

The Windrush Generation & Lost Educational Opportunities: How can the Commonwealth learn from this?

Thank you so much to the Council for Education in the Commonwealth for inviting me to speak tonight, and specifically to Sonny for making this event possible. It is an honour to be able to be part of such a wonderfully inclusive organisation, working to improve the lives of so many young people across the Commonwealth, from Malaysia, Ghana and New Zealand, to South Africa, Belize and the Bahamas. This organisation is driven by the vision that young people are the world

you so much for giving me some solace from Parliament and Brexit, albeit only for an evening. I dread to think what else will have happened by the time I finish this speech.

From 2018, then, to 1956, the year my father arrived in Britain from Guyana. My mother arrived in the late 1960s. They, along with 524,000 Commonwealth-born people, came to Britain because they wanted to take part in building Britain. After the Second World War, the NHS was desperate for a workforce, and found one in the Caribbean. The thousands of nurses and health workers that came to Britain before 1971 formed the backbone of the NHS. They worked with unparalleled pride and dignity labouring for all of Britain were women like my aunts, who did seemingly unending shifts from morning to night without complaint, whilst caring for their young families. They were also train drivers, cleaners and wardens in our stations. Workers like my mother, who did her own stint at the London Underground. I remember meeting her at Camden Tube Station as she would emerge into the daylight after a long shift.

The scale of their contribution is something to be celebrated. And when we celebrate, we tend to look at the positive, and nothing is more positive than Jessica Ennis, Daley Thompson, Linford Christie, Kelly Holmes or Colin Jackson draped in the Union Jack. But while reflecting on this great contribution there must also be a moment to think about the uncomfortable truths the tough and the hard times and to think about the struggles of those communities. Some wonderful high points are accompanied by some staggering depths.

We must remember the troubles that led up to the Notting Hill riots, the Brixton riots and the Tottenham riots, in which PC Keith Blakelock lost his life. We think also of the great injustices

that lie behind parts of the pain and the stain on this country: the stain of the murder of Stephen Lawrence and those young people who lost their lives in the New Cross house fire. We must acknowledge the souring relations between the police and ethnic minorities, between whom there are catastrophically low levels of trust.

Behind many of these difficulties lies a deeper, historical struggle. And that is the underachievement of black and ethnic minorities at school. It is important to remember that Windrush citizens are not just those that arrived as adults. Rather, they are citizens that were *brought* and *born* here in the 50s, 60s and 70s. Today I want to focus on these Windrush children, their experiences and their relationship with the British education system. These are children to whom we had a responsibility of care, compassion and custody; a responsibility we did not always fulfil.

Since the 1950s, the performance of both African Caribbean and West Indian children has, on average, been lower than that of their white counterparts. While this academic achievement gap gained exposure through the 1960s and 70s, this exposure did little to reduce the gap itself. During the 1970s, the reading scores of black Caribbean children were extremely low compared to Indigenous white population. This is documented well by the Inner London Education Authority

The underperformance of the Windrush children was fuelled by the extremely low expectations that were placed upon them. During the 1950s and 60s, a large number of black children were placed in low streams and how Black Caribbean and West Indian children were dumped in mal (ESN) schools. As a result, these children were themselves labelled as - normal. By 1970, in of pupils were from ethnic minorities, but in ESN schools that figure was 34%. Black children were also disproportionately placed in exclusion units, also known as -bins, system therefore failed to acknowledge the needs of the Windrush children, who suffered disproportionately from mental health problems.

Ultimately, the Windrush children came to believe the rhetoric that they were educationally sub-normal. The evidence shows that children resign to the mould to which they are confined.

Our education system fuelled and legitimised the widespread belief that Black and West Indian children were less intelligent than other children. Low expectations damaged their motivation and confidence, sentencing them to a life of underachievement; it became a self-fulfilling prophecy.

It is no surprise that countless Windrush citizens look back on their childhood as one of misery and isolation; many got out of school as soon as they could in order to escape from explicitly racist bullying. Most heartbreakingly, this bullying came from teachers, teachers who had a responsibility to provide them with the tools for their own prosperous future. Far from being integrated into society, the Windrush children were taught that they did not belong here.

