

17 **Black Don't Crack or Does It: The Home Office Scandal**

Patrick Vernon

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In April 2018 the public in the UK, and indeed the whole world, was exposed to what we now know as the Windrush scandal. That scandal involved the stripping away of the citizenship rights of those who came to Britain, particularly in the period between 1948 and the early 1970s. Colonies in the Caribbean and Africa were part of the British Empire, according to the 1948 British Nationality Act,

which meant that dependent children travelling on their parents', aunts', uncles' and other family members' passports had the same status and citizenship of anyone who was born in the UK. They came from countries that were invaded and colonised by the British, and therefore became British subjects. Yet, successive legislation over the last 50 years has eroded those rights.³

This erosion has not just affected those considered the Windrush Generation, but also those who arrived in the 1940s, 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s from the Caribbean, as well as other Commonwealth nationals and migrants.

As a nation, the UK moved into an even more toxic environment with the 2014 Immigration Act, which featured measures designed to create a 'hostile environment' for people in the UK without valid leave. The policy's main focus was to deter people coming to the UK, and to use fear and intimidation to force people from Black and racialised communities to voluntarily leave with a one-way ticket of reparation – a vision that the Far Right have been campaigning for since the early days of the colour bar.

It is now clear from the *Windrush Lessons Learned Review* that the Windrush scandal was linked directly to the 'hostile environment' policy and previous immigration legislation over the last 50 years – dating back to Enoch Powell's 'Rivers of Blood' speech in 1968, which influenced the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act.⁴ The Windrush scandal, or more appropriately the Home Office scandal, has caused considerable grief for so many families around us – and Black people have begun to crack. Many who were young adults and children when they arrived in the UK are now at retirement age – between their 50s and 80s – but they have no documented evidence of their citizenship. Most of them either did not acquire a passport because holidays abroad were not common back then; did not apply for naturalisation because they didn't know that they had to; or found it difficult to prove when they had come to the

UK because, in some instances, records such as landing cards had been destroyed over time.

Previously, the 1948 Nationality Act had absolved them from needing to prove that they were British, but policies designed to create a 'hostile environment' forced them into a situation where they suddenly became undocumented migrants. They had to prove that they were British, or they were deemed to be illegal immigrants. The policy strategy was hostile by name and hostile by nature!

Many thousands of mainly African and Caribbean people were subject to the onslaught of that 'hostile environment' policy strategy, and some volunteered to go back to their country of birth. There were instances of people who had been on holiday abroad being refused entry back to the UK, others were deported, and some spent considerable time in detention centres. But the reality is that the vast majority of those who could not prove their citizenship ended up losing their jobs and their homes, and access to pension rights and to NHS healthcare, even though they had been paying National Insurance contributions for well over 40 years.⁵

But those were not the only challenges they were facing. They say 'Black don't crack', but the constant pressure of having to prove citizenship to the Home Office had a serious impact on people's mental and physical wellbeing, and the first known case in the media was that of Dexter Bristol.⁶

Dexter was of Grenadian heritage and was caught in the frustrating system of having to prove his British citizenship despite having lived in the UK since he was eight years old. Because of the way the system was set up back in the 1950s, Dexter travelled to the UK in 1968 as a dependent on his mother's Grenadian British subject passport, and so he did not have his own citizenship documentation. Even though it was obvious why he didn't have it, his inability to prove his citizenship led to him being dismissed from his job and losing his right to benefits. Dexter's resilience cracked and sadly,

in March 2018, he was found dead outside his home. He died a broken man.

I got to know Dexter's mother, and that encounter led to us starting GoFundMe campaigns to cover the funeral costs of family members who had lost loved ones due to the Windrush scandal. Thankfully, the campaign raised sufficient money for Dexter's funeral costs, and he had a fitting tribute. I empathised with Dexter's traumas, and felt honoured to be able to say a few words at his funeral. He was buried in South London, in the country that had tried so desperately hard to get rid of him.

