

*History Notes: Issue 21*

# Black Skin, Whitehall: Race and the Foreign Office 1945–2018

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RACE AND THE FOREIGN OFFICE,  
1945-2018***

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## Black Skin, Whitehall: A History

I was asked to go out to the tent which Museveni had then arrived at. His first question was: ‘High Commissioner – who’s that African you’ve got with you?’ And I said: ‘He’s not African. He’s British’. And Museveni said: ‘But he’s black’. And I said: ‘yes, he’s black British’. ‘How is that possible?’ said Museveni. So we had this interesting conversation about citizenship and how you could actually become British by being born in Britain, which was very relevant to the situation in Uganda, which at that time was host to hundreds of thousands of Rwandans who had no hope whatever of ever becoming Ugandans because they were Rwandans.<sup>1</sup>

*Charles Cullimore, former High Commissioner to Uganda, interviewed in 2009, remembering visiting the Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni.*

I remember seeing a girl that was ... on the bench outside my office, crying, She was an intern, she had a headscarf on, a hijab, and was crying ... and she said ‘Nobody looks like me, nobody sounds like me’ ... I have not worked in an organisation where I have met so many people that constantly say ‘I don’t belong here’.<sup>2</sup>

*Mandip Sahota, interviewed in 2015 while working in Baroness Warsi’s Private Office at the FCO*

### Introduction

This History Note is the first attempt to document the history of race at the Foreign Office. It is not a history of British foreign policy, but rather a history of the absence of non-white (what we now describe, perhaps problematically, as BAME) people from the Foreign Office as an organisation for most of the twentieth century.\* It is also a history of how present-day approaches towards non-white staff developed, and what has driven changes in attitudes over the past thirty years or so.

Diplomats never agreed on a clear definition of ‘coloured’ – the term they used after the Second World War to refer to anyone applying to join the Diplomatic Service whose skin colour was (for them) a cause for concern. As this History Note shows, they tried to reconcile their idea of fair, meritocratic recruitment with what they saw as a genuine

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\* The term ‘non-white’ is used in the historical sections of this publication to describe those people of African, South Asian, East Asian or West Indian origin or heritage to whom the Foreign Office’s rules about ineligibility specifically applied. In a strictly *historical* sense, it is apt to group together people from a diverse range of backgrounds in this way in order to tease out the mechanism by which Foreign Office policy functioned. The term BAME, however – used in the final section of the publication – is far more problematic in that it groups together ‘Black and Minority Ethnic’ people in an unwieldy, homogenising manner. The reasons why, for example, people of Black Caribbean and Indian heritage fare so differently in FCO recruitment demonstrate the inadequacy of terms like BAME: there is no one ‘racism’, but rather many different ‘racisms’, affecting different groups in different ways. It is not the intention of this publication to merge together the diverse communities falling under the ‘BAME’ rubric. Rather, ‘BAME’ is adopted here because it is the most commonly-used term at the FCO and other similar organisations to monitor race, recruitment and diversity. Further – much-needed – research is required to explore fully the nuances of the experiences within and between groups classified as BAME.

risk to security and institutional reputation in employing non-white people to represent Britain overseas. At the Foreign Office, until the 1980s at least, those who did not match diplomats' definitions of 'whiteness' were presumed potentially disloyal to Britain and were consequently excluded from the representative grades of the Diplomatic Service.

What follows is split into four sections. The first section sets the pre-1939 context before examining Foreign Office's responses to the beginning of the era of Commonwealth immigration in 1948. The second section focuses on the 1960s and 1970s, and the global impact of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States as well as the domestic impact of Harold Wilson's first Labour government. The third section charts the rise of 'diversity' at the FCO, from the first explicit pledges to improve ethnic diversity in the 1980s through to the networks, schemes and initiatives designed to increase BAME representation in the twenty-first-century FCO. Finally, the fourth section uses interviews with current and former FCO staff to investigate the situation of race in the Foreign Office in the present day, and how it might develop in the future.

### **1945-1960: 'A person of manifestly un-English appearance or speech'**

The history of immigration and race in Britain began, of course, long before the period considered in this publication – before, in fact, the Foreign Office even existed. Children attending school in Britain today are taught about the ethnic diversity of Roman Britain, and popular history books like Miranda Kaufmann's *Black Tudors* have reminded us that even Early Modern Britain was far from a racially homogenous place.<sup>3</sup>

The history of mass immigration really began in the nineteenth century, when Irish workers were brought to Britain to address labour shortages and faced ethnic and religious discrimination. They numbered 600,000 by 1861. Between 1880 and 1914, 150,000 Jewish people migrated to Britain, fleeing bloody pogroms in Eastern Europe. They, too, faced open discrimination, and the first ever piece of immigration legislation to pass through Parliament, the 1905 Aliens Act, aimed to curb Jewish immigration. There was also black immigration from the Empire before the Second World War: in 1930s London, for example, a community of West Indian and African students, activists and artists flourished, helping to launch the careers of future anticolonial intellectuals like Kwame Anthony Appiah, Jomo Kenyatta, Kwame Nkrumah and George Padmore.<sup>4</sup>

War with Nazi Germany, however, altered the landscape of race relations in Britain. From 1942, 100,000 black American servicemen came to Britain, and their presence provoked such a volatile mixture of reactions that the government became concerned about its effect on Anglo-American diplomacy. The then Secretary of State for War James Grigg, supported by the Foreign Office, instructed British Army officers to treat the black American soldiers in exactly the same manner as the officers of the racially-segregated United States Army. At a stroke, the war introduced thousands of black migrants and attendant racial segregation (albeit temporarily) to Britain.

After the end of the war, Clement Attlee's Labour government passed the 1948 Nationality Act, which awarded the legal right to UK citizenship and residence for all Commonwealth and Dominion subjects. Following the passage of the Act, 492 Jamaicans arrived at Tilbury Docks aboard the *Empire Windrush*. These pioneers were welcomed by the authorities and had little trouble finding work in skilled jobs. The

number of black migrants, however, grew rapidly: estimated at around 75,000 in 1951, there were 336,000 by 1959, half a million by 1962, and over 700,000 by 1971. There were also 58,000 Indians and Pakistanis by 1958. Moreover, less than one in ten of the post-1940 migrants to Britain were from the 'white' Dominions; the rest were from 'black' Commonwealth countries and Dominions. After the Second World War, immigration became an issue inextricably associated with skin colour.

Immigration became a regular feature of postwar political debate in Britain, as a series of events and legislative measures appeared to create a narrative of a deepening crisis in race relations. For Britain's ethnic minority population, history moved quickly and dramatically: the arrival of *Windrush* in 1948; the Notting Hill riots in 1958; the anti-immigration pronouncements from MPs like Cyril Osborne and John Parnell; the rise of protest groups like the Birmingham Immigrants Control Association; the racist campaign for the Smethwick constituency in the 1964 general election; the Ugandan Refugee crisis of 1967; and the divisive rhetoric of Enoch Powell. Legislation to curb immigration, such as the 1962 and 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Acts, and the 1971 Immigration Act, all sent a misleading message that Britain could not support any increase in the number of migrants, and that the 'indigenous' population had to be protected from an imagined migrant threat.

Where, though, did the Foreign Office fit into this turbulent story? The answer to this question lies in the fact that the Foreign Office saw itself as being – and of course in significant ways was – an important arbiter of the type of person eligible to represent Britain to the world. The practice of Positive Vetting (PV) for the Foreign Office and Security Services was introduced in 1951 as a way of detecting communists or enemies of the state during the early Cold War.<sup>5</sup> This codified in Foreign Office rules various acceptable and unacceptable characteristics, the latter of which would result in denial of a PV certificate. Quite quickly, the idea of a 'trustworthy' Briton became politicised: when homosexuality was partially decriminalised in 1967, the Foreign Office denied PV certificates to gay men on the grounds that they were a blackmail risk. The question after the 1948 Nationality Act, then, was this: would the right to British citizenship also mean that Commonwealth migrants would have the right to work for the Foreign Office and represent Britain overseas?

