

UK government's persecution of Caribbean workers the tip of an iceberg

Paul Mitchell
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On Monday Conservative Party Home Secretary Amber Rudd apologised again to “Windrush Migrants,” the generation named after the first ship bringing workers from the Caribbean to the UK in 1948 to help fill a massive labour shortage following the Second World War.

Hundreds of members of the Windrush generation have been denied free healthcare and benefits, lost jobs and have been threatened with arrest and deportation as a result of the “hostile environment” for illegal immigrants introduced by then home secretary, now Prime Minister Theresa May in 2013.

Rudd lamented the “hardship they had endured,” claiming it was an unfortunate mistake by over-zealous civil servants and declared, “It is only right that the significant contribution the Windrush generation have made to the UK is recognised.” She announced that citizenship and compensation would be offered to their families and those of other Commonwealth nations who came to the UK between 1948 and 1973.

The UK government's scandalous persecution of Caribbean migrant workers is just the tip of an iceberg, however.

According to Robert McNeil, deputy director of the Migration Observatory, this could affect “tens of thousands of people from other Commonwealth countries in Asia, Africa, the Americas and elsewhere” because they did not regularise their residency status and are threatened with deportation.

Margaret O'Brien, 69, who emigrated from Canada in 1971, got married and had three children, told the *Guardian* how she has fought for over two years to persuade the Home Office to be allowed to stay. In 2015, O'Brien, after being refused disability benefit, received a letter stating, “Home Office records indicate that you do not have permission to be in the UK. You should make arrangements to leave without delay.”

The letter informed her “of our intention to remove you from the UK to your country of nationality if you do not depart voluntarily. No further notice will be given.”

Soon afterwards, O'Brien received another letter with her photo declaring, “You are a person without leave who has been served with a notice of liability to removal.”

It was only due to the diligence of her lawyers in finding supporting evidence that O'Brien did not suffer the fate of countless others.

In 2016, almost 40,000 people were removed from the UK or classified as “departing voluntarily,” after receiving threatening letters. Many more are detained at Britain's airports and ferry terminals and sent to another country under the “deport first, appeal later” policy.

Figures also show that around 10,000 people are waiting for more than six months for a decision on their asylum claims and, because they are banned from work, are forced to live on an allowance of £37.75 a week. The Red Cross has said these conditions are pushing a growing number of vulnerable people into destitution.

No belated apologies, emergency measures and attempts to blame the civil service can hide the fact that the Conservative government and its Liberal-Democrat coalition partners ignored warnings about the consequences of the “hostile environment” policy, which Rudd has “escalated”—a promise she made to her predecessor.

The results were both inevitable and intended. It was what the system was designed to do. They knew people's lives would be wrecked and families torn apart.

Former Head of the Civil Service Lord Robert Kerslake likened May's “hostile environment” to fascism. “You cannot create a climate and then not expect it to have consequences,” Kerslake explained, adding, “I think it was not just a question of the home secretary being told it was a challenging policy, the prime minister [David Cameron] was as well.”

“This was a very contested policy across all Government departments. Now I can’t say, and shouldn’t say as a former Head of the Civil Service, precisely who gave advice to whom but what I can tell you is that it was contested.

“And there were some, who I shall not name, who saw it as almost reminiscent of Nazi Germany in the way it was working.”

Kerslake has called for an inquiry into why the Home Office decided to destroy thousands of documents such as landing cards relating to the Windrush generation, which made it much harder for them to prove their status.

Short shrift should also be given to Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson who yesterday repeated his call, subsequently dismissed by May, for a “broader” amnesty for those from Commonwealth nations who had no criminal records and had lived in the UK for more than 10 years.

Johnson is resorting once again to disgusting politicking in the wake of Brexit and attempts by the ruling elite to re-establish the Commonwealth with its more than 50-member nations as an economic and trading partner and alternative source of labour to the European Union (EU).

Johnson’s newfound sympathy for immigrants is, of course, not extended to EU workers. The Migration Observatory also reports that “substantial” numbers of UK residents could be at risk of losing their legal status after Brexit, with particularly vulnerable groups including victims of domestic abuse, elderly people and children, many of whose parents mistakenly believe that they are automatically UK nationals. In addition many people do not realise that they are covered by the new regulations and need to apply for “Settled Status.”

The reaction of the Labour Party opposition has been predictable and tame. Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily Thornberry declared that there was something “rotten at the heart of government,” urging that Rudd should take the decision to resign. “People have died, people have lost their jobs, lost their futures. People working in the National Health Service all their lives suddenly lose their jobs... I really think she should quit.”

Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn called on May to repeal the 2014 Immigration Act, which imposed requirements on employers, landlords, employers, banks and the NHS to check people’s immigration status.

Diane Abbott, shadow home secretary, criticised Rudd for blaming the scandal on “successive governments,” including Labour, and said it was mainly the fault of the

2014 Immigration Act. Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell said Labour would substantially change the 2014 legislation.

This is about as far as Labour’s “left” leadership can go, because they are intent on concealing the party’s despicable anti-immigrant history.

Only 18 MPs, including Corbyn and Abbott, voted against the Immigration Bill in 2014. And little wonder, because former Blairite home secretary from June 2009 until May 2010, Alan Johnson, pioneered the approach prior to Labour losing the 2010 general election.

The BBC’s Nick Robinson told Thornberry that it wasn’t the Tories who first used the phrase “hostile environment,” referring to a UK Home Office report from February 2010, which said, “This strategy sets out how we will continue our efforts to cut crime and make the UK a hostile environment for those that seek to break our laws or abuse our hospitality.”

This was the policy underscoring Labour’s election campaign that saw the party selling mugs and badges reading, “Controls on immigration. I’m voting Labour.”

Thornberry was forced to admit, “Alan Johnson first used it in a speech,” while suggesting that to “lift that phrasing, to embed it as much as it was, to strengthen it, to make it sharper and nastier, that was the difference. The words were used but the culture was not.”

Her objection is difficult to understand, given her insistence that she “did not have a problem” with checks being made on people seeking homes, jobs and health care—the provisions introduced by the 2014 Act: “It’s right that we should have rules and that they should be enforced, and that it should be done fairly and fast and it should be firm.”



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