A Dream Deferred: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain

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A Dream Deferred: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain

Abstract
Text of the Arthur Ravenscroft Memorial Lecture, delivered at the University of Leeds, 11 May 1998 I have imagined the scene many times. We are in the late 1940s, or in the 1950s, or even in the early 1960s. Crowds of young West Indians are peering from the deck of a ship, eagerly securing their first view of the white cliffs of Dover. Before them lies a new land and a new future. At the moment of that first sighting I imagine that their dominant emotion would have been that of a profound sense of loss, for clearly they knew that it would be many years before they would return home to loved ones and familiar landscapes. A significant page in the narrative of their young lives was being turned; people and places were being confined to an earlier chapter. These emigrants were chained now to the future. A future in Britain. And, of course, they expected.
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These young men and women had been raised and educated on the many scattered islands of the curved archipelago which constitutes the English-speaking Caribbean. The very language which sat on their tongues, the Bibles tucked away in their hand luggage, the belated hand-me-down colonial fashions which draped their shivering bodies, all bespoke a profound affiliation to the land which lay before them. They expected from Britain in the same uncomplicated manner in which a child expects from the mother. They expected to be accepted, but they hoped to be loved. They expected to be treated fairly, but secretly they yearned for preference. They were coming to the 'mother country' to impress and be impressed, and they had much to offer. From the deck of the ship their first glimpse of the white cliffs of Dover suggested a homecoming of sorts. The weather was a little chilly, but having reconciled themselves to the fact that the Caribbean was behind them, over the horizon and out of sight, they hoped now that everything would be just fine. Sadly, they were soon to discover that the chilliness did not just refer to the weather.
II

'Tis said there is a great number of Blacks come daily into this City, so that 'tis thought in a short time, if they not be suppress'd, the City will swarm with them.' The (London) Daily Journal, 5th April 1723.

Sixty-five years later, in 1788, the same drum was still being banged. Philip Thicknesse, a contemporary observer, noted that 'London abounds with an incredible number of these black men ... in every country town, nay in almost every village are to be seen a little race of mulattoes, mischievous as monkies and infinitely more dangerous.' Eighteenth-century Britain, at the height of the slave trade, and at a time when it was fashionable for the well-heeled to employ black servants, was a vibrantly, if not altogether successful, multiracial country. As countless critics have pointed out, one need look only to the work of Hogarth and his contemporaries, or glance at the literature of Fielding or Thackeray for confirmation of this fact. However, during the nineteenth, and particularly in the early part of the twentieth century the number of black people in Britain fell rapidly. The abolition of the slave trade in 1834 accounted for much of the numerical decline, and intermarriage and mortality only served to speed the process.

Of course, this does not mean that racism and prejudice also subsided. Far from it. Consider, for example, the recently researched case of Britain's first black outfield soccer player. Walter Tull was born in 1888, the son of a joiner from Barbados who had come to Britain in 1876. By the time he was ten years old both parents had died and he was placed in a Methodist orphanage in London's Bethnal Green. In 1908 he signed professional forms with Tottenham Hotspur as an inside-left, and he quickly established himself as a player who The Daily Chronicle described as 'very good indeed with a class superior to that shown by most of his colleagues'. However, in 1909 Tottenham Hotspur played a game at Bristol City and the racial abuse was such that the chief football magazine of the day called the language 'lower than Billingsgate'. Tull was subjected to racial chanting and monkey noises, precisely the same type of abuse that is still showered upon the modern black player. Racism was rooted into British society long before the era of the slave trade, but it was practised with a particular vigour during these years. However, after the abolition of the slave trade in 1834, racism survived, and it was there to not only greet poor Walter Tull, but it endured to welcome postwar Caribbean migrants to Britain.