It took until 1951 for the Foreign Office to clarify its policy on race and recruitment. A memorandum written in early January by Sir Percival Waterfield, the First Civil Service Commissioner, said that commissioners should not 'let themselves be influenced in any way by colour prejudice', but that:

a person of manifestly un-English appearance or speech might be held unsuitable for a situation in which he would not act as a representative of the United Kingdom to foreigners.<sup>6</sup>

The burden, then, was on so-called 'coloured applicants' to demonstrate to recruiters that they were sufficiently 'English'. Power lay entirely in the hands of the commissioners, whose criteria for what constituted an 'English' applicant were never elaborated by Waterfield.

Later that year, Waterfield's successor as First Commissioner, Algernon Sinker, published further advice for recruiters on how to deal with 'Coloured British Candidates'. He began by reiterating that the 'general principle is that such a candidate must be considered on his merits, irrespective of his colour'.<sup>7</sup> Yet he repeated almost word-for-word Waterfield's claim that non-white people were especially unsuited to

diplomatic work, arguing that 'a person of un-English appearance or speech might be unsuitable for a situation in which he would act as representative of the United Kingdom to foreigners'.<sup>8</sup> The most telling passage, however, read as follows:

There are cases where a coloured candidate may properly be deemed unsuitable, not directly because of his colour or race, but because of attributes associated with or arising from those characteristics.<sup>9</sup>

In avoiding the suggestion that non-white people were *lacking* in attributes, Sinker sidestepped the charge of racial discrimination. Instead, he argued that not being white brought *additional* characteristics, which rendered 'coloured' people unfit for diplomatic representation. It is a classic example of older forms of racism, in which the privilege of whiteness resides in its invisibility: the term 'colour' suggests an excess of characteristics that 'colourless' white people lack. From the beginning of the 1950s, Foreign Office policy towards ethnicity was predicated on the basis that 'colour' brought with it an institutional burden that it did not want to carry.

Indeed, by the mid-1950s, the concept of race relations had become increasingly prominent in political and academic debate. The Home Secretary, David Maxwell-Fyfe, asked the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rab Butler, to conduct an 'examination of the possibilities of preventing any further increase in the number of coloured people seeking employment in this country'.<sup>10</sup> Butler cited internal research claiming that, although the Civil Service Commission (CSC) did not keep records on race, there were 'a few hundreds' of non-white Civil Servants in Whitehall, with '20 to 40' joining each year, all at the lower grades.<sup>11</sup>

Butler also highlighted the inherent contradictions in excluding 'coloured' people from the Civil Service while at the same time trying to maintain an institutional reputation for fairness and impartiality:

It would not be possible to revise the Regulations in such a way as both successfully and unobtrusively to exclude coloured candidates from eligibility for established Civil Service appointment would only be possible by coming out into the open about it in some way or other.<sup>12</sup>

The Chancellor added that such a policy 'would not be easy – if only because of the difficulty of defining a coloured person'.<sup>13</sup> He went on to say that an outright colour bar 'would be a signal departure from the traditional policy of non-discrimination' and moreover 'could hardly fail to excite considerable adverse comment, not only in this country, but in the Commonwealth, the United Nations and elsewhere'.<sup>14</sup> Reassured by CSC research that estimated the proportion of successful 'coloured' applicants to the Civil Service in recent years was miniscule (of the 23,000 interviewed, 20 were described as 'noticeably coloured'), Maxwell-Fyfe decided not to risk introducing a Whitehall 'colour bar'.

Even in the early 1960s, however, it was clear that an informal colour bar was in place at the Foreign Office – even if not an absolutely impermeable one. A CSC circular from February 1960 noted that at a low grade (B6) of the Foreign Office there had been 'one or two recent competitions in which the question of coloured candidates has arisen'.<sup>15</sup> In selecting candidates for the Clerical Class of the Foreign Office to be interviewed, the CSC stated that it 'did not include anybody marked 'Not for Foreign Service' by the first Board, but four coloured candidates went forward without discrimination'.<sup>16</sup> (The 'but' reveals an expectation that 'coloured candidates' would



normally be sifted out). The CSC did, however, 'take the precaution of asking the CSC to tell us their attitude', and were told:

[The Foreign Office] had no bar against coloured candidates, but people whose command of English was not sufficient or who did not know enough about the United Kingdom would obviously be unsuitable to represent this country abroad, even in the lowly grade of B.6.<sup>17</sup>

The four candidates in question were rejected, 'not because of their colour but because of their general quality as compared with the rest of the field'.<sup>18</sup> From this evidence, it is not difficult to see several different types of racism operating in tandem with one another, from concrete, overt practices like the 'Not for Foreign Service' label through to subtler, psychological barriers like the requirement that candidates be judged as sufficiently 'English'.

It is worth addressing at this stage the common contention that racism in the past is either excusable or at least understandable, supposedly because attitudes and sensibilities change over time, and what is considered offensive today would have been acceptable a few decades ago. When Thomas Lloyd, future Permanent Under Secretary at the Colonial Office, found out about Foreign Office policy towards race in 1951, he exploded. Writing to First Civil Service Commissioner Algernon Sinker, he said his department had 'been concerned over a very long period ... to remove all manifestation of colour discrimination in this country and to educate public opinion in the matter', adding that 'apart from the merits of ensuring equal treatment, the attitude adopted towards coloured Colonial people in this country has an important bearing in the relations between this country and the Colonies'.<sup>19</sup> He went on:

It does not seem to us, quite frankly, that the policy of effective non-discrimination is fully reflected in the memorandum [explaining the policy]. You will, I am sure, forgive me if I speak rather bluntly ... The whole tone of the memorandum appears to suggest that its object is to ensure that the principle of equal treatment for coloured candidates, while being recognised in theory, should only be applied in practice where this is convenient to Departments. There are a number of phrases in it which suggest that in this matter it is more important to ensure that justice should appear to be done than that it should in fact be done.<sup>20</sup>

Lloyd's two key points – that appointing black diplomats to black countries might be a good idea, and that the Foreign Office was merely paying lip service to equality with its nationality rules – illustrate that even in the early 1950s it was easily possible for a government department to take a liberal attitude to race.

### **1960-1980: 'The time has not yet come for us to employ negro officers'**

After more than a decade of Civil Rights campaigning in the United States, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965 marked a turning-point in American, and indeed global, history. The first Act outlawed discrimination based on race, colour, religion, sex or national origin, while the second guaranteed voting rights for ethnic minorities throughout the United States. Keen to establish its liberal credentials in the face of Soviet propaganda, Lyndon B. Johnson's

administration attempted to convey a clear and profound message about racial equality and Western democracy.

Across the Atlantic, the Civil Rights Movement prompted the incumbent Labour government to take a critical look at race and British industry. In 1966 the then Home Secretary, Roy Jenkins, asked Minister of State Alice Bacon to write to all Civil Service departments to 'be certain that our own house is in order' with regard to racial discrimination. Jenkins' plan, Bacon explained, was to conduct a national review of British industries:

Unless we can ensure that coloured people, especially those born and educated here, are able to get the work and the promotion to supervisory positions to which their qualifications entitle them, we may well find ourselves facing all the implications of an American type situation in which an indigenous minority group is discriminated against solely on grounds of colour.<sup>21</sup>

Jenkins had also been contacted by Mark Bonham Carter, Chair of the new Race Relations Board, which had been created in 1965 an independent arbitration body for disputes about racial discrimination. Bonham Carter wrote on behalf of another board member, Sir Learie Constantine, who had in turn expressed deep concern over whether the government was committed to its 'stated policy of non-discrimination in the employment field'.<sup>22</sup> The geopolitics of the Civil Rights Movement combined with serious concerns about structural discrimination at home persuaded Jenkins that an urgent review of race and Whitehall recruitment was required.

