

A New World Order

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 125,000 arrived, making a grand total of about 250,000. With the passing of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, this flow slowed to a trickle¹. 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, which, 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 them². (...)

The difficulty that postwar Britain had with Caribbean migrants, as opposed to immigrants from the Indian subcontinent 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 curried goat and jerk chicken, they seemed to be able to synthesise 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 surprisingly British, and in order properly to 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 blunt³. 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 veneer⁴ of intellectual respectability.

Caryl Phillips, *A New World Order*, Secker and Warburg, 2001

1. **trickle:** (fig.) numero esiguo.
2. **that were heaped upon them:** di cui venivano ricoperti.
3. **blunt:** schietto.
4. **veneer:** apparenza.

► Understanding the text

1 Answer these questions.

1. How many people came from the Caribbean to the UK in the years 1948-1962?
2. What happened in 1962 and how did this affect the migration?
3. Why was immigration welcomed by the British until 1962?
4. Why might migration have been attractive for Caribbeans?
5. What was the general attitude of the British towards these immigrants?

6. Why were Caribbean immigrants 'particular' according to the author?
7. How did white Britons react to this?
8. Which other ethnic groups are mentioned in the extract? What was different about them?

Beyond the text

- 2** Do you agree with what the author is saying about the particular character of the Caribbean? Do you not think that the same logic could also be applied to those who came from India and from Africa for example? Explain your answer.
- 3** The author mentions various Caribbean culinary specialities. Using the Internet find out which country they are taken from and how they are prepared.