

78th
ANNIVERSARY



WINDRUSH SUNDAY

Windrush@78: Lessons we can learn from the past

Although the Empire Windrush arrived on these shores some 78 years ago, there are parallels between the lands that welcomed those Caribbean travellers (who we now call the 'Windrush Generation'), and the situation that faces us today.

The Windrush Generation are regarded as those Caribbean people who came to these shores between 1948 and 1972, and akin to today, issues connected to 'race', immigration and 'change' were paramount in that era. What is more, protests and demonstrations from far right and extremist activists, often brandishing flags, were commonplace many decades ago. For example, there was racial violence in North Kensington (including Notting Hill) in west London, which was exacerbated by extremist groups such as Oswald Mosley's Union Movement and Colin Jordan's White Defence League, who sought to make life very difficult (and frightening) for Black folks at the time. History reveals that the Windrush Generation had every reason to be afraid, since in 1959, Kelso Cochrane, a 32-year-old Antiguan-born carpenter living in Notting Hill, was stabbed by a gang of White youths. He died later in hospital.



As we know, in recent years, Britain and Ireland have experienced some of the worst religious and race-related riots in living memory, which have seen asylum seekers, refugees and anyone deemed a 'migrant' targeted by far-right activists and thugs. Akin to that era, those not considered to be British or Irish are regarded as interlopers, economic extractors and general threats to these countries' way of life.

When not having to battle the often-violent racists, the Windrush Generation had to fight the racial discrimination in employment, housing, rented and hotel accommodation, and the provision of goods and services in Britain. Black, Asian and White activists subsequently came together to pushback against this form of racism and bigotry, and established the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) to represent and fight on behalf of Britain's largely Black and Asian communities. CARD systematically collected evidence of racism, and presented that evidence to influential people in the political parties, Labour especially, in order to get anti-discrimination laws passed in the British Parliament.

Many would argue that CARD was responsible for the Race Relations Act 1965 being



passed, which was the first piece of legislation in Britain to address the prohibition of racial discrimination. The Act banned racial discrimination in public places, and made the promotion of hatred on the grounds of 'colour, race, or ethnic or national origins' an offence.

It needs to be remembered that the laws and protections that we now enjoy on these shores, though not perfect, were hard fought battles. Those equality laws were never innate, nor were they bestowed on marginalised peoples by the benevolent governments; certain individuals sacrificed a great deal for legislation that some now take for granted. Consequently, anyone interested in equality must be concerned that certain political parties to the right of the political spectrum are now threatening to repeal equalities' legislation, which they regard as 'woke' and divisive. It is ironic that policies and ideas that encourage inclusion are now regarded as divisive by some.

Much like now, (non-White) immigration was a massive issue, as some extremists wanted to 'Keep Britain White'. However, when it comes to immigration, Lord Pitt of Hampstead, a Trinidad-born politician who had lived in Britain since 1947, argued that any fixation with immigration was really the preserve of bigots. In a debate on 24 June 1976, Lord Pitt commented: "...it is a myth, that the fewer the numbers [of Black immigrants] the better the quality of race relations. That is a myth, and it is a myth that has inspired the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, the Immigration White Paper of August 1965 and the Immigration Acts of 1968 and 1971. It is designed to placate the racials, but it is a fallacy; for to the racist or the antisemite the only acceptable number is nought."

Many of the Windrush Generation currently feel alarmed when they see large demonstrations with protesters brandishing St George or Union flags, as this is reminiscent of the aforementioned 'bad old days'. While it is common, and right, to speak of the resilience, diligence and courage of the Windrush Generation, most of them would confess that they would never want to go back to such an era, or have to revisit such experiences. Those times only appear 'pleasant' or 'happy' in the context of no longer existing.

What is interesting is that some of those who are protesting at the 'Unite the Kingdom' rallies, speak about returning to 'gentler' or 'better' times, but the question that needs to be asked is, 'for whom were these times "gentler" or "better"'? Certainly not for the Windrush Generation, or the countless numbers of Black and Brown people who followed them. What is also concerning is the growth of Christian nationalism, which among other things, posits that a White British or Irish identity is inextricably, and exclusively, linked to Christianity. The danger with such an ideology, as far as the Christian faith is concerned, is that it threatens to see the Church repeat the mistakes of the past, when those from the Windrush Generation were turned away from churches due to their skin colour.

If we are truly proud of the equality, diversity and inclusion that we currently experience in our society, then we need to celebrate the achievements of the past, focus on the present, and plan for the future. This also means having a vision for tomorrow, rather than dreams of yesterday!