III

In 1941 George Orwell sought to capture what was essential about the British character in an oft-quoted essay entitled, 'England Your England'. In it he stated quite categorically that British people had no desire to view
themselves as a nation of immigrants, and that a sense of continuity with the past was a crucial determinant of national identity. This would come as something of a surprise to Daniel Defoe who, two and a half centuries earlier in his poem ‘A True Born Englishman’, had pointed to what he termed ‘the mongrel condition’ of the proud nation which, much to its chagrin, had long been subject to continual waves of migration. However, in ‘England Your England’ Orwell was merely restating what most British people wanted to believe. That their traditions, hobbies and pastimes – their culture if you will – was not only deeply rooted in a continuous historical past, but was impervious to pollution from foreign sources. It was to be understood that the British neither needed to learn from, nor be subject to other people’s decidedly inferior cultures. Britain was mature and fully formed. British influence upon others was the norm; and after all, was there not an Empire to prove this?

The nineteenth-century imagined community of Empire did much to not only legitimize British racism, it entrenched the very ideas of Britishness that Orwell explored in his essay. After all, if Britain was a club whose members were scattered across the globe doing fine and necessary work, it made sense that one should at least clarify the rules of membership. In the nineteenth century, the very details and minutiae of being British took a firm grip on the national imagination, and writers and thinkers began to betray a powerful interest in British (which generally meant English) culture. Orwell’s ‘England Your England’ was merely an extension of this obsessive British desire to define the culture and thereby achieve some form of closure around the concept of identity. In his essay Orwell determines that England is:

The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids biking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn mornings

But Orwell does not stop here. ‘How,’ he wonders, ‘can one make a pattern out of this muddle?’ He tries again. This time English culture is

somewhat bound up with solid breakfasts and gloomy Sundays, smoky towns and winding roads, green fields and red pillar-boxes. It has a flavour of its own. Moreover it is continuous, it stretches into the future and the past, there is something in it that persists, as in a living creature.

Well, this second attempt to achieve closure does not entirely satisfy Orwell so he tries again. This time he appears to be clutching at straws. He declares:

We are a nation of flower-lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon-snippers, darts players, [and] crossword-puzzle fans.
In the end the only conclusion that Orwell can reach is the somewhat unconvincing one that because there has always been an England, there always will be an England. In the final sentence of his essay Orwell declares that England has ‘the power to change out of recognition and yet remain the same’. In other words, having failed to achieve a proper definition of English culture, Orwell decides to have it both ways. Perhaps Orwell’s desire to define and fix ‘Englishness’ was prompted not only by the fervour of war, but by a knowledge that change was on the horizon; that the ‘so-called’ barbarians were at the gates. A mere seven years after the publication of ‘England Your England’, on 22 June 1948, the S.S. Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury and discharged 492 Jamaican migrants. The modern phase of postwar Caribbean migration was beginning. As Orwell’s essay suggests, a people who had no desire to witness the national character of Britain ‘polluted’ by foreigners, were about to come face to face with a people who fully expected to be welcomed as British subjects.

IV

One hundred and twenty-five thousand people came from the Caribbean to Britain between the years 1948 and 1958. Between 1959 and 1962, approximately another one hundred and twenty-five thousand arrived, making a grand total of about a quarter of a million. With the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, this flow slowed to a trickle. Further legislation in 1968 made immigration from the Caribbean virtually impossible. A great number of the pre-1962 migrants were actively recruited by British companies such as London Transport, or Wall’s Ice Cream, who like countless other companies in the immediate postwar years, were in desperate need of labour. Some migrants arrived with the altruistic purpose of helping the ‘mother country’, but everybody wanted to better themselves, both financially and in terms of their experience of the world. There was, of course, also the hope that their children might have a first-class education, and if this could be achieved then whatever difficulties they might endure in Britain would be worthwhile. Sadly, it did not take long for these difficulties to make themselves known. White British attitudes towards Caribbean migrants were palpable from the start. Hundreds of testimonies by these pioneer migrants speak to the indignities that were heaped upon them.