In September 2019, Sarah O'Connor, aged 57, died of a stress-related illness. I met Sarah because of our mutual involvement in campaigning for justice. She regularly appeared on TV, was at the Houses of Parliament, and spoke at Windrush events. Sarah was always honest about the impact it was having on her mental health, and how stressful she found the entire process of having to retrospectively prove her entitlement to citizenship. Eventually, it took its toll, and the saddest part of Sarah's case is that she had received her citizenship certificate from Barking and Dagenham Council just before her passing.⁷

Sarah's funeral costs were paid for with funds raised by the community, and so she was able to have a proper funeral and burial. She had been under a lot of stress and tremendous pressure, and had become financially dependent on her children. The system prevented her from accessing any benefits, and at that time the government had not yet worked out what the Windrush Compensation Scheme should look like and how it would be administered, and nor did they make any provisions for interim payments to help those affected.

Theresa May did apologise, but no real financial efforts were being made to support any of those affected by the Windrush scandal until the scheme was launched in April 2019,⁸ and even then, making a claim was not straightforward.⁹

For me, the biggest impact of the Windrush catastrophe was the death of Paulette Wilson, because I had got to know her and her daughter Natalie very well. Paulette arrived in the UK at the age of ten in 1968 and lived in Wolverhampton, which is ironically the same year that Enoch Powell made his infamous and emotive ‘Rivers of Blood’ speech, giving an apocalyptic vision of a Britain of ‘violence and mayhem’. He said that Britain as a nation must be mad to take in its dependents, ignoring the fact that it was Britain that had gone into the Caribbean and Africa uninvited and unwelcomed, and colonising the inhabitants. He likened Britain taking in dependents to ‘heaping up its own funeral pyre’, and unfortunately that hostility towards people from the Caribbean and Africa is reflected in the structural racism that continues to exist in society today.

After living in Wolverhampton, Paulette moved to London, to the Ladbroke Grove community of North Kensington. She absolutely loved life, and used to party and rave at the Tabernacle, a well-known cultural community centre in Notting Hill, which was one of her favourite haunts. As part of her retirement she moved back to Wolverhampton. A lot of people from the Midlands have that natural yearning to go back home to the Midlands or to the north of England after years living in London, but Paulette’s move was not the joyful, peaceful retirement she had planned.

Not long after the move, she started receiving letters from the Home Office about her immigration status, deeming her an illegal immigrant even though she had lived in the UK since 1968. She paid her taxes for 34 years working as a cook, and yet her benefits and access to healthcare were stopped. Eventually Paulette was arrested because of her immigration status, and sent to the Yarl’s Wood detention centre even though she had not been to Jamaica since she had left as a child.

Thankfully, with the intervention of the local immigration advice centre and the local MP at the time, Paulette was eventually

released.¹⁰ That spurred her on to tell her story, and she also let others know the impact the experience of the Windrush scandal had had on her mental health. Her resilience was cracking because of the trauma and anguish she was going through, but along with many others affected by the Windrush scandal, she campaigned vigorously, and I am honoured to have known her and supported her in her quest for justice.

In the summer of 2020, during the cessation of the Covid-19 lockdown, I decided that a group of us should go to Number 10 Downing Street to present a petition.¹¹ I wanted to highlight the government's failure to implement the *Windrush Lessons Learned Review*, a report by Wendy Williams commissioned to explore the circumstances that led to the Windrush scandal, which was published in March 2020.¹²

That petition had over 140,000 signatures, and so the weekend before the 2020 Windrush Day on 22 June, a group including Anthony Bryan, Elwaldo Romeo, Michael Braithwaite, Paulette Wilson, her daughter Natalie, Glenda Caesar (people who were directly affected by the Windrush scandal), Satbir Singh (CEO of the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants) and myself, turned up with our petition and placards for justice. All the major TV companies were present – the BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Channel 5 – to witness us present the petition to Boris Johnson, and the campaign dominated news feed throughout the entire weekend and in the lead-up to Windrush Day.

Paulette and Natalie went on *Good Morning Britain* and spoke openly about the impact the Windrush scandal was having on Paulette's mental health. Sadly, that was the last time the public saw Paulette alive, because, just a week or so after she did that interview, I got the news from her daughter that she had passed away in her sleep. I was absolutely devastated. Paulette was really struggling, and on the day we presented the petition she said, 'Patrick, I'm

struggling with the compensation forms. It is just too much for me. I do not know what else to do.’

The system let her down big time, and the grief of her passing was felt by a lot of people, so I was determined that she had to have the special funeral that she deserved. It needed to reflect her life and the contribution she had made as a key campaigner in exposing the Windrush scandal.

