

# WHITE ENGLISHMEN AND BROWN

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WE in Britain have been told by several South African politicians that if our coloured immigrant population goes on growing at its present rate we shall soon come to see the necessity of segregation. Perhaps it is time now to examine this view in the light of the available evidence. In recent years the ordinary Englishman has experienced what it is like to have an appreciable number of coloured men living and working in his home town. The question has been discussed at length in the newspapers, on the radio, on television; what has been the result?

To interpret the present state of public opinion, one needs to see it in historical perspective. There have been coloured residents in Britain for four hundred years. Up to the end of the seventeenth century, they were generally regarded as sharing the same human nature as Europeans. With the growth in the slave trade, however, grew a readiness to believe that Negroes were an inferior species of humankind, and informed opinion divided into sharply opposed schools of thought. The pro-slavery outlook was strengthened in later years by developments in biological thought; the theory of evolution and the social Darwinist view of the races as competing with one another in the struggle for survival, both lent intellectual support to the belief that Europeans were biologically superior to Negroes. The great imperialist expansion of the century's closing years created a class of people who needed just such a justification for their politics, while the stories fed to the public at home, by administrators and missionaries alike, built up an image of the benighted heathens as lacking any culture whatsoever.

One of the minor consequences of the 1914-18 war was the recruitment of coloured colonials for manning merchant ships and for service in labour battalions. Several hundreds settled in Britain after the cessation of hostilities and coloured communities grew up in the dockland areas of several seaports. In the troubled inter-war years British shipping suffered severely. White seamen and coloured competed for a limited number of jobs. At first there was a series of minor riots; later, port authorities and shipping agents combined in discriminating against coloured seamen. The association of these men with

the local women was disliked and there was talk of segregation.

The Second World War brought greater numbers of Negro American and colonial troops to the country. Public awareness of the importance of racial relations on the international stage increased considerably. Some coloured servicemen settled in Britain. Then, in 1949, the first small but rising waves of West Indian immigration began. Men from Jamaica, Barbados, Trinidad, and the West Indian colonies fled their homelands, where the population was increasing far more rapidly than the capacity of local industry to offer them employment. Previously, West Indians had migrated to the United States, Panama and South America in search of work. Now these avenues were closed to them, so they came to Britain. At first there were about 2,000 immigrants per year; now the volume of traffic has swollen to an annual flow of nearly 30,000. Today there are, all told, about 80,000 West Indians and Africans resident in Britain, and a like number of Indians and Pakistanis. The great majority are males, but in recent years there has been an increasing tendency for West Indian women to migrate and for the menfolk to bring their families over.

Many of the immigrants have settled in the industrial midlands, and the numbers in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Sheffield together are comparable with London's widespread coloured population. The immigrants have gone to the places where work has been most plentiful and where housing accommodation has consequently been most difficult to come by. Many of them live in overcrowded conditions, exploited by landlords both white and coloured. The local sanitary authorities have in a number of cases been concerned about the resulting dangers to public health, though it is appreciated that the fault is not the immigrants'. Wherever coloured workers have settled, voluntary organizations and official bodies have taken steps to aid their adaptation to life in strange surroundings.

To find out what people think about this new influx and about coloured people as individuals, I organized last year a survey of racial attitudes. Three hundred people, whose names were chosen at random from the electoral registers of six centres, rural as well as urban, in England and in Scotland, were interviewed by skilled investigators. Thirty-seven per cent. of those interviewed had some connection, perhaps through friends or relatives, with one or more of the colonies or dominions. People's knowledge, however, about the structure

of the Commonwealth was not particularly impressive: after they had been told or reminded of the difference between a colony and a dominion, no more than 43 per cent. were able to name correctly two or more colonies. Eleven per cent. of those interviewed said that they had a personal friend who was coloured or had known some coloured person very well. When asked "Provided, of course, that there is plenty of work about, do you think that coloured colonials should be allowed to go on coming to this country?" 63 per cent. replied in the affirmative; the fact that the immigrants were British subjects like themselves weighed far more heavily with them than the difference in the colour of their skins.

