



British Politics and Society

WINDRUSH (1948) AND RIVERS OF BLOOD (1968)

LEGACY AND ASSESSMENT

Edited by
Trevor Harris



Windrush (1948) and Rivers of Blood (1968)

This volume looks at Britain since 1948 – the year when the *Empire Windrush* brought a group of 492 hopeful Caribbean immigrants to the United Kingdom. “Post-war Britain” may still be the most common label attached to studies in contemporary British history, but the contributors to this book believe that “post-Windrush Britain” has an explanatory power which is equally useful. The objective is to study the Windrush generation and Enoch Powell’s now infamous speech not only in their original historical context but also as a key element in the political, social and cultural make-up of today’s Britain. Contributions to the book use a diversity of approaches: from the lucid, forward-looking assessment by Trevor Phillips, which opens the volume; through Patrick Vernon’s account of the legacy of Powell’s speech in Birmingham and how it inspired him to launch a national campaign for Windrush Day; to the plea from novelist and playwright Chris Hannan for a fully inclusive, national conversation to help overturn deeply ingrained prejudice in all parts of our society.

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British Politics and Society

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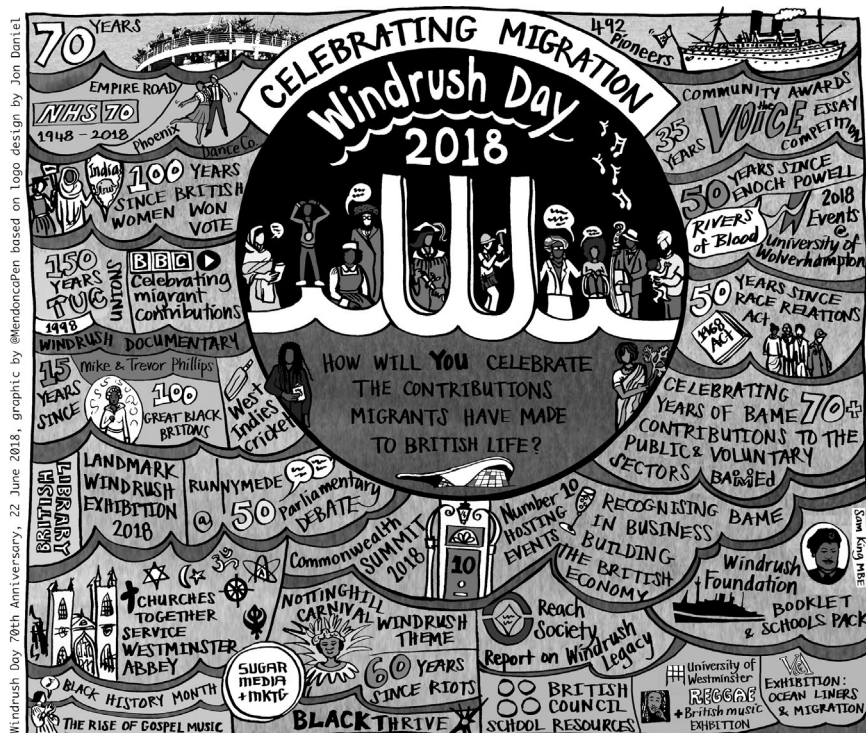
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standards” (in *Pre-trial Detention in 20th and 21st Century Common Law and Civil Law Systems*, edited by M. Charret-Del Bove and F. Mourlon, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014).

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Preface

This volume looks at Britain since 1948 – the year when the *Empire Windrush* brought a group of 492 hopeful Caribbean migrants to the United Kingdom. “Post-war Britain” may still be – and understandably so – a common label attached to studies in contemporary British history, but the contributors to this book believe and collectively argue that “post-Windrush Britain” may possess an explanatory power and validity which is at least as useful.

Enoch Powell claimed in 1968 that, following mass migration to Britain from the Commonwealth, the ensuing “total transformation” of Britain would turn its long-resident population into “the unwanted.” In the context of a Britain mired in the social and political turmoil induced by Brexit, the migration theme so close to Powell’s heart has taken on even greater relevance and urgency: for some proponents of Britain’s exit from the EU, controlling migration – or “freedom of movement” – appears fundamental to Britain’s success, perhaps even, for a minority, to her very survival. Yet, an investigation of some of the longer-term legacies of Windrush and Powell helps us to see, notably in the wake of the successful campaign in favour of “Windrush Day” as a national celebration, that there is just a little “Black in the Union Jack”; a presence which, though still contested, is now part of an established and increasingly nuanced diversity.