It is also no surprise, then, that the attainment gap between white pupils and their counterparts continued through to the 1980s, with research confirming that pupils of Black Caribbean background underachieve as a group within the education system. These findings were replicated in the 1990s and 2000s: In terms of achieving five or more A*-C GCSEs, whilst the national average in 1998 was 46%, for African Caribbean students it was 22%. In 2004, Black boys were three times as likely to be excluded from school as White boys and the percentage of Black Caribbean pupils getting five or more grades A* to C at GCSE and equivalent was 36% compared to 52% of White children.

Our education system failed the Windrush children. And it continues to fail the most vulnerable in society. Refugee and asylum-seeking children today face long delays accessing education after arriving in the UK. Statutory guidance states that an educational placement must be secured for all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children (UASC) within 20 school days of coming into care. UNICEF found that not a single region in the UK has met this target. The latest data indicates that only 32% of UASC attended a Further Education College and 26% attended a secondary school. That leaves over a third of children unaccounted for or in
in 4 children arriving in the UK wait more than 3 months for a place. In many cases, this is because schools are concerned about how their admission would affect their exam results and thus their position in the league tables.

Education has the power to provide those who are born into less fortunate circumstances with the self-sufficient means to prosper. Yet when education itself is treated as a marketable good,

it simply reinforces harsh inequalities and hierarchies. It is worth remembering that education is a human right and it is therefore something that should not be contingent on immigration status.

The situation is similarly dire for internally displaced communities. In 2017, just 16% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children achieved national expectations in reading, writing and maths by the end of Primary School. This compares to 61% of all pupils. At the end of secondary school, just 11% of Gypsy and Roma children, and 22% of Travellers achieved a grade 4 (C-grade equivalent) in English and Maths, compared to 59% of all pupils. 7% of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children receive exclusions, compared to 2% of all pupils. This kind of structural inequality echoes around the world. In Australia, the overall attendance-rate for Indigenous students is 10 percentage points less than non-Indigenous students. In the Northern Territory, the Indigenous attendance is just 66%.

This kind of structural discrimination spreads outwards to people the other week, a video emerged of a young Syrian refugee being assaulted in his own school playing-field. Just as it was 50 years ago for immigrant children, the kind of torment they suffer is embedded within a deep and pervasive system of discrimination.

If we are going to stand any chance of reversing the kind of entrenched disadvantage that ethnic minorities suffer in school, then we can't simply wallow in our failings. Rather, we must identify those areas and projects that have demonstrated success. The London Challenge, introduced by Labour in 2003, is a prime example. While this did not have an explicit focus on improving the educational attainment of Black Caribbean or West Indian Children, what it *did* do was raise the expectations of inner city schools and their teachers. The London Challenge had 3 main objectives: to raise standards in the poorest-performing schools, to narrow the attainment gap between pupils in London, and to create more good and outstanding schools. They explored new ways to monitor progress, placing a higher reliance on the use of data, demanding full breakdowns of exam results, as well as detailed reports from Ofsted officials. This data provided the clarity and accountability on which trust was built. The London Challenge also appreciated the power of devolution and context-driven policy; they assigned schools with an experienced to broker tailored packages of support for each school.

The performance of London schools subsequently improved dramatically, with Key Stage 4 results moving from among the worst in the country to the best. By 2010, Ofsted rated 30% of London schools as closing the performance gap between the average child and the performance of children in receipt of free school meals. In 2013, Ofsted proclaimed that the rapid improvement in London schools was the success of the London Challenge programme.

There are also other stories of success. Spires Academy in Oxford assesses children on arrival to judge what support they might need, teaching 28 refugee or asylum seeker children in a school of 1,000 students. The College of North West London has built partnerships with charities to provide additional mental health support to its refugee and asylum seeker children. ESOL classes have proven that they can help integrate immigrants and asylum-seekers; the ability to speak the common language is fundamental for building a socially cohesive environment and is crucial to new arrivals in our country being able to get a job and contribute fully to our country and their community.