Other questions were asked covering a variety of topics, but perhaps the most interesting of them came at the end. Three cards had been prepared, each bearing ten statements about immigration, coloured people, and relations between the two groups. The interviewer handed these cards, one by one, to the subject, saying that these were the sorts of things that had been said about these topics and inviting him or her to indicate which statements, if any, represented the respondent's own views on the matter. There was to be no persuading a person to express an opinion about a question he had never considered and about which he held no views. Some cautious subjects assented to very few statements, and in the circumstances it was impressive that one statement received the approval of 76 per cent., and two of nearly 70 per cent., of the persons interviewed. The four most favoured statements were:

"Coloured people are just as good as us when they have the same training and opportunities" (76 %).

"A lot of the coloured people here are very clever" (68 %).

"If we all behaved in a more Christian way there would not be any colour problem" (67 %).

"It would be a good thing if people of different races mixed with one another more" (64 %).

Four of the statements least favoured read as follows:

"Coloured people will always be inferior to white people" (10 %).

"All mixing between races should be avoided" (9 %).

"Most of the coloured people here are very ignorant" (9 %).

"The coloured people who come here are uncivilized" (4 %).

Other responses indicated that a substantial proportion of the population felt that "people who treat others badly because of their colour ought to be punished"; that "things will be all right when people get used to coloured people". Rather less than half of the sample said that they did not like the idea of the immigrants marrying English or Scottish girls.

One of the most striking results of the survey was the demonstration of how open-minded people were on most issues. Only about four people in every hundred held strong pre-conceived ideas about the inferiority of coloured peoples. Time and again respondents mentioned their limited acquaintance with coloured people, emphasizing that they could generalize only from that experience and that they realized it was limited. The racist view that some races are superior to others is, of course, a highly theoretical one, depending, if one believes in rational discussion, upon theoretical assumptions and proofs. The people interviewed would have none of this, and took a more practical line. They still regarded the immigrants with the suspicion shown towards nearly all strangers, but from their limited experience most people had been favourably impressed rather than the reverse. "There's good and bad in every race", they kept reiterating. The more experience of the immigrants they had had, the more favourably disposed they were.

Answers given to an interviewer do not always provide a good indication of how people will behave. Individual attitudes have to be seen against the background of the sorts of situation in which members of the two groups meet one another. In Britain it is generally accepted that there ought to be no racial discrimination in public places or services. No one questions the coloured man's right to a seat in the bus beside him, or to a place in the queue at the Post Office. They pay the same taxes and receive in return the same benefits as anyone else. However, in matters of private behaviour there is a great deal of genuine confusion as to the most appropriate course to take, and this is often reflected, for example, in the attitudes of employers and trade unions towards coloured workers. In the most intimate and private of all relationships, that of marriage, this confusion is also often apparent. Many people say they dislike seeing an English or Scottish girl walking out with a coloured man, but during the war the same people disapproved of American and Polish troops' success with the girls. The

attitude seems to be a straightforward one of sexual jealousy that is intensified though not changed by the extra complication of a racial difference. Mixed marriages are by no means uncommon and have been much in the public eye in connection with the Seretse Khama affair and the marriage between Miss Peggy Cripps and Mr. Joseph Appiah of Ghana. Many coloured seamen have married local women: their wives are often unfortunates who were rejected by their own society before they entered into their association with a coloured man. In such cases the wife is often able to help her husband, for people are more likely to assist him on her account than to try and punish her for marrying an outsider. Not everyone disapproves of mixed marriages. Many people say that it is a girl's own affair whom she marries, while an M.P. recently remarked in the House of Commons that he would not object to his daughter's marrying a coloured man, provided that he were kind to his father-in-law! Discussion of this question is usually confined to instances of a white girl marrying a coloured man. When it is a white man who takes a coloured wife, reactions are very different; the men, at least, are more likely to be slightly jealous of their fellow, as if he were enjoying a special experience denied to themselves, than to be disapproving.