Whatever one’s personal view on this may be, there is now widespread recognition of the obvious fact that the arrival of the *Windrush* signalled the onset of a social evolution which has fundamentally altered the nature of the United Kingdom. Peter Hennessy, in his seminal social history *Never Again: Britain 1945–51* (1992), underlines that “the great wave of post-war migration from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom can symbolically be said to have begun with that fateful [*Windrush*] voyage. The history of the black diaspora in Britain begins here.” True, the *Windrush* was not the first ship to bring Caribbean migrants to Britain: in March 1947 the *Ormonde* sailed from Jamaica to Liverpool with 108 passengers on board, and on 21 December 1947 the *Almanzora* sailed into Southampton. But it is *Windrush* and the “Windrush generation” which have now come to symbolise the significance of this change.

The unease and discomfort provoked at Westminster by the arrival of the *Windrush* was evident even before the boat docked. Arthur Creech Jones, Secretary of State for the Colonies, was moved to express fears about public disorder. The

British government even wondered whether the ship might be turned back. The political legacy of such an attitude at the very heart of British government could scarcely be anything other than ambiguous, at best.

The main aim of this book is, accordingly, to assess the inherent tensions in the legacy of “new” Commonwealth migration to Britain, heralded by the arrival of the *Windrush* and codified by the British Nationality Act the same year. It is an ambiguous, and often divisive, legacy which has lain more or less dormant deep within British society ever since but which has, of course, more recently been the focus of sustained press and public attention. The “Windrush scandal” and the embarrassing government U-turn which it provoked are the most obvious manifestations of this. And the divisions within British society opened up by the presence and the treatment of the Windrush generation show no real signs of disappearing: on the contrary, they now seem more present, more visible than at any time since 1948. Understanding the prominence of the migration question necessarily involves an investigation into the Windrush generation itself, as well as reactions to their presence in the United Kingdom over the following decades. Indeed, one of the main consequences of the Windrush generation’s presence was to launch a national, and continuing, debate about British identity.

An iconic moment in this debate was undoubtedly Enoch Powell’s so-called “Rivers of Blood” speech in April 1968, the local, national and international impact of which we wish to investigate in relation to the Windrush generation. Like Windrush, the impact of Powell’s speech has continued to spread outwards from 1968, right up to the present day: posters and banners proclaiming “Enoch was right” still appear during demonstrations in Britain against migration. The novelist, Hanif Kureishi, writing in *The Guardian* in December 2014, looking on from the other side of the argument, admitted that “It’s impossible not to summon [Powell’s] ghost now that immigration is once again the subject of national debate.”¹

Our main objective is therefore to study the Windrush generation and Powell’s now infamous intervention – in their original context but also, and more importantly, their legacy down to the present day – as a key element in Britain’s contemporary political, social and cultural history. This approach is intended to emphasise the continuities between the two themes, on the one hand and, on the other, suggest the importance of their relationship to the deep malaise in British society which became apparent during the Brexit referendum debate and after. As the Liberal Democrat peer Lord Dholakia has put it, “few other political issues raise the same tensions and emotions as immigration and its implications for ‘Britishness.’”² In bringing Windrush and Powell together in this way, this book aspires, then, to show how, taken together, they can be analysed and assessed as founding events in the emergence of Britain’s multicultural society and that, whatever the supposed successes or failures of that society may be,³ reactions to Windrush and Powell themselves embody a peculiarly British response: those reactions, that very debate, are in themselves a fundamental constituent of today’s “Britishness.”

The contributions to this book are revised versions of papers delivered at a conference held to mark the fiftieth anniversary of Powell’s speech and the seventieth

anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in Britain.⁴ The first part of the book deals with testimonies from the Windrush generation, reactions to Powell's speech and the interplay between them. Part II documents the ways in which post-war Britain has been enriched by post-Windrush culture. Part III steps outside that framework and aims to demonstrate how the transition to a post-imperial/multicultural society was managed elsewhere.