At the time of Bacon's letter, Foreign Office policy on race covered only eligibility criteria. The regulations stipulated that a candidate was ineligible for membership of the Diplomatic Service unless:

- a) he or she was 'at all times since birth' a British or Irish citizen; unless his or her parents were at all times British or Irish citizens;
- b) the 'Secretary of State is satisfied that the candidate is so closely connected with the United Kingdom, taking into account such considerations as ancestry, upbringing and residence';
- c) he or she undertook to become a British citizen if not already one.<sup>23</sup>

The most important thing to note about these regulations is their flexibility. The second criterion – that candidates were 'closely connected with the United Kingdom' – reserved the right to overrule the other two, suggesting that recruiters (and ultimately the Foreign Secretary) had to be satisfied that, on balance, the candidate could be deemed acceptable. This was not, therefore, merely institutional or structural racism. This was a battle of opinions between individual diplomats as to how to interpret vague rules.

Indeed, diplomats were divided as to the most appropriate way of applying the regulations. In late 1965, Dennis Fowler, an officer from the Diplomatic Service Administration Office (DSAO) wrote to his colleagues about the case of three non-white civil servants who were seeking transfer to the Diplomatic Service.<sup>24</sup> The three men in question were:

- M.L. Atwell, who was born in Barbados, educated at Modern High School in Bridgetown, now working as a Clerical Officer for the Ministry of Housing and Local Government;
- C.M.K. Burge, born in Indore, India and educated at the University of Peshawar and South Berkshire College of Further Education in Newbury, now working as an Executive Officer in the Atomic Energy Authority;
- I.H. Chin, born in British Guiana and educated at Regent Street Polytechnic as well as Pitman's Secretarial College in London, now working as an Executive Officer for the Colonial Service.

Fowler set out a strong case 'for accepting these officers'. He said that they had 'earned it on merit', having been through interview processes and passed. He added, more poignantly, that 'in the new multi-racial Britain it is logical that the Diplomatic Service should have some coloured members', and that having some would

improve our image in certain countries ... Indeed, it could be argued in some quarters that the fact that there are no coloured members of the Diplomatic Service is proof that our talk of equality of opportunity for all races is so much eyewash.<sup>25</sup>

Evidently, there was no seamless web of racist attitudes at the Foreign Office; diplomats were familiar with the nuances of the issue. It would be mistaken, therefore, to imagine a racist 1960s establishment closing ranks on the basis of skin colour.

Influenced by anxieties about security, however, discussions at the 1960s Foreign Office tended towards casual prejudice. Indeed, despite his cautions about institutional hypocrisy, Fowler was unwilling to recommend that the three men be allowed transfer. Asian officers (by which he meant Burge and Chin), he thought, would pose little to no problem, but he warned that 'with the present upsurge of racist feeling among negroes throughout the world, there would be a considerable risk in employing a negro in a Diplomatic Service post abroad'. Black officers would 'immediately become a target for subversion by the Iron Curtain countries and even by the more extreme African countries'. He concluded with confidence: 'On balance my feeling is that the time has not yet come for us to employ negro officers in the Diplomatic Service'.<sup>26</sup>

Fowler's colleagues in the DSAO and Personnel Policy Department had similar (though significantly not identical) concerns. James McGhie replied to say that 'I disagree strongly about Asians. The Chinese for example are in my experience only basically loyal to themselves and the Central Kingdom'.<sup>27</sup> Stephen Olver at the Foreign Office Security Department pushed the point about Chinese and other Asian people even further:

May they not still be susceptible to Indian and West Indian influence? Mr. Chin has a Chinese name and the inherent nationalism of the Chinese is such that he may even be susceptible to Chinese influence.<sup>28</sup>

Fowler, McGhie and Olver each recommended that all three of the officers in question be denied transfer to the Diplomatic Service. What is most significant about their reasoning, however, is its internal inconsistency. For Fowler, Asians were acceptable but 'negroes' were not; for the others, Asians were a far bigger problem. Terms like 'Asian', 'negro', 'inherent nationalism' and 'loyal to themselves' were thrown around without cogent definitions. The decision-making culture reflected the attitude of David Maxwell-Fyfe and Rab Butler a decade earlier: definitive rules ought to be avoided lest

they invite criticism and political pressure, but it was better to be cautious and find reasons not to employ non-white diplomats.

Yet the internal inconsistencies of diplomats' attitudes could only be maintained for so long. In May 1966, the Foreign Office Security Department was asked to deal with another case, this time involving a 19-year-old Miss. F.V. Glaze, Personal Assistant to Charles Roberts in the Aden Section of the Colonial Office. As part of the forthcoming merger between the Foreign Office and the Commonwealth Relations Office (CRO), Glaze was being considered for appointment to the Diplomatic Service, but officials advised that 'as a non-U.K. citizen' she 'might prove a source of embarrassment from the security angle'.<sup>29</sup>

The lines between Glaze's citizenship and her skin colour quickly became blurred. Michael Morgan wrote to his Security Department colleague Stephen Olver to argue that when it came to 'coloured candidates',

we should be guided not so much by any hard and fast required period of residence in this country, as by the general principle that the period of residence must be such as to suggest that loyalties are to the United Kingdom ... Clearly we must expect and may have to put up with some temporary influx of coloured staff with C.R.O. amalgamation. But I hope due care will be taken to ensure that Miss Glaze and others like her, whose background loyalties must be Commonwealth rather than British, are replaced as soon as possible.<sup>30</sup>

Morgan recognised that strict nationality rules might not be defensible in cases like that of Glaze, who had been resident in the United Kingdom since 1961 but whose background and skin colour diplomats could not accept. The CRO was more open to employing non-white officers, and this fact worried diplomats who were keen to keep those non-white officers out of their organisation.

Again there were calls for a more liberal approach. Douglas Phillips at the DSAO told fellow diplomat Ewen Fergusson that the terms 'British subject' and 'Commonwealth citizen' were 'synonymous' and that both should therefore be equally eligible for the Diplomatic Service. 'Indeed', he continued, 'the sooner the Service begins to reflect the multi-racial nature of our society, surely the better'.<sup>31</sup> Diplomats had evidently conveyed Phillips' suggested attitude to their Minister of State: when George Thomson eventually replied to Alice Bacon's original letter, he said that 'in the Diplomatic Service the problem of colour hardly yet arises'.<sup>32</sup>

It is worth pausing for a moment to contemplate the apparently contradictory attitudes to race circulating in the mid-1960s Foreign Office. Historians of decolonisation in Britain have written extensively about the profound domestic impact of the winding up of the British Empire: for centuries, government officials' perceptions of race had been shaped by encounters with British colonial subjects (think of George Orwell's career as a colonial administrator and his novel *Burmese Days*). Generations of officials in various overseas government departments had confronted their own 'whiteness' in the context of exotic environments and imperial administration. As historian Bill Schwarz has explained, the rapid decolonisation of the 1960s had just as much an effect at home in Britain as it did overseas:

... the proximity of black migrants worked to activate memories of the imperial past – memories of white authority, in particular ... For the white

man could only be a white man in relation to his others: his whiteness and his masculinity acquired meaning only in relation to those who had no claims, or lesser claims, to whiteness or to masculinity.<sup>33</sup>

Taking, for example, the career of an officer like Douglas Phillips, it is not too difficult to imagine the effects of the psychological processes that Schwarz described. Joining the CRO in 1948, Phillips worked in Pakistan and India, before joining the Diplomatic Service in the mid-1960s and working in Australia, Singapore and Sri Lanka. 'Race', to men like Phillips, meant empire and 'Britishness' as defined against an exotic 'other'. In the contradictory opinions quoted above, we can observe a psychological struggle taking place as diplomats tried to reconcile the idea of being a 'British diplomat' with the idea of being 'coloured'.