Wallace Collins, who migrated to Britain from Jamaica as a 22-year-old in 1954, eventually left for Canada eight years later, where he wrote a book about his experiences in Britain. In Jamaican Migrant Collins remembers his first Saturday night in England. ‘A big fellow with sideburns’ spotted Collins and another Jamaican friend and shouted across to them: ‘You blacks, you niggers, why don’t you go back to the jungle?’ The big fellow then lunged at Collins with a knife, and Collins ran for his life. This type of
verbal and physical abuse was the norm for Caribbean migrants to Britain in the fifties, particularly if they were young and male. Blatant discrimination in housing and employment was also a given, although the Caribbean sense of humour often found ways of staunching the pain. A character in A.G. Bennett’s book, Because They Know Not sums up how many migrants dealt with the prevailing atmosphere. The character comments:

Since I come ‘ere I never met a single English person who ‘ad any colour prejudice. Once, I walked the whole length of a street look a room, and everyone told me that he or she ‘ad no prejudice against coloured people. It was the neighbour who was stupid. If we could only find the ‘neighbour’ we could solve the entire problem. But to find ‘im is the trouble! Neighbours are the worst people to live beside in this country.

The problem, of course, was that the Britain to which Caribbean people had migrated was not the Britain that they expected to find. In 1955 the Trinidadian, Learie Constantine, who had been in Britain since the early 1930s as a revered cricketer in the Lancashire leagues, wrote about his adopted home:

After practically twenty-five years’ residence in England, where I have made innumerable white friends, I still think it would be just to say that almost the entire population of Britain really expects the coloured man to live in an inferior area devoted to coloured people, and not to have free and open choice of a living place. Most British people would be quite unwilling for a black man to enter their home, nor would they wish to work with one as a colleague, nor to stand shoulder to shoulder with one at a factory bench. This intolerance is far more marked in lower grades of English society than in high, and perhaps it disfigures the lower middle classes most of all, possibly because respectability is so dear to them. Hardly any English women and not more than a small proportion of Englishmen would sit at a restaurant table with a coloured man or woman, and inter-racial marriage is considered almost universally to be out of the question.

In the postwar years British insecurity was everywhere in evidence. Deeply anxious about her rapidly changing role in the world, and disturbed by the rapidity with which the rapacious Empire was becoming the toothless Commonwealth, Britain was having to adjust to a new relationship with countries such as India, and the new country of Pakistan. The humiliation of the Suez Crisis in 1956, suggested to both Britons, and foreign observers, that Britain’s importance as a global power was also waning. The seemingly all-pervasive influence of American mass culture simply added to Britain’s increasingly desperate self-questioning. What did it mean to be British in this postwar world of decline and retreat? Clearly in such a climate, mass immigration from the colonies served only to exacerbate the anxiety that was
already gnawing away at British society.

Eventually, and predictably, there was civil disturbance as the number of unprovoked physical attacks against Caribbean migrants grew, and the arrivants began to defend themselves. White Britons were offered precious little explanation of the fact that these ‘foreigners’ were in fact British, that they had come to help, and that astonishingly enough for a migrant group only 13% were unskilled labour and that 87% had an often highly developed trade. Instead the British public were informed by the media that yet another boatload of ‘West Indians’ had arrived ‘whose calypso flamboyance could not be chilled even by the frosty air of an English winter’. The British government, who should have been making some concerted attempt to clarify what was happening in British society, were colluding in this media-driven campaign of disinformation and obfuscation. Violence was hardly surprising when one learns that (according to Harold Macmillan’s memoirs) in 1955 the Conservative Government actually considered using the phrase ‘Keep Britain White’ as an electoral slogan. This fact is made all the more disturbing when one realizes that this was the same political party that was actively responsible for recruiting Caribbean labour to Britain.

When one looks back at the comments made by white Britons of this period about this pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants, it is clear that white British hostility was rooted in a physical distaste for black people. In other words, it was a most primitive form of racism. Questions of undercutting white people in the job market, or the living arrangements of Caribbean migrants with many people sharing a single room, or Caribbean people’s ignorance of some customs such as lining up in an orderly manner at a bus stop, or their insistence on wearing loudly coloured shirts and ties, all of these complaints are commonly directed towards new groups of immigrants at any place at any time. By contrast, the particular focus of white British hostility was unashamedly racial. The comments of a personnel officer at a London-based factory are typical; when asked about coloured workers, he replied:

We’ve found them slow and there’ve been complaints from the other men over their toilet habits. I’d rather have a strapping Irishman any day than a darkie, even if the Irish don’t stay long. After the last redundancy, it would cause a lot of trouble among the men if we took on any more coloured men or even swarthy British subjects from Egypt, so we’re not doing so.