The conference, from the outset, was conceived and designed to bring together the widest possible range of contributors: sociologists, historians, specialists of literature and cultural studies and leading figures from outside academia who have worked and campaigned for many years to promote dialogue, equality and human rights in Britain – notably in relation to the Windrush generation. The result was an extremely rich exchange over two days which highlighted the many points of filiation between Windrush, Powell and present-day attitudes to migration in Britain. It also underlined the obvious complementarity of the contributions from different disciplines. The chapters which follow faithfully reflect that diversity of approaches: from the lucid, forward-looking assessment by Trevor Phillips, which opens the volume; through Patrick Vernon's account of the legacy of Powell's speech in Birmingham and how it inspired a national campaign for Windrush Day; to the plea from the novelist and playwright Chris Hannan in favour of an all-inclusive national conversation to help to overturn deeply ingrained prejudices in all parts of our society.

These three were joined by researchers from France, Britain, Spain and the United States who have studied international migration (Hoerder, Latour, Puzzo); its social and political impact in Britain (Baptiste, Blackman, Shiels); and its prodigious contribution to British cultural theory (Navarro), poetry, fiction, drama (Cudicio, Misrahi, Ranguin), music and the visual arts (Bousquet, Marin-Lamellet, Wallart). The overall effect is to create a tribute to the prolific diversity of contemporary Britain, a diversity celebrated in the illustrations by Pen Mendonça included in this book.⁵

Notes

- 1 www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/12/enoch-powell-hanif-kureishi
- 2 House of Lords *Hansard* 18 January 2018 Vol 788 Col 52 GC. Lord Dholakia placed this remark, however, in a resolutely upbeat assessment of the Windrush legacy: "We now see a cultural pluralism that has emerged. If this is the legacy of Commonwealth migration, we should welcome it. The legacy has demonstrated that if properly handled, migration is to be valued and promoted, not regarded as a source of fear. A progressive liberal approach would value differences and cultural pluralism."
- 3 David Cameron, at the Munich Security Conference in February 2011, publicly announced that Britain had "allowed the weakening of [its] collective identity" as a consequence of "state multiculturalism," the latter having given rise to "segregated communities." To rectify the situation Cameron claimed that it was time "to turn the page on the failed policies of the past." www.youtube.com/watch?v=VsGQvOq8cEs
- 4 The conference was held at the University of Amiens in northern France (*Université de Picardie Jules Verne*) in May 2018. It was jointly financed by the research centre "CORPUS" (www.u-picardie.fr/unites-de-recherche/corpus/presentation/) based in the

university's English Department, by the university Research Committee, and by the *Hauts de France* region. The editor would like to acknowledge the key role of Marie-José Ruiz – senior lecturer in British Studies at Amiens – in the conception and preparation of the conference; the success of the event was to a very considerable degree the result of her excellent work.

- 5 www.penmendonca.com/ Dr Penelope Mendonça is an independent graphic facilitator and cartoonist with more than twenty years' experience in the private and voluntary sectors. Originally from New Zealand, of mixed heritage, Pen has developed the concept of Values-Based Cartooning as a research method for accessing and representing social issues. The editor would like to thank the artist very sincerely for her generous permission to use the illustrations. The illustration on page 46 also references the Windrush Day logo created by the late Jon Daniel, a pioneering and highly celebrated British creative of African Caribbean heritage.



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Part I

Windrush and Powell

Context, reaction, testimony



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1 2048

Europe one hundred years on from Windrush

Trevor Phillips OBE

Introduction

It is a privilege to be asked to join the contributors to this volume in reflecting on two historic moments in the British story: the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* and the controversy surrounding Enoch Powell's 1968 speech, now commonly referred to as "Rivers of Blood."

I suppose that it is not too fanciful to add to that a third equally significant event: the marriage of the couple we should now call the Duke and Duchess of Sussex – more popularly known as Meghan and Harry – and the creation of the first modern day Duchess of colour. I know that there will be mixed feelings about this – I shall share some of my own later – but there is no doubt that this is a symbolic moment to rival the first two.

In each case the headline story asked some profound questions of the nation. In the case of Windrush, about Britain's response to modern migration; in the aftermath of Powell's speech, we were challenged to map out a viable approach to racial and cultural integration; and now we are confronted by the reality of irresistible demographic change that in and of itself is transforming what it means to be black and British – and not in entirely obvious ways. Some of the effects have yet to be made plain.