Of course, 'coloured' diplomats with African or Asian heritage did not comprise Britain's entire ethnic minority community. Although there has never been a specific rule forbidding the employment of Jewish people as diplomats, there have occasionally been instances where anti-Semitism has influenced careers. Horace Phillips was a Scottish Jew who joined the Foreign Office in 1947. Famously, in 1968, he was appointed Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, but a few days later King Feisal withdrew his initial agreement to the appointment. In a remarkable turn of events, an article in the *Jewish Chronicle* about the lack of Jewish people in the upper echelons of the Diplomatic Service prompted a Scottish reader to write to the paper, informing the editors of Phillips' recent appointment to Saudi Arabia. The *Chronicle* splashed the story, and the news found its way to Riyadh that Britain had sent a Jewish Ambassador there. King Feisal refused to accept the appointment, and the Foreign Office was left with little choice but to accept the decision were diplomatic relations to be maintained.

Several important events in the 1960s, like Peter Griffiths' 'if you want a nigger for a neighbour vote Labour' campaign to win the Smethwick seat in the 1964 general election, the formation of the National Front in 1967, and the infamous 'Birmingham Speech' delivered by Powell in May 1968, ushered in a new era of populist racism in Britain. If indeed the issue at the Foreign Office was not strictly one of skin colour, but that recruits 'should genuinely be able to represent Britain', as DSAO officer Ewen Fergusson argued in 1966, then the divisive nationalism that was beginning to shape so much of British political discourse did not augur well for non-white ethnic groups.

There were, though, legislative attempts made in the 1960s and 1970s to improve race relations and to tackle racial discrimination. Roy Jenkins, Home Secretary between 1965 and 1967, delivered a speech about race in Britain in May 1966 in which he decried the 'flattening process' of *assimilation*, and argued instead in favour of *integration*, which he defined as 'equal opportunity accompanied by cultural diversity in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance'.<sup>34</sup> Just as he tried, with legislation on male homosexuality, divorce, corporal punishment and abortion, to create a liberal 'civilised society' (as he called it), so, too, with the passage of the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968 did he try to build a more racially tolerant Britain – including within Whitehall.

The full effect of Jenkins' reforms would only really be felt in the 1980s and 1990s as successive political attempts to tackle discrimination built on his legislative legacy. He did, however, have a more immediate impact on the Foreign Office. One of the provisions of the 1965 Race Relations Act was the creation of the aforementioned Race Relations Board (subsequently the Commission for Racial Equality and from 2007 the Equality and Human Rights Commission). The Board was responsible

(among other things) for arbitrating between employers and individuals who felt they had been discriminated against. Colin Crowe, the Diplomatic Service Chief of Administration, reported that the Treasury was adamant that it would not allow the Race Relations Board jurisdiction over Civil Service appointments and promotions on the basis that this would bind the process to an extra-parliamentary body, and that technically therefore ministerial authority would be compromised.

Crowe persuaded the then Foreign Secretary George Brown to back the Treasury position, and Brown wrote to Jenkins at the Home Office to express his concern that 'there would have to be exemptions for the Diplomatic Service', not only because of ministerial independence, but also on security grounds.<sup>35</sup> In a characteristically measured response, Jenkins wrote to Harold Lever at the Department of Economic Affairs, hoping to bring him on side:

It is basic to our policy on racial questions that the government must give a firm lead to public opinion. The new race relations legislation ... will place categorical obligations on all employers and to exempt the Crown would be to give the Government a special position which I think we would have difficulty in justifying.<sup>36</sup>

What nobody (apart from the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson) knew, however, was that Roy Jenkins was in line to replace James Callaghan as Chancellor. Appointed in November 1967, Jenkins took over the Treasury determined to use his new position to remove impediments to the powers of the Race Relations Board. One worried diplomat reported to his colleagues that Jenkins 'has brought from the Home Office to the Treasury all the zeal that the Home Office was showing when he was in charge of it', adding that Treasury officials 'are a bit upset that their hierarchy have not stood up to Mr. Jenkins' over the issue.<sup>37</sup>

Jenkins agreed a compromise with the Treasury whereby complaints made to the Race Relations Board would be investigated internally by Whitehall departments, who would then have to justify their findings and actions to the Board. It was not an ideal solution for many reasons, but it did serve as a revolutionary development in one important respect: for the first time, the Foreign Office would have to justify its decisions about its treatment of non-white staff to the outside world.

It would take until the mid-1980s for statistics about the ethnic backgrounds of staff to be compiled, so it is difficult to assess the Foreign Office record on race during the 1970s governments of Edward Heath, Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. The 1971 Immigration Act tightened controls on who could and could not come to Britain to work, and introduced a new, tightened definition of a 'Patrial' – an individual with 'close ties' to the United Kingdom in the form of permanent residence or a parent with citizenship, for example. 'Patrials' had the right to work in Britain, but at the same time the Heath government tightened restrictions on other forms of immigration. Labour did little to alter this situation when back in power from 1974. Separate studies in the 1970s demonstrated that within the labour market itself, better-paid jobs requiring skill and training were overwhelmingly controlled and dominated by whites.<sup>38</sup> Put simply, it was unlikely that there would be much significant change to the racial composition of the Diplomatic Service or Foreign Office in the 1970s.



### **1980-2000: 'Membership of the host society's club'?**

At the end of the 1970s, Whitehall employment practices were, as one CSC circular put it, 'coming under increasing scrutiny'.<sup>39</sup> The reason was the passage of two pieces of legislation, the Sex Discrimination Act (1975) and the Race Relations Act (1976), which together made discrimination in employment on the grounds of sex or race illegal.

Significantly, the Race Relations Act made a distinction between *direct* and *indirect* discrimination. As we have seen, diplomats were more than ready to defend themselves against charges of outright racism. The term 'indirect discrimination', however, had implications that might present difficulties. While diplomats had no trouble distinguishing their views from, say, those of Enoch Powell or members of the National Front, proving that the rules around race and recruitment did not *indirectly* disadvantage non-white applicants would be another matter altogether. How could diplomats argue that decades of linking race, ethnicity and nationality with concerns about security and representation did not obstruct the appointment of people who did not have white skin?

Demonstrating that Civil Service recruitment did not indirectly discriminate against non-white candidates would require the CSC to begin to keep records about the ethnic background of applicants. R.H. Howorth, a Senior Principal in the Civil Service Department, was opposed to this for two main reasons. The first was that monitoring ethnicity 'may elicit false information ... in the recent trial census some people of negro descent classified themselves as English'.<sup>40</sup> This, of course, implied that there were fundamental links between skin colour and 'Englishness'. Howorth then speculated as to why those of 'negro descent' were unable to represent Britain:

Because we fall over backwards to fill our posts by fair and open competition, we can only assume that, since the ethnic minority groups do not fare as well in our competitions as do people of European descent, the ethnic minority groups do not possess the qualities which we require, on average, to as high a degree as their British-born counterparts.<sup>41</sup>

In these comments, Howorth not only deemed those of what he termed 'negro descent' to be by definition un-English, but he also racialized the 'qualities' associated with being a diplomat. His phrasing – 'on average' – avoided going so far as saying that non-white people were *all* less capable than their white counterparts, but nonetheless suggested that there was a causal link between ethnicity and diplomatic ability.

D.J. MacLeod, the Chief Psychologist at the CSC, shared Howorth's view, arguing that it took generations for his Gaelic ancestors to assimilate with British society, and that in the case of those educated in 'Third World countries' (by which he meant, of course, the black Commonwealth), it was clear that 'superficial Westernisation does little to remove the difference in test performance that we are talking about'.<sup>42</sup> This vague suspicion that non-white applicants simply were not of the required standard – and that this shortfall in talent was a situation in which diplomats were powerless to act – would dominate debates about ethnic minority representation at the Foreign Office throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s.

The 1980s were a decade of contradictions for ethnic minorities in British public life. As Margaret Thatcher's government came to power in 1979, Britain was in the grip of a moral panic linking knife crime and mugging with young black men. Race riots including those in Chapeltown, Toxteth, Handsworth, Brixton and Dewsbury punctuated the decade with reminders that relations between government, police and Britain's ethnic minority communities were constantly strained. Such tensions reached fever pitch with the cultural and legal fallout from the racially-motivated murder of the black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993.