To the ordinary Englishmen, the coloured workers often appear strange and exotic creatures. He tends to avoid contact with them, because he fears that if he enters into a relationship with a coloured man the other may not know the correct way to behave and may land him in difficulties. To the employer, a coloured workman appears as a risk, for he is unlikely to have the background of experience that a white worker has and he may need extra supervision. Perhaps, of course, the immigrant may be a particularly ambitious and hard working man, but the risk is not always worth taking. An incident that was described to me in London (*The Coloured Quarter*, Jonathan Cape, 1955, p. 149) illustrates this most aptly. A coloured man applied for a job only to be told that it had been filled. He did not believe this and got his English wife to telephone the firm. She said that she had a coloured lodger who was a good worker and asked if they would consider him. The man put on a different suit of clothes, went round, and got the job! I know from my own experience that this story is not unrepresentative.

Trade unions are often placed in a similar quandary and they have been at sixes and sevens over the development of a policy

to meet the problems arising from the new influx. Their attitude has been the same as that of Ben Tillet who told the Jewish immigrants in the East End of London at the beginning of the century, "Yes, you are our brothers and we will do our duty by you. But we wish you had not come to this country". In many cases the unions have done their duty by immigrant coloured workers, but they have never faced up to the conflict between their duty to the immigrants and their duty to their "own" people. The recession in employment in the Birmingham region early this year caught the unions without any effective policy on this question, though it had been urged upon them in the palmy days of over-full employment that they should commit their members to a policy of "last in, first out". The ordinary British worker has assumed that it must always be the coloured man who is discharged first and the white man who gets the first choice of a vacancy. This has happened often enough, but not always, and has given rise to much bitterness. Provided that the level of employment falls no further and the flow of immigrants does not rise too steeply, there is reasonable prospect of the West Indian workers being integrated into the existing labour force.

The general picture, then, is one showing very little colour prejudice on the part of individuals, but a general tendency to avoid coloured people. This has been attributed to the association between a dark skin colour and an inferior social class position. A man who wants to rise in the world takes care to be seen in the company of the "best" people and does not want to be seen associating with a coloured man any more than with a road-sweeper. A man whose social position is firmly established, or has an occupation giving him a certain license, like that of clergyman or social worker, can entertain coloured people without any doubt arising as to his true social standing. A landlady may not be so fortunately placed. If she starts taking coloured students her neighbours may ask, "Can't Mrs. Smith get white students? Are her lodgings as bad as all that?"

The view that people avoid coloured immigrants because of these social class associations helps us explain some aspects of British behaviour towards the newcomers, but it is not a complete answer. Part of the Englishman's insularity is due to a mild suspicion of all foreigners, and the coloured man is only a few degrees more strange than the central European. Because the presence of coloured residents in significant numbers is a

relatively new development, conventional patterns of behaviour regulating relations between members of the two groups have not yet emerged. In countries like South Africa and the southern states of the U.S.A. it is customary for whites to behave towards coloureds in particular ways according to the situation. The coloured people know what to expect and know what sort of behaviour is expected of them in return. This is not the case in Britain, where the man in the street has not yet decided whether the coloured man, besides being a fellow taxpayer, is also to be a friend at the work bench and a potential brother-in-law at home. Consequently his behaviour towards the immigrants is inclined to be inconsistent, and the coloured man quite naturally resents it. He complains that he does not know where he stands and that life is easier in the United States, where even if his presence is not desired, at least he knows what to expect and there are definite opportunities open to him.

The very fluidity of the British situation, however, can also be seen as a ground for hope. The longer the situation remains fluid, the greater the chance there is for people to become acquainted with the immigrants in an open-minded fashion. The longer it takes before customary patterns of race relations become crystallized, the greater the chance that they will be liberal ones. Indeed, there is no reason at all why any such patterns should arise. The British people have now been fairly well informed of the position in South Africa, and what they have heard they do not like. More and more of them realize that race is to be one of the major factors in the international affairs of the immediate future, and they keep our consciences awake. A growing body of opinion holds that acceptance of certain elementary ideals like justice and democracy makes a stronger demand upon our allegiance than the tie of a common racial heritage. If our way of life is to survive in a divided world, we must choose our friends from among those who share our principles, not from among those who deny the unity of mankind. Yet the last thing the Englishman wants is for foreigners to try and become English. Differences in cultural tradition are a source of richness and are not to be melted down, but they provide no cause for segregation. Britain is perhaps the only country in the world to have acquired a domestic race question in the last ten years, but if present tendencies continue she may be nearer a solution than countries which have been crippled by racial divisions for a century and more.