the UK. They have faced harassment and violations of their rights as well as the denial of health care, housing and employment. The Home Office insisted they prove that they have been in the UK continually since January 1973 by providing four relevant documents for every year of residence.

According to the Migration Observatory at Oxford, there are around 524,000 current UK residents who were born in a Commonwealth country and arrived in Britain before 1971. It estimated that 50,000 people who arrived from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1973 may not have regularised their residency status and are threatened with deportation.

The first of these arrived in the UK after the Second World War on the cruise ship *Empire Windrush*, which brought West Indian workers to Britain in 1948. Known as the "Windrush generation," Caribbean migrants—and later migrants from the Indian sub-continent—were invited to the UK to help fill a massive labour shortage in such vital areas as the National Health Service. Many migrants were children when they arrived, often on their parents' passports.

The government's belated and reluctant apology came only after harrowing stories began to emerge of the

disgusting treatment of Commonwealth migrants.

The case of one man, Albert Thompson, is indicative of the sadistic treatment meted out. He has lived in London for 44 years after having arrived from Jamaica as a teenager and worked and paid taxes for more than three decades. He went for his first radiotherapy session for prostate cancer, only to be told that unless he could produce a British passport he would be charged £54,000 for the treatment. As well as being denied his right to free health care, Thompson was evicted last summer as a result of tighter immigration legislation, leaving him homeless for three weeks.

Following changes to immigration law made during May's time as Home Secretary (2010-2016), the lives of many migrants have been ruined.

In 2012, legislation was passed requiring people to possess documentation of their right to be in the country in order to work, rent or access health and welfare benefits. But the 1971 Immigration Act did not issue any such paperwork and the Home Office did not keep a record of those who had been granted leave to stay. The onus was placed on individuals to prove they were residents in the UK before the Act went into effect on January 1, 1973.

In 2014, this situation was worsened by the secret removal from the 2014 Immigration Act of a clause that protected long-term Commonwealth residents from deportation.

More evidence emerged Tuesday proving that other measures were enacted whose purpose could only have been to facilitate mass deportations. In 2010, the government destroyed thousands of Windrush-era landing cards of Caribbean migrants. Attempting to play down the destruction of the important archive, the government said the cards did not provide reliable evidence of ongoing residence in the UK or immigration status.

On Wednesday, this claim was exposed as a lie by two

Home Office whistle-blowers, who said the cards were used regularly in decision-making. One said the databases “would show who else arrived with you; it would show the parents and the children that they brought with them.”

The tightening of immigration legislation was part of a policy of creating, in May’s words from a 2012 speech, a “really hostile environment” for “illegal” immigrants. This was necessary, she declared, “after thirteen years of uncontrolled mass immigration.” It was directed not just against people who rightly considered that they had full citizenship rights, including three generations of citizens hailing from the Caribbean, but all immigrants.

This was central to the Tory government’s efforts to bring net migration down to the “tens of thousands” as part of their adoption of policies demanded by the UK Independence Party, which was winning over swathes of Tory supporters.

In 2013, the government even hired vans, at May’s direction, to drive around towns and cities with large immigrant populations displaying giant “Go Home or Face Arrest” posters.

Since then, the Home Office has pursued a ruthless anti-immigration agenda. Landlords were required to check on tenants’ immigration status, while hospitals and charities in receipt of NHS funds were required to carry out ID checks on patients prior to treatment in order to bill them if they were not found eligible for free treatment. Banks and building societies were forced to conduct immigration checks on their current account holders. As a result of the 2014 and 2016 immigration acts, a “deport first, appeal later” policy was routinized.

The post-war migrants were granted leave to remain under the 1971 Immigration Act, which came into force in 1973. However, due to the very provisions of that reactionary act, many of the Windrush generation are still not officially classified as British citizens.

The act shut down Commonwealth migration through the introduction of a “patriality clause.” A partial “right of abode” was introduced, lifting all restrictions on immigrants who could prove a direct personal or ancestral connection with Britain. Under this provision, a person’s father or grandfather had to be born in the UK for citizenship to be granted. In effect, this provision meant the applicant had to have a white parent or grandparent. Black and Asian people were effectively barred from citizenship, but not white migrants from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, etc.

Those already here for five years were granted permanent leave to remain, but Commonwealth citizens

lost their automatic right to remain in the UK. As migration from the West Indies to Britain occurred mainly between 1948 and 1965, the documentation now being demanded of them did not exist. As a result, many of the Windrush generation and their children—some of whom have never traveled outside the UK and did not require a passport—are still not classified as citizens.

This racist act was introduced by the Conservative government of Edward Heath, who declared, “There will be no further large-scale permanent immigration.”

Only three years earlier, leading Tory MP Enoch Powell delivered his fascistic “Rivers of Blood” speech in Birmingham, in which he called for “stopping, or virtually stopping, further inflow, and... promoting the maximum outflow.” Heath was forced to sack Powell from his cabinet after the public outcry at the speech, but cabinet papers confirm that Powell’s politics were critical in formulating the Immigration Act.

In the following decades, many of the Windrush generation, their children and grandchildren would be involved in fighting against the racist policies of Margaret Thatcher and the rest of May’s political forebears.

On becoming prime minister, May tried to strike a newly minted progressive pose. The UK’s leaving the European Union, she said, would be based on a “Global Britain,” which would turn out to the world to grow its trading relationships, in particular with the more than 50 Commonwealth nations. May’s political pretense lies in tatters. She has been forced to make an apology on the eve of today’s Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, which is centred on discussing the strengthening Britain’s trading relationships.

Of greater political import still, millions of people are repulsed and angered at the treatment of their lifelong neighbours, friends and work colleagues. It is a stark exposure of the divisive and socially destructive implications of the anti-immigrant rhetoric and associated policies used to divide the working class in the face of the common enemy.



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