Yet at the same time, a number of historic milestones were passed. In 1978, Trevor Phillips became the first black president of the National Union of Students. In 1982, Val McCalla founded the black weekly newspaper *The Voice*. At the 1987 general election, four ethnic minority MPs were elected, including the first black woman MP, Diane Abbott, and Paul Boateng, who would go on to be the first mixed-race cabinet minister and then be appointed High Commissioner to South Africa in 2005 by Tony Blair.

The increased visibility of black role models in the 1980s was a crucial step for Britain's ethnic minority communities, but of equal importance was a growing willingness to discuss racial discrimination openly and productively. This period saw the first parliamentary questions put to Foreign Office ministers on the subject of racial discrimination in employment. Greville Janner, then the Labour MP for Leicester West, asked the Foreign Office Minister of State Tim Renton whether he would appoint an equal opportunities officer in the Diplomatic Service. Renton replied that there were already 'three such officers', appointed in 1984 to deal with 'race and sex discrimination', working with the Diplomatic Service, the Overseas Development Administration, and Hanslope Park respectively.<sup>43</sup>

By 1986, it was clear that ethnic minority recruitment was, in theory at least, becoming a priority for the CSC. The official report of the Civil Service Commissioners featured a special in-depth review of racial discrimination in CSC hiring practices. The review conceded that the 1968 Race Relations Act had forced the CSC to reconsider its principle that 'merit and fairness' were alone capable of delivering a representative Civil Service. The commissioners would have to work harder, they said, to engage with ethnic minority school leavers through advertising and school liaison visits.<sup>44</sup>

The special CSC report appeared to mark a turning-point in attitudes to the employment of ethnic minority civil servants, as the commissioners considered how to diversify intake without making any of the racist assumptions that come with positive discrimination:

We have considered whether we should also produce material aimed specifically at ethnic minority school leavers. There are arguments for and against this. We want to encourage suitably qualified ethnic minority candidates who might also be deterred from applying. But a separate publication directed exclusively at ethnic minority school leavers may suggest that we regard ethnic minority candidates as different, with the implication that we have some hidden quota of places for black and Asian applicants. This is not the case.<sup>45</sup>

The commissioners decided against producing targeted material, but did propose buying advertising space in ethnic minority press publications. The issue was not restricted to the initial application stage, either. The same CSC report launched a separate review into whether there was a ‘cultural bias’ to its Qualifying Test, after it found that while ethnic minorities applied ‘broadly in proportion to their representation in the working population of Great Britain as a whole’, they ‘disturbingly’ fared much worse than their white counterparts in the test.<sup>46</sup> Slowly, Whitehall recruiters were confronting the scale of the challenge they faced in trying to build a non-discriminatory recruitment system.

A survey of the entire (non-industrial) Civil Service in 1987 found that among civil servants, 3.6 per cent identified as Asian and two per cent as black.<sup>47</sup> This was a roughly representative figure: even in the 1991 census, 3.3 per cent of Britons identified as Asian and 1.6 per cent as black. Significantly, though, these percentages referred to the Civil Service as a whole and did not necessarily reflect the distribution of ethnic minority employees across the grades. Indeed, these figures appear particularly misleading if we consider the Diplomatic Service, for which, in every grade except the two most junior, entry rates were lower for ethnic minority candidates than for their white counterparts.<sup>48</sup> Responding to a parliamentary question about race in the Diplomatic Service in 1988, FCO Minister of State Timothy Eggar conceded that ‘only one serving member of the administrative group [the most senior grades] was identified as belonging to an ethnic minority with antecedents in the Afro-Asian Caribbean Commonwealth’.<sup>49</sup>

The Qualifying Test was again identified as a problem. In 1987, there were 206 ethnic minority applicants to the Civil Service Fast Stream; just two of these went through to the Final Selection Board, and just one was appointed. In 1988, the total numbers of ethnic minority staff in the Diplomatic Service were as follows:

GRADE	STAFF IN POST	NO. ETHNIC MINORITY	% ETHNIC MINORITY
DS 1-5	1,119	1	0.1
DS 6-7	1,464	9	0.6
DS 9	1,477	8	0.5
DS 10 and below)	2,260	66	2.9
Industrial	114	4	3.5
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>6,434</b>	<b>88</b>	<b>1.4</b>

The one person in the top grades was Noel Jones, who was Head of Post in Seattle, and would go on to become Britain’s first ever ethnic minority Ambassador when posted to Kazakhstan in 1993. Jones was, evidently, an exception who managed to work his way up through the organisation after joining in 1962, being promoted to Third Secretary level in 1975 and Deputy Head of Mission in Bonn in 1979. As the above statistics clearly demonstrate, however, progression to the senior grades was extremely rare for ethnic minority staff.

A closer look at Jones, and at Robin Chatterjie, who (evidence suggests) was the first ever successful ethnic minority applicant to the Diplomatic Service Fast Stream in

1975, provides some clues as to the institutional culture around race in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Born in India in 1940, Jones moved to Britain as a child, and did not attend university – instead beginning his career as a chartered accountant. He joined the Diplomatic Service in 1962 at the grade of DS10 (comprised of attachés and registry clerks), working his way up through the organisation and reaching ambassadorial rank in 1993.

Jones was extremely highly-regarded by his colleagues, but was reluctant to be thought of as a pioneer. He did not talk openly about his ethnicity, and nor did anybody else: a *Guardian* article from June 1996 was effusive in its praise of his handling of an alcohol shortage in Kazakhstan three years earlier, declaring that his ‘stoicism under extreme pressure has become a byword in the service’, but made no mention of his status as Britain’s first ethnic minority ambassador. The Foreign Office failed to build on his appointment, appointing its next ethnic minority ambassadors – Alp Mehmet to Iceland and Anwar Choudhury to Bangladesh – more than ten years later in 2004.

Jones’ reluctance to discuss his Indian heritage appears to have reflected Foreign Office culture as much as it did his individual preferences. Probably the first ethnic minority candidate to be accepted onto the Foreign Office Fast Stream programme was Robin Chatterjie, who joined in 1975. Little is known about Chatterjie’s life, but coincidentally he joined as part of the same cohort as the *Times* columnist Matthew Parris, who remembers his friend and colleague. Interviewed in 2018, Parris described Chatterjie as

gregarious, and yet quite a solitary person. I think he put on a very confident, almost dandified front. I remember him as being a cultured person, cultured in literature, cultured in music ... I got the impression that his family were relatively wealthy Indian people, perhaps second generation themselves. He was certainly second generation ... There was something a little bit British Raj about him, something a little bit old fashioned ... <sup>50</sup>

Chatterjie fitted with the cultural template of an upper-middle-class Englishman, and Parris was evidently impressed by his tastes, intellect and persona.

While such observations raise questions about the relationship between race and class, Parris also denied that although ‘it should have seemed odd’, neither he nor any of his colleagues discussed or, as he claimed, particularly noticed Robin’s ethnic background:

No. It wasn’t not talked about because it would have been embarrassing or anything, it just wasn’t talked about because all of us in the Foreign Office thought we were terribly clever. We thought we were the sort of crème de la crème. And we knew it was the hardest, apart from the Treasury, of all the Departments to get into. And so we just regarded ourselves as sort of Foreign Office, sort of elite, and there was nothing strange about Robin being in it.<sup>51</sup>

In this passage, Parris describes a self-confident elite who thought of themselves, as he later put it, ‘too clever and civilised’ to discuss issues like race, and for whom

Chatterjie's presence alone was proof of his ability – a natural ability that was clearly thought to transcend ethnic background.