The myth of the *Windrush*

When I say myth, I do not mean, of course, that the boat was not real: it was. But it was not the only ship of its kind, and I do not think its story was unique. There was also the *Georgic*, and the *Orbita* for example, which landed in Liverpool. But the *Windrush* has become emblematic.

In our book *Windrush: The Irresistible Rise of Multi-Racial Britain* (1998), my brother Michael and I traced the story of the iconic boat which brought 492 Caribbean migrants to the United Kingdom in June 1948. When we chose the *Windrush* as a platform from which to tell the story of post-war Caribbean migration we were, to be honest, more driven by the fact of a convenient anniversary, the brilliant stories of the once young men who crowded its decks, and the historic footage available.

But the truth is that almost before we had published, and the documentary series had been broadcast, the legend of the *Windrush* had escaped our grasp, and like all powerful myths, it had left its authors far behind in its wake. 'Twas ever thus. And the power of the myth was again proven during the spring of 2018.

I am the child of immigrants who believed deeply in the values of the nation into which they were born over a century ago. Both are now gone, but I have no doubt that both of my late parents would be bewildered and outraged by the treatment of the children of the *Windrush* generation by Britain's bureaucracy.

Many of those children could be the offspring of my parents' friends, and indeed, any one of my older brothers or sisters could be faced with the desperate situation confronting tens of thousands of *Windrush* babies today: impoverishment, incarceration, or in some cases involuntary repatriation to countries they have never really known. As many as 57,000 of my fellow British citizens are, in effect, being abandoned to statelessness, being excluded from the health care for which they have paid all their lives, and even risk being detained and then deported to countries they hardly know. My parents would regard this treatment as a betrayal of that most fundamental trait of the British: a desire for fair play. And most British people agree with that point of view.

The government's desperate scramble to retrieve some semblance of credibility, if anything, made matters worse. It is evident that had it not been for the presence of dozens of Commonwealth Heads of Government, and had ministers not been held to account by the media, I suspect they would have dismissed the whole matter as a small storm in a Caribbean teacup. The casual disregard shown to people who have been unfortunate enough to be caught in this colonial time warp evokes the contempt so characteristic of the empire into which my parents were born.

All this is being done to the single minority ethnic group which is more likely than any other to intermarry with native white Brits. It is a laughable irony that just weeks after publishing its green paper purporting to offer a "vision for building strong integrated communities" we discovered that many hundreds of individuals from the most highly assimilated minority in the United Kingdom were being shown the door.

The campaign mounted by *The Guardian*, *The Daily Mail* and others evidently rattled Whitehall. But until white journalists and politicians took up the cause, the bureaucrats offered little more than a bored shrug of the shoulders. Of course, this is the familiar experience of people of colour. There is never any shortage of sanctimonious twaddle about Whitehall's commitment to diversity. Yet when confronted with an opportunity to act in the interests of minorities, the machine freezes – and puts the lives of tens of thousands of British people on ice.

I believe that this is exactly the kind of situation where the importance of human rights should trump the neat simplicities of immigration regulation. Yet it seems that our government was ready to act out its hypocrisy to the detriment of people who have given everything to our country. Theresa May spoke repeatedly of burning injustices. This one should still be searing a hole in her conscience.

But we know where all this came from. Home Office officials were not alone in believing that a hard line on dark-skinned folks would strike a chord with the

British people. In fact, it produced a crashing dissonance, but for fifty years, the orthodox view was that underneath every true Brit there lies a seething bigot. And that belief stems above all from one single moment: the reaction to the 1968 “Rivers of Blood” speech.

“Rivers of Blood”

It is certainly true that the sentiments expressed by Enoch Powell were not peculiar to him. What he said reflected one aspect of an underlying unease about race amongst Britons of all kinds. That did not make him right, but it would be wrong not to acknowledge that Powell’s public rhetoric reflected the private thoughts of many white Britons.

This unease was felt very differently by black families like my own. And felt to the extent that, the year before the speech, my own parents decided that the friendly shore to which they had sailed in 1950 had turned into a hostile frontier.

My family had arrived in the early 1950s with the brightest of hopes. They went to work with gusto in the Post Office, North London sweatshops and the NHS. They got used to bad breaks and rolled with the punches. For many, what they found in the promised land was not streets paved with gold but drudgery, disappointment and discrimination.

