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'Race' and 'nation' in the welfare state

Fiona Williams

The 1945–51 Labour government debated the desirability of importing workers from the Black Commonwealth in terms of their economic cheapness compared with other foreign workers (for example, Italians or Poles). Somewhat ironically Commonwealth workers were deemed 'cheaper' because they had British citizenship rights and would need no formal arrangements for their arrival, or accommodation or welfare provision. As Aneurin Bevan said in 1948, 'If colonial subjects come here on their own responsibility and initiative we do all we can to fit them into useful jobs, but they cannot complain if all is not plain sailing' (quoted in Joshi and Carter, 1984, p. 60). At the same time, some problems were envisaged in terms of political and social unrest, particularly by way of the racist and protectionist response of the white working class and trade unions, in the face of the presence of 'uncivilized' and 'culturally backward coloured Colonials' ... In so far as the mass immigration of Black workers might bring problems then responsibility for such problems was seen to lie with the immigrant him or herself: he or she would have to adapt, make out or go home.

The immediate response to the arrival of Black immigrants has been described as '*laissez-faire*' (Sivanandan, 1976): no state intervention to provide housing and welfare needs, and the treatment of immigrants simply as units of labour. What welfare provision did exist was from the voluntary sector: the National Council for Commonwealth Immigrants whose policy was to help immigrants adapt to their circumstances. The general assumptions behind these two responses were that the immigrants in general had few requirements, and secondly, in so far as they did then these would be met as soon as they were assimilated – spoke the language, understood British culture and knew the values of democracy.

[...]

Welfare services are labour-intensive and provide far less possibility than manufacturing industry to use automation as a way of offsetting rising costs. Black and immigrant workers are one section who play an important role, particularly in the health service, of limiting these rising costs. The study of Doyal, Hunt and Mellor (1981) shows clearly how, since the 1950s, the NHS has been dependent on overseas workers, both as contract labour, and settlers from the Caribbean, India, Ireland and Malaysia, at all levels of skills, though they tend to be concentrated on the lower grades and many of them are women. One third of the doctors and 20 per cent of student nurses working in Britain in 1981 were born overseas. In the London hospital in the Doyal study, 84 per cent of domestics and 82 per cent of catering workers were from abroad. ... A further point related to the question of social costs being borne by the immigrant's country of origin is that many of the doctors and nurses have had their training paid for by their own – far poorer – countries,

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and the children of many of these women on contract labour are being cared for and educated in their own countries ...

The issue of social costs of immigrant workers was an important debate in the late 1940s as the government looked for new sources of labour. The failure of the post-war government to acknowledge the social costs of the new immigrants, to make necessary adjustments in the provision of welfare, can be understood in terms of the priorities given to other issues in the debate about how to meet labour shortages. One of these issues was how to dispose of labour once it was no longer needed and the other was the effect upon the host population if the immigrants were to stay longer. The 1949 Royal Commission on Population emphasized that immigrants should be 'of good human stock and were not prevented by their religion or race from intermarrying with the host population and becoming merged in it' (quoted by Booth in Dummett, 1986, p. 117). In both these terms Europeans from Holland, Greece, Italy and Eire were not seen as posing great problems – they could enter the country on temporary work permits and thus return when no longer required, or if they stayed they would 'merge in'. Black immigrants, however, as commonwealth subjects had rights of settlement and also were seen to be bearers of radically different – and inferior – cultures. In other words, they were seen even before their arrival as a 'problem'. However, at the same time, as Joshi and Carter (1984) point out, commonwealth workers were cheaper than aliens because they were British citizens, and as such were deemed to have come 'individually and on their own initiative' and thus there was no need to make welfare provision for them. There was thus *no intention* to provide for them, and when Black immigrants *did* use welfare services they were seen as scroungers. The juxtaposition of these two features is pinpointed by Jacobs when he says: 'black workers were acceptable as cleaners, porters, kitchen staff, even nurses and doctors, but never wholeheartedly, as patients. They could build council houses but were not expected to live in them' (Jacobs, 1985, p. 13).

As it was, immigrants came from Europe, particularly Eire, and the commonwealth, pushed by economic necessity as well as pulled by Britain's demands for labour.

References

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