Indeed, Chatterjie epitomised the idea that identity politics were subordinate to the display of 'merit' and conformity to Foreign Office culture. Parris was convinced that his colleague was, like himself, a gay man. Chatterjie 'fitted a Wildean ... exuberant, flamboyant, slightly dandified' stereotype. Whether Parris' assumption was accurate is of secondary importance; what matters is the way Chatterjie's persona was understood by his colleagues:

I think actually if Robin had been a white boy, and had been the kind of person he was, we would have assumed he was gay, and we would have thought it pretty odd and thought him an anachronism. But because he was obviously, very high-born Indian, one somehow put him in a special category.<sup>52</sup>

Jones' and Chatterjie's Indian heritages functioned differently. For Jones, it appeared not to affect his career, and certainly made little impact on the Foreign Office and its attitudes to ethnicity in general. For Chatterjie, it served to give him an excuse for eccentricity, which in turn helped him to fashion a persona which, according to Matthew Parris, enabled him to fit in with his colleagues.

Robin Chatterjie died tragically young in 1986; Noel Jones also died prematurely, in 1995 – just two years into his ambassadorship to Kazakhstan. Chatterjie never fulfilled the career he was surely capable of, and is only remembered through having earned a mention in Matthew Parris' memoir, *Chance Witness*. Jones, meanwhile, achieved a tremendous amount and was remembered by all who knew him as an extremely talented and dedicated diplomat, but left little tangible legacy in terms of advancing or promoting racial equality in the Diplomatic Service. This was never his responsibility, of course, but it does reveal a lot about the scope for discussion and recognition of race at the 1980s and 1990s Foreign Office.

The 1992 CSC Report lamented that there was 'no shortage' of ethnic minority applicants to the Civil Service Fast Stream, but that 'this was not yet reflected in ethnic minority successes'.<sup>53</sup> Only seven non-white applicants across the whole Civil Service were accepted.<sup>54</sup> Survey data from the mid-1990s shows that ethnic minority graduates were marginally more likely to work in the public sector than their white counterparts.<sup>55</sup> Moreover, the public sector – in particular local government jobs – had been the single most effective way of integrating ethnic minorities into the employment market between the 1960s and 1980s.<sup>56</sup> The Foreign Office, although recruiting on a different scale and in a different manner, therefore had little excuse for its poor record on hiring ethnic minorities.

The 1997 general election brought a new government and with it arguably the most left-wing Foreign Secretary in the history of the role. Robin Cook had a track record of promoting social equality while in opposition, famously bringing Scottish law on homosexuality in line with that in England in 1980. Soon after his appointment, Cook made public commitments that the FCO would represent the diversity of British society, and organised a highly successful Open Day – the first of a number of new

initiatives aimed at attracting more women, ethnic minorities and people with disabilities to join the FCO.<sup>57</sup> Cook also promised the ‘creation of a new post for an expert to look at ethnic minority issues in the FCO and liaise with outside organisations who can offer help and advice’.<sup>58</sup>

Cook kept his word and created a new post: the Ethnic Minority Liaison Officer. The appointee was to be a diversity consultant named Linbert Spencer, the writer of the *Diversity Pocket Book* whose impressive CV included contracts with firms in the private sector as well as Greater Manchester Police and the Cabinet Office. He was given a large office in the FCO’s main building in King Charles Street, and worked for two years full-time and then another two years as a consultant.

Speaking in 2018, Spencer recalled the scale of the task he encountered at the FCO, remarking that governmental departments were ‘really concerned, and rightly so, about equality’ but had ‘no idea about the value of a culture’. He contrasted this with the private sector, who ‘understood that if they had half a dozen white men show up in a situation that had women and black people they were less likely to get the job’. In essence, his experience had taught him that private companies instinctively understood the so-called ‘business case’ for diversity, and that what was required at the Foreign Office was a similar realisation that creating a culture of inclusion was far more important than meeting ‘equal opportunities’ targets to which it was already nominally committed.<sup>59</sup>

Spencer was far from critical of senior individuals at the FCO, and in fact singled out former Foreign Secretary Jack Straw and former PUS John Kerr for their attitudes and the support they afforded him. Rather, he felt the crux of the problem lay in the need to ‘manage the change’ while at the same time not thinking ‘that the lack of ability to change is just about the thing that you’re wanting to change’. Eliminating what he called ‘alligators in the lobby’ – perceptions and obstacles preventing non-whites from applying to join – was his priority.<sup>60</sup>

Some of this, he said, came down to basic communication and mutual understanding. He remembered visiting an overseas post with a record of racial discrimination, at which the new Head of Mission had introduced an ‘open-door policy’ to encourage staff to talk freely should they experience any form of discrimination. During Spencer’s visit, the Senior Locally-Engaged member of staff asked him if she could share some issues she had been discussing with colleagues:

She said: ‘We have a real problem with the open-door policy’. I, and the other Brits in the room – wide eyes – ‘well, what’s the issue?’ She said, ‘well, this thing that, there’s the door, if you don’t like it you can leave’. That was the perception of what open door meant, because of the context ... you need to be very careful about the assumptions you make when you’re using picture language [because some] people have got different pictures and they come to different conclusions.<sup>61</sup>

It is an anecdote that encapsulates neatly one of the core challenges faced by ‘equal opportunity’, ‘affirmative action’ and ‘diversity’ campaigners over the second half of the twentieth century: successful anti-discrimination policy involves creating a culture in



which dominant and minority groups both see equality as a priority in which they share a vested interest.

Spencer's advice for the Foreign Office – then and now – was to think deeply and critically about the boundaries to inclusion that operated as part of its institutional culture:

So yes, the Foreign Office is open to everybody, but it's only open to those who conform or comply with a whole range of things. Some of those are academic. Some of those have to do with how you look and speak when you are representing this nation. Some of those have to do with behaviours, and some of those have to do with your willingness to sign up to a set of values. Now, once those things are clear, then it's open to everybody. And what often happens is that people are often unclear about what the boundaries are until somebody crosses them.<sup>62</sup>

Mapping the boundaries to inclusion at the Foreign Office and acting on them was the challenge laid down by its first Ethnic Minority Liaison Officer at the end of the twentieth century. In it we may observe the origins of present-day policy on 'diversity of thought' and other such attempts at demonstrating the value of inclusivity. It also, however, serves as a warning as to the ease with which well-intentioned policy can fail for want of better communication and deeper self-criticism.

### **2000-2018: 'History is what it is. You can't get rid of history'**

On Thursday 23 February 2004, 19 people from countries including Afghanistan, India, Kenya, Nepal, New Zealand, Poland, Somalia, Sri Lanka and Zimbabwe gathered in Brent, North London, to swear an oath of allegiance to Her Majesty the Queen. Each had paid £218 for the privilege, as part of their bids to become British citizens in a ceremony which would be mandatory in every one of Britain's 434 councils.

The oath-taking was one of a range of measures introduced by the then Home Secretary, David Blunkett, to rejuvenate the politics of citizenship and nationhood in a racially-diverse Britain. Aspiring citizens would be obliged to take language tests and demonstrate knowledge of British history and culture. In his own words, Blunkett wanted Britain to 'stop being apologetic about our history' to 'reclaim the patriotic mantle from the right and to forge a new English identity for the modern age' (note the careful use of 'English'; devolution was, of course, a flagship New Labour policy).<sup>63</sup>

Blunkett's initiatives were launched in the context of unprecedented migration to Britain following Prime Minister Tony Blair's decision to allow citizens of eight countries about to join the European Union the right to work in the United Kingdom. Between 1997 and 2010, net migration averaged 200,000 per year. A public perception developed, however, that the economic and cultural impact of this influx had been mismanaged, and the early twenty-first century began increasingly to resemble the 1970s in terms of the prevalence of populist anti-immigration sentiment. Such sentiments manifested not only in terms of the anti-EU, anti-immigration politics of Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party (Ukip), but also the far-right nationalism of the British National Party (BNP) in the 2000s and Stephen Yaxley-

Lennon's English Defence League (EDL) in the 2010s. These developments epitomise the revival of populist nationalism that has become inextricably intertwined with foreign policy issues such as the so-called 'war on terror' and, more recently, the Brexit referendum.<sup>64</sup>

The growing prominence of anti-immigration politics contrasts with the rise of 'postcolonial studies' and academic reappraisals of the place of empire in British culture since the 1980s. However, calls for Britain to pay reparations for its role in the Atlantic slave trade were met with a muted response from ministers who were keener to promote a sense of pride in Britain's imperial history, as did Gordon Brown on a trip to Africa in 2005.<sup>65</sup> Heavily influenced by British diplomat Robert Cooper's conception of 'postmodern foreign policy', Blair and his two Foreign Secretaries – Cook and Jack Straw – espoused a form of 'New Imperialism' which Cook hailed as prioritising an 'ethical dimension'.<sup>66</sup> Characterised by military interventions in the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq, but also by a culture of state-sponsored contrition for past policy failures during the Irish Potato Famine, the Bloody Sunday massacre and the treatment of First World War prisoners, for which various New Labour ministers *did* publicly apologise, the twenty-first century began as an era of ethical ambiguity as far as British foreign policy was concerned.