This provides the Commonwealth with an extremely valuable lesson: education policy is not a one-size-fits-all. Rather, we need localised and devolved solutions that take into account the context in which the pupils are being taught. This means taking into account whether the school is situated in a particularly low socio-economic area, whether there are a particular high number of refugee or asylum-seeker children looking for school places, and whether there is entrenched disadvantage for particular communities that is affecting their educational achievement.

Only then will these stories of success become a national reality. Only then will we be able to say that we have learnt a valuable lesson from our past. Unfortunately, if there is one piece of evidence to show that we have not learnt our lessons from the past, then look no further than the Windrush Scandal. Many of the Windrush generation have once again been made destitute by the British state. They have had their rights stripped from them, and they have been thrust into despair and desperation. Windrush citizens were told that they had no right to the British public services to which so many of them had dedicated their lives and to which their ancestors had contributed. The nurses who toiled in our hospitals, the train drivers, and the

other public sector workers upon whom Britain relied were told that their contributions were null and void and that they should leave this country immediately. The Windrush generation were thanked for their service to this country by being thrown into detention centres and being deported. They are British citizens who have been seized and imprisoned, who have been outlawed or exiled, and who have been treated like criminals in their own country. They are British citizens who have been denied access to jobs, their families, homes, healthcare and, yet again, *education*.

I want to share with you the story of Alberta, who arrived in Tottenham from Ghana in 2012. Years later, aged 19, she was studying Health and Social Care to become a midwife. One day, 5 immigration officers burst through her front door. She was still half-naked, getting dressed to go to college. Despite explaining to the officers that her five year immigration permit was still valid, they arrested her, locked her in the back of their van and took her to Yarls Wood detention centre, where she was incarcerated for 3 weeks, despite committing no crime. While detained, she missed critical course deadlines. As a result, her dream of becoming a midwife is now uncertain. For Alberta, the Hostile Environment has eroded opportunities that may never re-emerge.

We must be amenable to learning valuable, national lessons from abroad. Within three years of arriving in *Canada*, children of new immigrants do as well as native-born children. In fact, 36% of the children of immigrants aged between 25-35 hold university degrees, *more* than the 24% of their peers with Canadian-born parents. English-learners join mainstream classes, working side-by-side with native English-speaking students their age. This intentional integration is on display in every school in Toronto. Headteachers post notices in multiple languages, teachers learn phrases in languages their students speak, several dual-language books are circulated, free interpreters are provided at parents-evening, and English-learners are included in all extra-curricular activities.

It is no coincidence that Canada is more comfortable with coming to terms with their uncomfortable history. This is *not* something on which we can pride ourselves. The Windrush scandal is not a shameful part of our present, but is the product of a shameful failure to acknowledge our own colonial past. Windrush is too often framed in terms of an isolated event in and around the year 1948. The danger of this is that the Windrush citizens are simply seen

as those who answered Britain
future. But there are 2 aspects that such a narrow story overlooks.

Firstly, I am here because you were there. I say you metaphorically; the Windrush generation are here because of slavery. The Windrush story is the story of British empire. And it is a story of hostility and compliance. The connection between Britain and the Commonwealth countries stems from Britain people from across the globe.

Secondly, like in Britain after the second world war, the homes of those on board the Windrush and the many boats that came after it had also been destroyed by a foreign power a foreign power had left much of the Caribbean in a sorry state. Unlike in Britain, however, the siege of those countries had lasted for 300 years. Three centuries of colonial rule had stripped the Caribbean of much of its wealth and resources, and left behind an unsustainable plantation economy. Under the British, the French, the Dutch, the Spanish and Portuguese, the Caribbean region and Latin America and South America had become little more than a warehouse from which to extract profit.

