An immigration scandal in the UK and the Veneration of the Caribbean Windrush Generation

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The UK government's treatment of elderly black Britons from the Caribbean is a scandal, but their elevation to national treasure offers hope.

Paulette Wilson, 61, came to Britain from Jamaica in 1968, when she was just 10, to live with her grandparents. She never left, living legally in the country for the next 50 years—attending school, serving meals at the House of Commons and to the homeless at her church, and becoming a grandmother. Then, in 2015, Wilson received notice that she was an illegal immigrant and would be sent "back" to Jamaica—a country where she didn't know anyone. She was taken to a detention center, and only a last-minute legal reprieve kept her in the UK. "I wondered what was going to happen to me. All I did was cry, thinking of my daughter and granddaughter; thinking that I wasn't going to see them again," she told a reporter from *The Guardian*.

Wilson's story ended up being the first of many such tales in what has become the biggest immigration scandal in the UK in decades, prompting a flurry of apologies at the highest level. It's a scandal that could yet take down the British prime minister and force a reckoning with the xenophobic immigration laws put in place over the past five years.

Another person affected by those laws was Michael Braithwaite, 66, a grandfather who came to Britain from Barbados in 1961, at the age of 9. He worked his entire life, only to lose his job as a special-needs teaching assistant after a "routine" immigration check.

A third was 63-year-old Albert Thompson (not his real name), who came from Jamaica as a teenager and lived in London for 44 years, only to be evicted from his council house because he couldn't prove citizenship. Thompson was also denied cancer treatment by the National Health Service unless he paid £54,000 ($75,000).

All of these people—and many, many others are emerging—are in the country legally. Indeed, many essentially arrived with British passports, because the countries they came from were not yet independent. Nearly all of them lost access to housing, health care, or pensions. Some were handed bills for services they had used.

Amazingly, none of this was a mistake. In 2014, the Conservative government passed an immigration act underpinned by a "hostile environment" policy aimed at undocumented immigrants. The goal was to make life so hellish that people would, in Mitt Romney's words, "self-deport." The British government even sent vans around black neighborhoods in London with the message: "In the UK Illegally? Go Home or Face Arrest." The legislation effectively made any Brit—health professionals, teachers, employers, landlords—a border guard, authorized (and sometimes required) to check your

immigration status; and it made every immigrant a suspect until they could prove they were legal.

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So someone like Braithwaite, who'd never had a passport, was suddenly asked to produce four pieces of documentation for every year he'd been in the country, stretching back over 50 years. And when he couldn't, he lost his job.

Even the British high commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago had the passport application for his Trinidadian-born infant son rejected. "You cannot be more British than the British High Commissioner but he wasn't British enough," tweeted the diplomat, who managed to sort it out. "Compared to the experience of many deserving British residents…my problems were trivial. But it illustrates a #HomeOffice that defaults to refusal wherever possible."

This was not a glitch in the system; it was the system. Indeed, the architect of this policy is now the prime minister, Theresa May. She can be forgiven for being taken aback by the recent response: The law was enacted at a time when xenophobia was running high. With a handful of exceptions (current Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn being one of them), Labour supported the law. Back then, it seemed there was no political price to pay for being hateful toward immigrants.

As several similar stories appeared over the past five months, the Conservative government evidently calculated that a handful of elderly Caribbean-born black folk who couldn't get their paperwork together would hardly pose a threat. Then, in mid-April, the dam broke in the national imagination. There have been demonstrations and large meetings in favor of these immigrants across the country.

Quite what broke that dam is not clear. It appears these Caribbeans had become "good immigrants" who stumbled into the line of xenophobic fire. They became known as the "Windrush generation," named after the HMT Empire Windrush, a ship that brought mostly Jamaican servicemen to the UK in 1948, marking the symbolic beginning of a postwar migration to Britain from its former colonies in the Caribbean.

The reverence that the Windrush generation has enjoyed since the scandal came to light has been surprising to many of us who follow race politics (my mother was of that generation)—but it's been especially astonishing for them. They came of age in Britain during a period of intense and open racial hostility, with segregated bars, police harassment, and episodic racial violence. But their elevation to a national treasure in recent weeks has offered hope on two fronts: first, that Britain is not immune to a compassionate conversation about immigrants. For two weeks solid, we have been talking about the taxes they pay, the communities they create, the nation they helped build, and the fact that their arrival changed it for the better.

Second, it offers hope that we might be able to take that revelation and apply it to more recent immigrants. The government's apologies thus far have been tailored to the Windrush generation. The message, in essence, has been: "The hostility wasn't meant for you—it was meant for someone else." But now the human costs of such a policy have been illustrated in a way that people can relate to, and so we might be able to shift the way in which the debate has been framed. That may seem unlikely. But in a world where elderly, working-class black people touch the conscience of a Western nation, anything is possible.

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P.S.

* “The Veneration of the Windrush Generation”. THE NATION APRIL 25, 3:23 PM : https://www.thenation.com/article/the-veneration-of-the-windrush-generation/

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