A personnel officer at a south London garment factory was equally explicit:

We require ability or a capacity for training, and also a smart appearance. From coloured applicants, after long experience, we also require intelligibility and an appearance attractive enough not to give offence to the rest of the staff. By this I mean that they should not be unkempt or too dark or negroid-looking.
Across the centuries British identity has been primarily a racially constructed concept. The situation has been complicated by the fact that in Britain it has been the habit to conflate race and ethnicity, so that one can still be white and excluded. Therefore, although race has been used to define who is British and who is an ‘alien’, it is also true to say that ‘ethnicity’ has also been a determinant. So that at certain times in British history, being Jewish, or Catholic, or speaking with an Eastern European accent automatically stamped one out as an alien. Race and ethnicity are the bricks and mortar with which the British have traditionally built a wall around the perimeter of their island nation and created fixity. On the inside reside patriotic Britons, who are British by virtue of their race (white) and their culturally determined ethnicity. On the outside of the wall are the foreigners with their swarthy complexions, or their Judaism, or their smelly food, or their mosques, or their impenetrable accents, or their unacceptable clothes, or their tongue-twisting names, or their allegiance to Rome.

The difficulty that postwar Britain had with Caribbean migrants, as opposed to immigrants from the Indian sub-continent or from Africa, is that as an ethnic body Caribbean migrants were far more in tune with what Orwell might have understood to be the British character. They were English-speaking Christians, who had studied their Shakespeare and Wordsworth at school, and while they might like saltfish and ackee, or curry goat and jerk chicken, they seemed able to synthesize these peculiar ethnic aberrations with a broad understanding of the ways of the British. In other words, to many white Britons these Caribbean migrants were uncomfortably and surprising British, and in order to properly exclude them and reinforce their alien status, white Britons needed to accentuate the one aspect of their identity which these people could do nothing about – their race – which, of course, accounts for the perversely physiological racism to which Caribbean migrants were subjected. For white Britons the equation would henceforth be simple and blunt. British people are white. Even the hitherto unacceptable Jew, Irishman, or Pole, whose ethnicity was certainly not British, would now be acceptable for the battle was to ‘Keep Britain White’. Despite the evidence of the British passport in the hand of the Caribbean migrant, the nation could certainly agree on one thing. A black man could never be a British man.

It was precisely this point that Enoch Powell, the paterfamilias of modern British racism, was trying to make in 1968 when he made his now infamous series of speeches in which he tried to give racial prejudice a veneer of intellectual respectability. Powell claimed that Westminster was ‘betraying the nation’ by permitting immigrants to settle in Britain for, by virtue of their race, they could never be admitted as full members into that closed, fixed, club called Britain. He was furiously attempting to convince the British people that a guilt-free nationalism that was racially constructed was
synonymous with Britain's best interests. I quote Powell. 'The West Indian or Asian does not, by being born in England, become an Englishman. In law he becomes a United Kingdom citizen, by birth; in fact he is a West Indian or Asian still.' Why should this be the case when it would not be the case for a Spanish Jew or a French Canadian? The answer is simple. Because the West Indian or Asian is black, and people such as Powell were clinging on by their fingertips to the idea that Britain would always be white. As long as Britain could define membership of the British nation along racial lines, then she could continue to reside in the past and snuggle up against the cushion of her imperial history. The Powellite strategy was simple and transparent. Appealing to the lowest common denominator in British society, he wished to stigmatize Caribbean migrants as 'alien', as impossible to assimilate, as genetically 'foreign', then organize a campaign to send them back.