By the mid-1960s my mother, who had coped with years of Rachman-style landlords and dreary shift work, decided she’d had enough.¹ After all, she reasoned if you found yourself at a party where you were not welcome you should not hang around. In 1967 my family left for the United States; they sent me back to Guyana. So, on 20 April 1968, I, and most of my siblings, had already departed for less menacing territory. But when we read about Mr Powell’s speech, we knew exactly what was happening.

The sentiments in Powell’s speech had been muttered quietly in workplaces, painted surreptitiously on walls, blustered openly in pubs for years. They were daily translated into the language of the playground, which christened every black- or brown-skinned child “coon-features” or “nig-nog” or “wog-face.”

My brother was chased home by Teddy boys. We learned quickly about the unspoken subtleties of racism. Some houses you just could not go into, and some kids were just not allowed to come to yours. My sister found the girl she thought was her best friend had thrown a birthday party and somehow forgotten to invite her.

Some of this behaviour was not subtle at all. As a skinny, opinionated, probably too-clever-by-half black kid, one of only half a dozen or so in my grammar school, I learnt the value of knuckledusters from my friend – let’s call him Winston – at the secondary modern across the way. You could borrow them for those days when you thought the bigger boys might corner you in the playground and you would not be able to talk your way out of trouble.

So even though I was thousands of miles away at the time, I understood the Britain into which Powell’s speech was launched only too well.

Other contributors to this volume comment extensively on Enoch Powell’s words that day. But, although the moment that took place fifty years ago mattered,

I believe that what took place in the years afterwards mattered much more. Not because there were “Rivers of Blood,” or were ever likely to be, but because the shockwave that followed still reverberates through our society and influences the behaviour of today’s political and media elites.

Most people start their analysis of this speech by asserting that Powell was wrong. That is not entirely true. We may disagree with his conclusions, but as far as the facts are concerned, we know now that some of his forecasts were within hailing distance of reality. He suggested that there would be five to seven million Commonwealth immigrants in the United Kingdom by the year 2000; official figures say that there are today over nine million foreign-born residents in the United Kingdom.

But what was important in that speech was not the population predictions but the principles it set out. In the years that followed, others created a doctrine in his name that tried to build on and justify those principles. Today we would call that doctrine “Powellism,” and it is Powellism that I want to address today rather than Powell himself.

Powellism and why it failed

At the heart of this doctrine are three key propositions. First, racial integration is impossible. Powell called it “a dangerous delusion.” Powellism argued that people of different races and traditions cannot, by their very nature, ever enjoy good relations unless the majority race or tradition is numerically so dominant that the minority eventually gives up all aspects of its special identity. We would today call this assimilation. In effect Powellites believed that we are all prisoners of our race, our heritage or our religious beliefs.

The second article of the Powellite faith was that every single immigrant, no matter what skills and resource they bring, is one too many and adds to social fragmentation. There is no evidence or logic here, but neither is a feature of this doctrine. And the corollary is that if you can get rid of some – or all – immigrants by repatriation then you are on the way to creating a better society.

Third, if for some reason you are forced to accommodate different kinds of people in one society, then you must ensure, by any means necessary, an overwhelming cultural domination by one group, preferably the majority, so that all other traditions wither on the vine. This is socially engineered assimilation pure and simple, and it goes with repugnance towards any law that protects the rights of minorities.

So how have these principles survived the past fifty years? We have certainly seen violent incidents involving different racial groups. Some have been monstrous. But have we as a nation been consumed by racial war? Did we repudiate integration?

I think I would take the word of Mr Powell’s most famous protégé, that the racial rivers of blood never materialised. Margaret Thatcher robustly refused to attribute the riots in 1981 and 1985 to a fundamental incompatibility between races. She instead cited economic causes – unemployment and urban decay.

Indeed, it was she who memorably said on the night of her 1987 victory that her government's first task would be to regenerate the inner cities.

Our true British instinct has been shown time and again in times of crisis: after the 1980s disturbances, the Northern riots in 2001, after the 7/7 bombings in 2005, the attacks in Manchester, Westminster Bridge and Borough market in 2017, we chose not to isolate and attack the minority but to respond with unity and compassion rather than conflict.

Yet the fear that followed Powellism still stalks Britain. And the principles that underlay Powellism governed political debate about immigration and race until very recently. And even now the fifty-year shadow persists, even though it has largely achieved the opposite of what the Powellites hoped.