The FCO has been deeply connected with each of these political developments. Whatever its role in the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and other controversial decisions, the FCO will always be associated with the foreign policies of the administration it serves. Whatever its relative departmental power compared with previous periods of history, it remains by far the biggest employer of Britons who desire a career in international affairs. And while it is the Home Office whose role in immigration policy is scrutinised, it will always be the Foreign and *Commonwealth* Office whose history is most emblematic of empire and thereby implicated in Britain's long and problematic history with race and immigration.

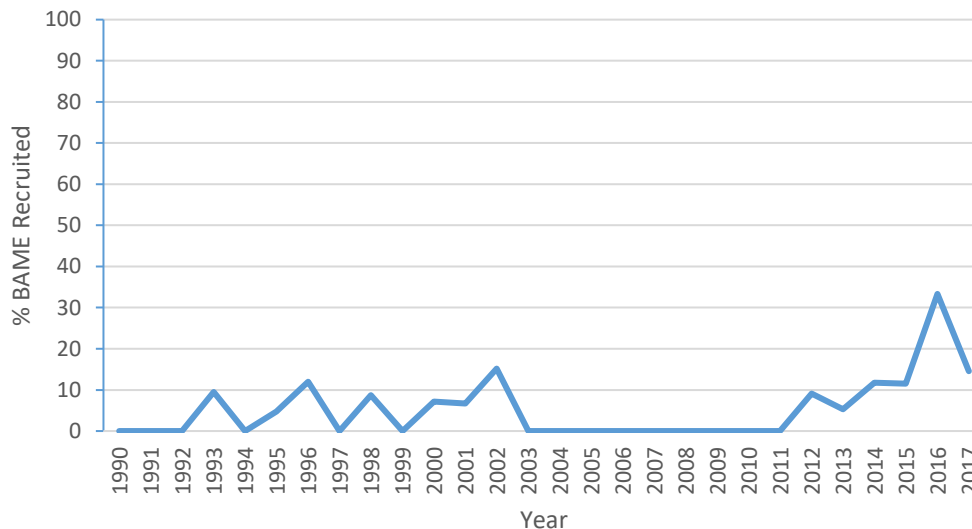
Reconciling these facts and responsibilities with a genuine desire to change the racial profile of its staff, in line with the ideology of 'diversity', has been the central challenge for Foreign Office recruiters in the twenty-first century. Since Robin Cook's pledges to diversify recruitment, the idea that bringing the number of female, non-white, LGBT and disabled diplomats in line with the proportion of those groups in wider society has become the single most important criterion by which 'fair' and ethical recruitment is judged.

But of all the protected characteristics cited in the 2010 Equality Act, race remains by far the most problematic for the Civil Service Commission in general and the FCO in particular. At the time of writing, the FCO has no non-white board members, and the percentage of staff who identify as BAME at SMS is just 5.6 (though this figure is slightly higher than the Civil Service average; this figure rises only to 6.3 per cent at C5 grade. At A2, BAME staff are hugely overrepresented, at 31 per cent. Almost one in three of the FCO's most junior and lowest-paid staff are BAME; a statistic which helps push the organisation's overall proportion to a deceptively representative 12.7 per cent. As the graph below demonstrates, this imbalanced landscape is hardly likely

to change soon: in the last thirty years, BAME recruitment to the Fast Stream has barely increased at all.

### BAME Recruitment to FCO Fast Stream, 1990-2017

(data unavailable for years 2003-2011)



Clearly, there are aspects of the problem of racism in recruitment that are buried too deeply for surface-level enthusiasm for ‘equal opportunities’ or ‘meritocracy’ to penetrate – admirable though such enthusiasm might be. In order fully to understand the FCO’s relationship with race, we must excavate and investigate the often subconscious forms of racism that affect the experiences of non-white diplomats.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, an era in which identity politics have firmly replaced the ideology of ‘equal opportunity’ espoused by Robin Cook, there exists an uneasy relationship between institutional commitments to social diversity and the individual employees of the FCO upon whom such commitments depend. David<sup>†</sup> is one of the most senior UK diplomats identifying as BAME, but confessed when interviewed for this publication that he is ‘much more comfortable talking about this stuff now than I would have been five years ago’.<sup>67</sup> Part of the problem, he said, was exemplified by the experiences of women in the FCO:

Maybe you’ve spoken to some women ... It’s a fine line between historic injustices that have befallen your people but also not overcompensating or be given opportunities in a way that then leads to some sort of backlash with people thinking you got the job because of your gender ... So I think for that reason, my starting philosophy having got into the Office was [that] basically the best thing for me to do ... to support the cause of diversity [was to] prove to anyone who doubted it that I was good at my job and that was why I was given a particular position, not because of my ethnicity.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>†</sup> This and all subsequent names have been changed to protect the anonymity of those who kindly contributed interviews to this research.

Observing the paradoxes faced by both women and non-whites in actively participating in diversity politics, David chose to focus on becoming a role model, rather than an activist of any kind.

Indeed, David recalled a profound discomfort with addressing the issue of non-white representation in what he perceived as hostile institutional contexts:

So you know, when I was at Cambridge, the last thing I was going to do was to go and join the Afro-Caribbean society because that was a way to alienate myself from the rest of the institution ... So, when I joined the Foreign Office, the last thing I was going to do was join EMAG [the Ethnic Minority Action Group] because my success depended on demonstrating that I was comfortable in a majority white establishment institution rather than being in the difficult, awkward squad.<sup>69</sup>

Navab, another senior diplomat, was also sceptical about participation in diversity activism at the FCO, and drew a distinction between race and gender in this respect:

I am really struck by the fact that [FCO Women] do a really good job ... you see stuff on social media where senior female ambassadors take pictures with ... other female ambassadors globally to promote their ability, and that's great ... But a part of me thinks if I or more senior BAME folks did that ... I'm curious what the reaction would be. Like, if we all took selfies of all us BAME officers together – to paraphrase, 'here are the ethnics' – I'm not quite sure it would have the same reaction.<sup>70</sup>

Such observations highlight the emotional cost of any kind of diversity work: as a minority, historically excluded from an institution, it can often be extremely difficult for those who identify as BAME to do so publicly and prominently.

What does not help, of course, is the maintenance of exclusionary practices which amplify non-whites' 'outsider' status. David remembered being asked at his Developed Vetting (DV) interview about whether his family (his father was Kenyan) were involved in the Mau Mau uprising. Such incidents are not necessarily limited to security clearance, either, as Rachel reported:

The example that sticks in my mind to this day is when I had an interview for an overseas job ... they asked me 'if I'd ever had any trouble overseas'. It was only after I realised they were asking me about race and my experience of it overseas. I seriously doubt that they would ask a white candidate that question.<sup>71</sup>

Rachel's comments, like those of David and Navab, are indicative of the atmosphere in which relations between the FCO and its non-white staff are conducted. Not everybody who identifies as BAME will have had this experience, nor have they all interpreted such interactions in the same way – rather, such observations and anecdotes shine a light on deeper racist assumptions that endure if not addressed openly.