There is no doubt that Powell's ugly proclamations were endorsed by a large section of the British population. Almost overnight he became an icon for millions of British people who were either too shrewd or too embarrassed to publicly approve of the crude racism of self-proclaimed fascists or ignorant skinheads. Although the leader of the opposition, Edward Heath, removed him from the shadow cabinet, the nation's dockers and London's Smithfield porters downed tools and marched to the House of Commons in his support. They were supporting a man who had said the following: 'In this country in fifteen or twenty years time, the black man will have the whip hand.' He went on to quote a letter he claimed to have received about an elderly widow living in Wolverhampton: 'She finds excreta pushed through her letter box ... she is followed by children, charming, wide-grinning piccaninnies. They cannot speak English, but one word they know. "Racialist", they chant.' Powell's various speeches during 1968 were vulgar, incendiary, and calculated to cause the maximum possible damage to the lives and interests of non-white British citizens. We know now that the social catastrophe that Powell predicted never came to pass: we know that he was not only wrong statistically, but he clearly misjudged Britain and the British character. History has taught us that this was a temporary alliance of patrician eloquence with gutter racism, but back in 1968 neither black nor white Britons could be sure of what might befall them in the years to come.

VII

In 1968 I was ten years old, and the school I attended was on the Whinmoor estate in the northern part of Leeds. One morning, my friend, Terry Neat, came up to me in the school playground to tell me a joke. He claimed his dad had told him it. He said it goes like this, 'Two Pakis walking down the street singing "We Shall Overcome".' That was the joke. I don't know if I laughed. Terry definitely laughed, but I didn't get
the joke. I don't think Terry did either, but clearly his father did. This was not only the year of Powell's terrible speeches, it was the year of the death of Martin Luther King Jnr and the end of a key period in the Civil Rights struggle in the United States. Clearly there was some conflation of these two events in this joke. Our friendship survived, but the ground beneath my feet became increasingly unstable. Like all non-white children in Britain during this time I tip-toed somewhat cautiously through life knowing full well that Britain's ambivalence towards me and my parents' generation could cause a stranger, a friend, or even a teacher to turn on me when I might least expect it.

The key issue for me and my generation - the second generation, if you will - growing up in the Britain of the late sixties and seventies was identity. We spoke with the same accent as the other kids, we watched the same television programmes, we went to the same schools, we did the same exams. Surely, we were British. Well, of course we were, and eventually we insisted that we were even in the face of a nation which continued to invest in a racially-constructed sense of itself. We endured discrimination in schools, in jobs, in housing, the same discrimination that was earlier visited upon our parents. However, our response was different from that of our parents who often held their tongues in order that they might protect their children. We were invested in British society in a way in which they were not, and it was clear to us that a British future involved not only kicking back when kicked, but continuing to kick until a few doors opened and things changed. We, the second generation, had to change British society with our intransigence, or what the police force called our 'attitude', because British society was certainly not going to change of its own volition.

The inner-city disturbances of the seventies and early eighties were largely born out of the frustration of this situation. That they occurred principally in the cities of London, Liverpool and Bristol, should come as no surprise to anybody who understands the complex relationship of the past on the present. These were the three chief slaving ports of Britain during the eighteenth century, and the injustices that were perpetrated in these three cities had occasioned discontent to simmer for decades. During the late seventies I was a student at University, and I remember each night being exposed to images on the television screen, and each morning reading stories in newspapers, all of which depicted black youths, who looked just like me, as a disciplinary problem in the heart of Britain. Very seldom did these reports mention the truly appalling police harassment, the continued discrimination in housing and in the workplace, and the institutionalized racism to which we were all subjected. For a moment my generation flirted with the idea of making being 'black' the basis of our identity, as African-Americans had done in the sixties and seventies, but mercifully this unsatisfactory notion never really took hold. In the end what the second generation were actually saying, brick, bottle, stone, or
book in hand was, we are British, we won’t allow you to harass and marginalize us, and we are not going away. In fact, we don’t have anywhere else to go. And then came Mrs Thatcher.

VIII

It did not begin well. In 1978, a year before Mrs Thatcher was elected Prime Minister, she claimed that ‘the British people who have given so much to the world’ were understandably fearful of being ‘swamped by alien cultures’. Once again a British politician was attempting to invoke a racially-constructed sense of Britain, for there was no doubt that the ‘swamping’ cultures she was referring to were colour-coded. In the wake of the Falklands War, her victory address at Cheltenham on 3 July 1982 further clarified her imperial mindset:

We have learned something about ourselves, a lesson which we desperately need to learn. When we started out, there were the waverers and the fainthearts ... the people who thought we could no longer do the great things which we once did ... that we could never again be what we were. There were those who would not admit it ... But – in their heart of hearts – they too had their secret fears that it was true: that Britain was no longer the nation that had built an Empire and ruled a quarter of the world. Well, they were wrong.

