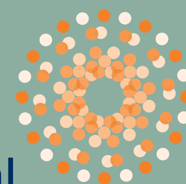
Global Exchange Briefings



How has Britain's Post-War Experience of Immigration Shaped the Contemporary Debate on Integration?

Britain's post-war debate on integration was transformed by new and unprecedented immigration from its colonies and former colonies. Britain became a much more ethnically diverse population during the Second World War. Alongside traffic from continental Europe (Jewish refugees, European armies in exile, POWs) came troops and workers from Africa, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, India and the Caribbean. After 1945 decolonisation was the trigger for the inward migration of formerly colonised peoples to Britain, France, Portugal, Belgium, the Netherlands and Italy. The empire was suddenly no longer "out there". In Britain, half a million people arrived from beyond Europe between 1953-1962 (272,450 from West Indies; 75,850 from India; 67,330 from Pakistan). By the mid-1970s there were 1.5 million "New Commonwealth" immigrants": 3% of Britain's population and a third of its total number of immigrants. Their presence reframed the debate in Britain on the subject of integration.

Reframing the debate on integration

Across Europe these postcolonial migrations led to new and different cultural encounters for "host" populations. The values and concepts which today inform our understanding of cultural diversity are, therefore, a direct inheritance from the imperial past. At a time when many of these values and concepts are felt to hinder rather than help the acceptance of religious and ethnic difference, it is vital to revisit the formative context in which they emerged. In Britain the post-war debate about integration was framed by four factors:

- How the British people came to terms with the loss of empire
- Intensifying pressures on social welfare provision, especially housing
- The testing of liberal assumptions about immigration, as the "convergence hypothesis" (the idea that the longer immigrants stayed the more likely they were to integrate) came to be displaced by the idea of a "threshold of safety" (below which "absorption" could be achieved, above which lurked the danger of persistent social conflict)
- International influences, particularly from America, as well as the consideration of "Commonwealth sentiment"

Languages of integration

"Integration", "assimilation" and "multiculturalism" were the major responses to post-war immigration. Far from being singular concepts, "integration" and "multiculturalism" carried multiple meanings. Integration was spoken of in three ways:

- *Residential*: Reducing the inner city concentration of immigrants and its perceived consequences for their interaction with / acceptance by wider society.
- *Structural*: Overcoming the barriers to integration in employment, education and housing. This notion of "integration" was the basis for the anti-discrimination legislation of 1965, 1968 and 1976, championed by the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination but later criticised for taking potential Asian and West Indian leaders out of their communities to work for government-sponsored welfare organisations and thereby retarding immigrant political activism.
- *Cultural*: The values shared by "host" and "immigrant" communities. This is where "integration" merged with "assimilation" (the view that social stability required minority cultures to accept the beliefs and practices of the majority). "Assimilation" dominated press coverage of the 1958 Nottingham and

Notting Hill race riots and was the basis for a "one-way" interpretation of integration. Such an interpretation did not go unchallenged. In a high profile by-election in 1964, Labour MP and Foreign Secretary, Patrick Gordon Walker, dared to suggest to Smethwick's voters that it was they who should make the social adjustments necessary to integrate "coloured citizens". His Conservative opponent rounded on him, calling for a "homogenous Britain", "peaceful co-existence" and complete ban on further immigration. Walker lost his seat.

These three understandings of integration shared:

- *An understanding of "Commonwealth immigrants" as a "problem":* A problem placing undue strain on welfare, causing resentment among the host population, and who could only be integrated into wider British society by checking the total number of arrivals (Acts restricting immigration were passed in 1962, 1968, and 1971)
- *A tendency to narrate the migrant as a "stranger":* Emphasising a social distance between established and newly arrived communities which left little grounds for optimism about migrants' ability to integrate.

Two historical snapshots of the post-war integration debate: Maurice Foley and Enoch Powell

Two key figures can be taken to illustrate this debate about post-war integration:

Maurice Foley: a neglected but central figure in the debate during the critical decade of the 1960s. Foley (Labour MP, West Bromwich) was given the very tricky post of Under-Secretary at the Home Office with special responsibility for immigrants (1965-7) just as the debate on immigration reached its greatest intensity. Foley declared the "integration of immigrants" to be "one of the great questions of the age in which we live".

Enoch Powell (Conservative MP, 1950-74) attained greatest prominence from a controversial and widely publicised attack on immigration in April 1968 – the so-called "Rivers of Blood" speech ("As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood.") As a result Powell was dismissed from his position as Shadow Defence Secretary. His speech aimed to cast doubt over the capacity of certain types of immigrant (those from the Commonwealth) to integrate. Opinion polls at the time suggested substantial public support for Powell's opinions about integration.

Conclusion: Policy tensions / crisis of multiculturalism

The end of empire was just as important as the UK's relationship with the Common Market/ EU was later to be in challenging and changing ideas about who should have the opportunity to live in Britain. By the early 1970s, in the context of decolonisation, four key fault lines in Britain's debate about integration had been established:

- Interventionist policies to promote integration versus a laissez-faire tradition in which politicians were reluctant to target special welfare provision for immigrants for fear of the electoral backlash if they were treated as a privileged class.
- A desire to integrate immigrants versus policies that served to reinforce rather than diminish segregation (e.g. the allocation of less desirable inner city social housing; the compulsory registration of lodging houses).
- Those who supported dispersal of immigrants versus those who were uncomfortable with such a policy on the grounds it was resented by immigrants.
- And, above all, a more pluralistic idea of national identity, which saw multiculturalism as a mode of integration (the basis for which could not simply be conformity to majority norms), versus a homogenous national identity, which held multiculturalism (and its emphasis on cultural protection and ethnicity as the basis for political recognition) to be responsible for separation and segregation.

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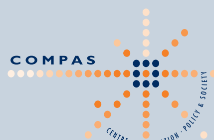

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