When it comes to funerals, Caribbean communities know about good funerals, and we wanted Paulette to have one. Sadly, an unfortunate consequence of the scandal is that the family did not have the money to cover the funeral costs. I was so determined that Paulette Wilson was going to get the funeral she deserved that I started another GoFundMe campaign, and the public response was overwhelming. In less than a week we raised the funds for the funeral and had enough left over to install a blue plaque in her honour at the Wolverhampton Heritage Centre.

I remember going to Wolverhampton on the day of the funeral and worrying about the anger and grief that people were feeling because we all knew that Paulette’s death was directly linked to the ‘hostile environment’ policy, and that it was yet another example of ‘state violence and suffering at the hands of Babylon’.¹³ When I arrived at Paulette’s home that morning it was very apparent that the family and the community were going to ignore the lockdown restrictions, because to adhere to the 30-person maximum would be an infringement on our ability to grieve communally.

We all made sure that Paulette got the funeral she deserved. There was a horse and carriage procession that left her home in Heath Town and made its way to the New Testament Church of God less than half a mile away. People came from all around the country, including London, Manchester and Bristol, to show their respects to her and their solidarity around justice for the Windrush Generation. There must have been around 500 people following that procession, which was led by Nyabinghi drummers, and outside

the church there was powerful rhythmic drumming, chanting and calls for justice. Some people were calling out her name, 'Paulette, Paulette, Paulette'. It was a very powerful occasion, and a fit and proper tribute celebrating Paulette's life.

Only 30 people could be inside the church, and I had the privilege to be one of them. I spoke about her life and read a poem as a tribute to the Windrush Generation. While the service in the church was going on, outside the drummers and the crowd continued creating a powerful spiritual connection to Paulette and the ancestors. Paulette was a Rastafarian by faith, and to acknowledge that as part of the ceremonial process, one of the two pastors officiating the service was a Rastafarian.

When the service finished, there was another procession as we made our way to the burial ground, which was about three miles away, and there were film crews everywhere. Those in the funeral procession were mourning her passing, celebrating her life, and continuing to raise awareness of the plight of those affected by the Windrush scandal.

One of the issues and tensions at the time was around the Covid-19 restrictions. However, the Council recognised that it would have been impossible to try to enforce it at that time, so over 200 people were at the burial plot, pouring libation, singing and dancing. All the male family members began putting the dirt into the grave, and then others joined in too, not just the men, but everyone was doing it as an expression of our collective mourning and showing our respects to Paulette. The displays of love, empathy and compassion were evident as we sang and rejoiced her life, and we found comfort in our grief as we were linked together by one common thread, Paulette. It was an intensely powerful funeral.

I have never been to a funeral like that before. It was special, because it was Paulette, and in my tribute to her, I said she was 'likkle but tallawah' – meaning 'small and impactful'. Months later,

I wrote an obituary in *The Guardian* so that others would know that she died a broken woman.¹⁴

Sadly, she is not the only one to be let down by the system or end up being broken and going on to meet the ancestors. What is even more disturbing is that it will continue to happen if the current government and future governments continue to implement the ‘hostile environment’ policy strategy and refuses to right the wrongs of the Windrush scandal that have caused so much cumulative trauma and grief to other human beings.

I, and others, grieve for Paulette. We grieve for those who died because of the scandal. Yet, in the midst of our grief, we are continuing to witness government failures to right their wrongs. We see the conveyor belt of families experiencing the deterioration of the mental health of their loved ones, and then having to cope with the aftermath of the passing of those loved ones. How are we, as a community, expected to heal from the community trauma when the needs of people impacted by the Windrush scandal are still not being met?

I am continuing to do my part, and am currently working with Associate Professor Rochelle Burgess of University College London (UCL) on a project called ‘The Ties that Bind: Mapping the Intergenerational Mental Health Consequences of the Windrush Scandal’.¹⁵ The project is using public art and research to capture evidence of the impact of the ‘hostile environment’ policy and the Windrush scandal on people’s mental health, and the grief experienced by families after the passing of their loved ones.¹⁶

The Windrush scandal is an ongoing indictment of British society, and there is no justice, and no peace. This is not just about the individual trauma, grief and loss – this affects an entire community. The system has let down too many people and lives have been lost because of it, and without access to proper culturally appropriate mental health support services to help those going through what

turns out to be one of the most traumatic periods of their lives, Black does crack!

Notes

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