This was not a comfortable speech for many Britons to listen to. For Britons, such as I, whose heritage was blighted by the inequities and cruelties of Empire, this was a disgraceful speech, and one which served only to remind us of our tenuous position in British society.

Mrs Thatcher’s Britain was invested in images of Britain as a colonial power – ‘Put the “Great” back into Great Britain again’ was a popular Tory Party campaign slogan. However, alongside her desire to evoke an imperial past, Mrs Thatcher was also interested in hurrying the demise of the ‘well-born’ as a ruling force in British society. The self-made businessman, the upwardly mobile person who has no time for patrician codes of behaviour, or blue-veined privilege, or bumbling one-party Toryism, this would be the type of Conservative who would win favour under Mrs Thatcher. Her desire to modernize the nation by dismantling the Welfare State and selling off state-owned industry, meant that economic considerations began to play a large part in Mrs Thatcher’s perception of who and what was British and patriotic. And, ironically enough, despite her imperial sensibility, it was Mrs Thatcher who eventually took the first real step in moving Britain away from a primarily racially-constructed definition of British nationality and belonging.

In 1983 the Conservative Government produced an election poster which featured a full-page advertisement of a nattily dressed young black man in a suit, with his arms folded, and staring confidently into the lens of the
camera. The slogan beneath it read, 'Labour says he's black, Tories say he's British'. Suddenly there were to be acceptable 'aliens', such as profitable Asian businessmen and upwardly mobile black men in suits, which meant that there would also be unacceptable 'aliens', presumably those who still had the temerity to go to the mosque, or wear dreadlocks. However, Mrs Thatcher's new idea of British nationality, with its dependency on economic virility and on codes of behaviour, was clearly to be culturally and not racially constructed. Her new nation of hard-working, ordinary people, who were being encouraged to forget their 'place' and 'make it' in what she called her 'property-owning democracy', was to include non-white Britons for Mrs Thatcher was more invested in the realpolitik of the city than she was in the racism of her home counties electorate.

During the eighties, television stations and local councils began appointing executives whose special duty was to cater to this newly-recognized, and now to be tolerated, constituency of non-white British citizens. It was during this decade that the first black members of parliament were elected, and non-white faces began to play for and even captain national sports teams. In music and fashion, black became synonymous with style, and although the racism which had greeted the pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants still existed, it was impossible not to recognize that for the black British community things had changed for the better. Mrs Thatcher still continued to identify enemies within – the IRA, the 'Loony Left', Scroungers, Do-Gooders, and Trade Unions – but even as she rewarded the working classes with neo-Georgian doors, double-glazing, and carriage clocks with which they might adorn their newly purchased council flats and houses, Mrs Thatcher was also creating a space for the black community in Britain to begin to come of age.

So fifty years after the S.S. Empire Windrush unloaded 492 Jamaicans at Tilbury docks, what kind of society do we have in Britain today? Most would probably claim that we have a multicultural society, but do so without stopping to think about what they really mean by multicultural. The word can, of course, refer to a society that is composed of many different cultures all living side by side. Or it can refer to a society whose common culture is composed of an amalgam of the interests and origins of its constituent members. The first alternative, while implying a healthy respect for the cultures of different people, can never really work. In such societies there will always be one dominant culture, and a hotchpotch of others which are, by definition, lesser; cultures which will be merely tolerated until some parent leads a boycott against the local school because it encourages its children to recognize divali; or until some police cadet finally sniggers out loud when being shown how the Sikh community tie their turbans.
A truly multicultural society is one which is composed of multicultural individuals; people who are able to synthesize different worlds in one body, and to live comfortably with these different worlds. In order for a society to tolerate such individuals, the society must by definition be open, fluid, and confident. In other words, the society must be everything that Britain was not when the first Caribbean migrants stepped off the ships in the forties and fifties. This pioneer generation met a Britain that was no longer sure of herself, a Britain which sought to define herself by strategies of exclusion, a Britain fearful of her shrinking role in the world. Should these same Caribbean migrants step from the trans-Atlantic ships today they would meet a different Britain in which a government who would discuss using ‘Keep Britain White’ as an electoral slogan could never hope to be elected, and would probably be violating the law of the land. While things are still far from perfect, and while Stephen Lawrence’s killers still walk free, and while we still endure huge under-representation in government, in the city, in the universities, in all spheres of power in this country, then the dream which those pioneer Caribbean migrants carried in their hearts will have to be deferred. However, there is no doubt that in the past fifty years Britain has changed, and it has changed radically.