To begin with, Powellites wanted to make immigration the touchstone political issue. In fact, for four decades serious political debate about immigration and race has been suppressed.

On the right, immigration has remained a taboo subject: Conservatives fear being associated with Powellism and condemned as racist. The right's public justification for reticence is usually that political correctness has unfairly silenced them. Somewhat comically, this point of view has been widely and consistently peddled by writers, and publications which hardly ever stop yelling about immigration, only pausing from time to time to complain that they are being gagged, before resuming a deafening roar of outrage.

But the left, too, has played its part in this deadly silence. Centre-left politicians have, since the late 1960s, persuaded themselves that immigration is an issue which favours the right. The left still fears that a free and open debate on these issues would lead to the release of a caged beast of an essentially reactionary public opinion.

So, for fifty years we have, by mutual consent, sustained a political silence on the one issue where British people most needed articulate political leadership.

But the shockwave of fear has not just affected what politicians said. It also critically determined what they did. And that, too, has mostly been the opposite of what the Powellites hoped.

To start with, by closing down debate about immigration, they allowed successive governments to avoid having much of a policy at all. In essence, Powellism so discredited any talk of planning that we have limped along with an ad hoc approach to immigration whose only consistent aspect has been its racial bias; a non-policy that may have led to Britain admitting more immigrants rather than fewer over this period.

Worse still, the Powellite attack on integration so scared lazy officialdom that they colluded with old-guard ethnic leaders to warp a progressive and very British recognition of diversity in the early 1980s into a bureaucratic version of multiculturalism which today keeps many communities closed and separate. We know the result: people who want to scale the cultural walls that separate them are blocked by institutions which insist on pigeonholing them by their race, colour and religion.

And in the end Powellism failed in its most important aim: to demonstrate the prophetic vision that ethnic diversity would lead to chaos and hatred. It just has not happened.

According to the government's citizenship survey in 2007, 81% of people in England agreed that their local area is a place where people of different backgrounds get on well together. Of course, this may reflect the English propensity to get on with other people by not talking to them at all.

So why, given the impact of its launch speech, did Powellism fail so dismally as a political project? I think there are three reasons.

First, the doctrine utterly failed to understand the essential attitude of British people to difference. We are not racists. How could we be? We are an ancient multilingual state forged from at least four different ethnicities, with a people built on and used to intermarriage, compromise and negotiation.

Our defining monarch, Elizabeth I, set out the doctrine of toleration, asserting, according to Sir Francis Bacon, that she would not open a window into men's souls. That is to say that this is a nation which would not judge people according to their faith, as long as they followed the rule of law and observed the common good. This lies at the heart of the live and let live philosophy that makes cities like London and Birmingham vibrant, multicultural places.

And when we get it right, British tolerance is not some grim passive acceptance of difference. It is an active enjoyment of different food, music and ways of worship, for example. And at its finest it is allied to a passion for justice that has become part of our culture, perhaps best summed up in the expression "standing up for the underdog."

I think the second reason for the Powellites' failure is that they wanted to promote a British identity rooted in an empire that by 1968 was already in rapid decline.

And finally, perhaps most important of all, the Powellites fatally confused race and immigration. We can see today why this is a mistake. In the last decade, when we have had higher net immigration than at any time in the past forty years, large numbers are white. As is pointed out elsewhere in this volume, the three largest groups of foreign-born British residents are Polish and Romanian and Irish – not much room for racial agitation there.

On the basis of Powellite doctrine we should welcome today's immigrants, since they dilute even further the non-white presence here. A true Powellite should today be encouraging more, not less, migration from eastern Europe. In fact, anti-immigrant groups still don't quite know what to say about the Poles.

So, in short, after fifty years I think we can say with confidence that we do not need to ask if Powellism was ever right. All we need to know is that it is wrong now. That story is over. Goodbye Alf Garnett.

19 May 2018

So, let me turn now to my third historic moment.

On 19 May 2018 something important happened in Windsor that will, I suspect, symbolise a profound change in Britain that will be spoken about long after even the *Windrush* is reduced to an obscure pub quiz question.

In the days both before and after the wedding of the Duke and Duchess, I was asked what it meant for the country as a whole, for the Royal Family, for black Britons. In truth, my answer is – not very much.