Windrush: a ruddy nightmare!

by Simon Belt

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Amber Rudd resigned from the Cabinet for 'inadvertently misleading the home affairs select committee', much to the glee of many in the Labour opposition. The big issue in the end was over whether she was aware or not of internal targets for removals of illegal immigrants being used within the Home Office. The backdrop to the issue though was the treatment of immigrants of the Windrush generation, including people losing the jobs, being denied free NHS services and including the deportation of some British citizens, because they didn't have the correct paperwork in place.

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So what should we draw out of this bureaucratic blundering and heavy handedness by a fragile and out of touch government? The wider backdrop of course is the Brexit vote to leave the EU and ongoing negotiations to establish trading relations and border arrangement, focussed on the border between the North and South of Ireland. Labour and much of the media have played on the government use of the phrase 'creating a hostile environment' against illegal immigration as the reason why British citizens of the Windrush generation had been targetted for

deportation, as a consequence of the racism being whipped up. The Remainer sections of Labour and the media promoted a similar line regarding the Brexit vote. This doesn't seem a good assessment to me though.

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Firstly, so there is no confusion over Labour's record here, Labour have been responsible for their share of closing the doors on immigrants wanting to move to the UK, including from the commonwealth. Indeed, the Labour government in 1979 were responsible for the introduction of the disgraceful virginity tests being conducted on South Asian brides entering through Heathrow. Talk about creating a 'hostile environment' as a bad thing by Labour politicians displays a whitewashing of the truth on a grand scale, and let us not forget that the 'creating a hostile environment' towards illegal immigrants was a phrase first used by Labour's former Home Secretary Alan Johnson in 2010, just after ordering the destruction of records of migrants coming to the UK on the Empire Windrush and before the Tories took office.

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The crucial aspect of the charge being made against the Tory government over the recent Windrush generation of migrants who were given British citizenship is not just their treatment by a bureaucratic administration not able to operate sensibly, sentively or even have the political nouce to intervene earlier when problems were clearly aired. No, the charge being made is that the government is trying to behave like it did in the days of the British Empire, or at least try and re-create an imperial past where it treats foreigners with contempt. The issue of the Windrush generation came to a head at the Heads of Commonwealth meeting in April, and rightly pushed by campaigners to have the issue sorted properly. Bureaucratic incompetence of the government has to a large degree in my view, been confused with the May government having a conscious and purposeful agenda to respond to an upsurge in racism in the wake of the Brexit vote.

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The mood of labelling May and Brexit voters as racist, may well use some of the language of anti-racism but expresses contempt for democracy and the electorate more than anything else.

Labour's shadow Home Secretary Dianne Abbott's calls for Amber Rudd to resign accepted that she would also have targets to deport illegal immigrants, as Amber Rudd should have known the Home Office did. The real discussion is then more about the use of language used about immigrants, and where possible removing the discussion about immigrants and migration from public debate, and this is where the Brexit backdrop is key. One of the main arguments by those opposed to the referendum on the EU was that it would excite the tendency to nationalism and xenophobia in the electorate. Indeed, the elitist arguments to have and to remain in the EU is that important issues of politics should be managed by the wise people who staff the Commission and not by the emotional forces of the electorate.

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The snide approach of 'liberal' anti-Tory opinion that barely masks the contempt towards the electorate is well summed up with a Guardian opinion piece by Stewart Lee - see ' The racists won. So are they happy now?
'. If you took it seriously you would ban the electorate from having any say and leave politics up to those wise people who are insulated from the electoral process, well that's the EU then.

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Ironically, the bureaucratic nightmare of the Windrush generation without the proper papers being deported, was drawn to a head because of the influence the wider population has on our elected politicians, which is becoming more so given the Brexit vote. That the overwhelming majority of people across the UK thought that those losing their jobs, being refused NHS services or being deported was wrong and should be reversed with compensation paid to those affected is testament to there not being a predominant climate of racism and that the electorate are better charged with making such decisions than bureaucracies. When has an EU commissioner ever faced such accountability to the electorate, even if they did have one?