Most Britons are no longer interested in the aimless navel-gazing of a George Orwell. And those who persist in defining British nationality in terms of race must become terribly confused when Paul Ince leads out the England soccer team, or Linford Christie does a lap of honour draped in the Union Jack. Young British people, both black and white, are these days increasingly invested in ethnicity as a signifier of their identity rather than crude notions of race. They are able to synthesize Wordsworth with Jamaican patties, or Romeo and Juliet with the music of Bob Marley, and happily many of the pioneer generation who stepped from the ships in the forties and fifties have lived long enough to see these changes. This pioneer generation should take heart in their achievement, for the reimagining of Britain is the logical extension of their arrival in the country. Because they refused to be beaten into submission by a country which patently had no desire to welcome them, and because they refused to conveniently disappear or slope off back to where they came from, British concern with a continuous past, with fixity, with a racially conscious rigidity, is these days playing an increasingly small part in how the nation thinks of itself.

So how should we ‘ethnically’ define ourselves as a nation? A synthesis of Indian takeaways, baked beans, soccer, Jamaican patties, St. Patrick’s Day, pub on Saturday, Notting Hill Carnival, church on Sunday, Mosque on Friday, and fish and chips? I say emphatically, yes. The inability to achieve proper closure around an ethnically defined concept of nation will inevitably
cause more closed-minded citizens some problems. But better an open, fluid definition of nationality tied to ethnicity than a return to a situation where race and nation are perceived of as being synonymous. Should this happen then we will once again find ourselves surrounded by people such as Norman Tebbit, the former chairman of the Conservative party, who like some inept number eleven batsman will insist on occasionally slouching out of the pavilion. In November 1997 he stood up in the House of Lords and said that ‘different cultures will splinter our society’. And of course, being staunchly of the old school, by different cultures he meant different races. A day or so later the Daily Telegraph felt it necessary to admonish one of their own. ‘Norman Tebbit was not quite right about multiculturalism ... A child with a Welsh father and a mother from Ulster can eat Indian food, listen to reggae, and watch Italian football without experiencing cultural confusion and political alienation’. Precisely.

I would argue that whereas George Orwell claimed that, ‘It needs some very great disaster, such as prolonged subjugation by a foreign enemy, to destroy a national culture’, the truth is that it needs some very great fortune such as continual waves of immigration to create a national culture. And one of the most important waves of migration in the second half of the twentieth century has been the arrival of Caribbean migrants to Britain after the Second World War. Not only did they help to rebuild Britain with their labour, they made Britain think beyond Derby Day, Wensleydale Cheese, and the Boat Race as signifiers of national identity. As a nation we are now reluctantly post-colonial, but stubbornly pre-European. While it was the pioneer generation of Caribbean migrants who helped to introduce Britain to the notion of post-coloniality, it is their children’s and grandchildren’s generation who will help Britain cross the Rubicon of the English Channel and enter the European age of the twenty-first century. But this will be a different story. Fifty years ago the S.S. Empire Windrush dropped anchor at Tilbury docks and discharged 492 Jamaicans. It is these individuals, and the quarter of a million who succeeded them, who deserve our acknowledgement, respect and gratitude for as they stood on the deck of the ship and stared out at the white cliffs of Dover, they carried within their hearts a dream. And like all great pioneers, in the face of great adversity and innumerable obstacles, they remained true to their dream. Without them this country would be a poorer place. Without them I would not be on this platform. I stand here on their shoulders.