In 1948, the societies that had once been made up of slaves and their owners were instead made up of rich planters and landless, low-wage labourers. People in the Caribbean had been emancipated from slavery in 1834, but they had achieved their emancipation in name only. Ten years before HMT Windrush arrived on British shores, labourers in Barbados were earning the equivalent of just £3.50 a day. Half the workforce worked in manufacturing and agriculture. Many were employed on sugar plantations and forced to work for extremely low wages. They worked in unbearable conditions, their children were suffering from malnutrition and they faced an influx of disease.

In Jamaica, searing unemployment ravaged society. Britain had closed sugar plantations in favour of cheaper labour elsewhere, and the consequences were devastating. Labour riots were commonplace as people became increasingly frustrated by the destitution that they faced. In Guyana, society was reeling from the Ruimveldt riots in the earlier part of the 20th century. Again, much of the economy was crippled, and people were working in bauxite mines and on sugar or rice plantations for very poor wages and in very poor conditions. People were rioting as a consequence. We cannot forget that Britain

underdevelopment of the Commonwealth. Britain deindustrialised India, and its profits were built on the exploitation of Caribbean plantations and on the backs of Egyptian cotton farmers and Barbadian sugar producers.

We cannot forget that those on board the Windrush came to Britain filled with the promise of the British motherland, yet this was the same Britain that had promised away all their riches and resources. It was the same Britain that has never faced justice for the crime of slavery, and that stole 12 million people from their homes in the dead of night and carted them like cattle across the ocean and into slavery. This had never before been seen in the world. Britain was still paying off its debts to slave owners in 2015, but it has never paid reparations to those who are the descendants of slaves.

This is the same Britain that, sadly, has recently failed the Windrush generation. It had failed them previously, and it has failed them again today. Many of the Windrush generation have once again been made destitute by the British state. They have had their rights stripped from them, and they have been thrust into despair and desperation. The injustices that the victims face today have a long history, and it is a history that Britain must never forget. I do not say that to evoke guilt. This is not really about guilt. If you do not know where you are from, you do not know where you are going. If you just teach your young people the very best bits of history and do not examine the tougher bits, as the modern nations of Germany and Japan have had to do, you will make the same mistakes over and over. The injustices that the victims face today have a history that we must remember.

We finally return full circle, then, to education. The British national curriculum is stunted because it too often glosses over the bad. History in British schools skips from the Henrys to Hitler, ignoring the shame of what goes on in between. We fail to teach slavery and exploitation across Africa and the Caribbean. We fail to teach about Britain's colonialism. We fail to teach about the brutal suppression of the Mau Mau uprising. We fail to teach about the Indian partition, where up to 2 million people were killed. We must cure Britain's amnesia and reflect maturely and frankly on our historical record. We must teach our history, geography and sociology honestly and accurately, warts and all.

Far from acknowledging our racist past, the government is adding to the list of national disgraces that are being brushed under the carpet. Sajid Javid has announced that compensation for the Windrush generation will be delayed, with no mention of a hardship fund. When I write to the Immigration Minister, I am met with a reluctance to apologise. People have been pushed into rent arrears and debt by the Home Office, but they still have no financial support. The Windrush Scandal is already an extension of our colonial past. The question is: will it become just another extension of colonialism that we choose to forget? In 100 years, will we fail to teach our children about it as well? We cannot let this happen. I have spoken about the loss of educational opportunities for the Windrush children. Ultimately, our inability to acknowledge the historical roots of their arrival would be a gravely wasted opportunity to educate *ourselves*.

When we fail to educate ourselves about our past, frankly and maturely, we misremember. This misremembering of the past has enabled the Brexiteer sovereignty. Rather than alliance and diplomacy, we are told all that is needed is that we *naïve*.

The need to remember accurately is more pressing than ever. If we end up leaving the EU, then the future of our economy will rest on our ability and dedication to strike trade deals around the world. We can go into these meetings one of two ways. The first way is to go in with colonial nostalgia and cultural ignorance. The second is to go in with maturity, reflection and the knowledge of *how* these countries and their people think of the UK. One of these approaches ends in humiliation and failure. The other leads to diplomacy and prosperity.

Thank you.