Making a commitment to talk more openly about non-white experiences of working for the FCO may seem to be a fairly uncontentious proposition, but any such

commitment must inevitably also involve interrogating the relationship between the FCO, the British Empire, and the history of British foreign policy. Given the heavily imperial flavour of the architecture of the main FCO building in King Charles Street, and given the tendency for critics of British foreign policy to discuss, for example, liberal interventionism through paradigms of empire and colonialism, such themes have to form part of the conversation about BAME recruitment and careers.

Zayn, who recently joined the FCO, remarked on the importance of the relationship between history and race when it came to recruitment:

I think external perceptions are quite interesting – when I did some outreach events, I got the sense at times that our foreign policy choices/past have put BAME people off. There are obviously massive diaspora communities in the UK and I don't think, for example, the Iraq war makes these communities feel like the FCO is working for them.<sup>72</sup>

He went on:

I don't think we've talked enough about all this, and certainly haven't acknowledged our past enough – so there hasn't been a proper, discontinuous break. I think the FCO would rather brush the damaging parts of our history under the carpet and ride the wave of broadly greater integration/racial consciousness in the UK we're now seeing, benefitting where possible.<sup>73</sup>

Zayn hits upon an important paradox in his comments: the FCO is not responsible for the foreign policy of the UK government, and nor, therefore, is it its place to apologise for it. It is, however, strongly associated with government policy and therefore held accountable for it, at least on some levels. Recruiting against a backdrop of controversial foreign policy is not a new problem: David remembered deciding against joining the FCO until the British government changed its stance on South African apartheid. If, as Zayn points out, the FCO is to 'ride the wave' of changing attitudes to diversity in Britain as a whole, then surely the FCO must also 'ride the wave' when it comes to the vagaries of government policy and do whatever it can to dispel myths about its attitudes among, for example, Indian diaspora communities.

The FCO's relationship with British foreign policy is irrevocably intertwined with history. Michael was born in Jamaica 'when it was a colony, so I'm that old', to an English father and a Caribbean mother, and after a period at school in the United States, moved to England when he was 20. He joined the Foreign Office in 1986, the year it began collecting data about ethnic minority staff:

I certainly felt different because I hadn't been to school in the UK. I was not Oxbridge. I wasn't that confident about my abilities ... I suppose the other thing about the Foreign Office, everybody who's in it seems or seemed at the time to have a very clear long-term view of their life. It would be this cycle of postings and I wasn't sure that was what I wanted to do and I was pretty new in London as well. So yeah, I felt different, and then if we get on to behaviours, there are definitely some behaviours that were not great at

the time. You know, casual use of racist language and stuff like that ... by very senior people as well ... there wasn't a lot of room for people who felt differently so you ... tried to behave in the same way.<sup>74</sup>

Notice how Michael linked – possibly subconsciously – his experience of racist language with his feeling unsure about what career path he wanted to take. His outsider status, due partly to race and partly to education, prevented him from coming to terms – at least to the same extent as his colleagues – with the normalised career structure at the FCO. In the light of Linbert Spencer's observations about the often invisible cultural boundaries that alienate non-white people from the FCO, Michael's awkward relationship with the norms of diplomatic careers is worth consideration.

Indeed, assumptions made about British 'diplomatic types' are so ingrained that they profoundly affect external expectations of what an FCO official should look like. Early in his career, Michael was posted to Madrid:

There were examples in Spain which were funny ... I remember a newspaper article when I went to the Basque Parliament and sat in the gallery and somebody wrote this sort of diary piece for the Basque newspaper: 'Who was this strange person. Were they from Africa? Where were they from? No they were a British diplomat.' I was sitting in the gallery – it was hilarious. And I remember people in the embassy showing it to me, feeling very embarrassed about it and apologising that it had happened.<sup>75</sup>

While the concentration of non-white people (the overall BAME figure is around 5.6 per cent) in the FCO Senior Management Structure remains so low, such assumptions are likely to persist.

Michael, literally a child of empire, reached a senior level in the FCO, before going on to pursue a successful career outside of government. His life, beginning in colonial Jamaica, moving to the United States, and finally ending up representing Britain overseas, taps into many of the social, cultural and geographical structures that constitute the legacy of imperial Britain:

I mean the UK as a whole is associated with empire and the Foreign Office is one bit of it and those issues go beyond the Foreign Office ... I think that the way in which we do foreign policy and the, there's a book that says, I think the title is something like 'Everywhere That Britain Has Invaded', it's an A to Z. I don't think there are any letters that are not used. So the recognition of Britain's colonial past and the responsibility it has in different bits of the world for where we are now is very, very thin these days, including in the Foreign Office.<sup>76</sup>

For Michael, the FCO is neither responsible for nor separable from its associations with British power and imperial history. Indeed, from anxieties in the 1940s about the trustworthiness of those whose only distinction from their counterparts in other British Dominions was skin colour, through to twenty-first century concerns about inclusion in an era of intensely politicised debates around migration, it is the British Empire that serves as the historical thread linking together the FCO's attempts to become more racially diverse.



## Conclusion

It is reasonable to assume that the FCO's relationship with the British Empire will be a difficult one as long as the question of whether the Empire was, to borrow Niall Fergusson's formulation, a 'Good Thing' or a 'Bad Thing' (Fergusson thinks the former) remains apparently undecided. Scholars like Fergusson, and Nigel Biggar – whose 'Ethics of Empire' project attempts to rescue the Empire from its reputation as an unambiguously 'wicked' phenomenon – persevere with defences of British imperialism on the basis of its influence on democracy, abolitionism and a vague sense of a defence of 'liberty'. For the majority of other scholars, the famine, genocide and racism from which empire is inseparable render such arguments futile and ethically dubious.

While the debate is at least nominally still open, however, the FCO will always be forced to adhere to a narrative of 'balance'. Its role is to promote and maintain Britain's world role in a diplomatic manner, and the Empire is still a part of British history around which there is no public consensus. The FCO has to remain as neutral as possible, and as such is powerless to celebrate or condemn British imperialism. Empire quite literally depended on crude skin racism in order to function, and until that basic fact is processed and accepted, British politics in general and the FCO in particular will find it an uncomfortable legacy with which to deal.

This is not to say, though, that the FCO is powerless to act until the deeper questions about race and empire have been resolved. It must talk to its non-white and white employees about how to ensure open and trusting dialogue is maintained; it must closely monitor its reputation among non-white British communities and be as bold as possible in engaging with them; it must continually report on the state of BAME recruitment, diagnose problems and communicate solutions; finally, it must pursue diversity not as merely a 'numbers game' to meet specific percentage targets (though these should act as a guide) but as a strategy to improve the quality of British diplomacy and the quality of life of those who conduct it. A historical study such as this intends not to provide the last word on this subject, but – it is hoped – does provide a useful place at which to start a long overdue conversation.

## Afterword

*Fouzia Younis and Muna Shamsuddin, co-chairs of the FCO's Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Network*

For the first time ever, this History Note attempts to set out the history of Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) staff – our history – in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. As daughters of Commonwealth immigrants who made the UK their home and as we mark 70 years of the Windrush Generation this year, it is hard to detach some of our emotion reading this study.

The history and legacy of the British Empire is not in most school curricula in the UK; it is a part of our history often confined to those with an interest in colonial affairs or wanting to find out more about global history. Yet in the building in King Charles Street, the headquarters of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, many of our visitors and new staff coming through are surprised to see the legacies of the British Empire literally set in stone, unedited and unexplained. From the murals over the Grand Staircase leading to the Foreign Secretary's Office, to the marble relief above the fireplace in the India Office Council Chamber depicting Britannia receiving the riches of the East Indies, statues of celebrated British Colonial Generals, and the names of the great cities once under Imperial rule in the Durbar Court – every day staff work in an office steeped in British Imperial history.

When we joined the FCO in the 2000s, we felt the piercing gaze of the colonial rulers watching us through their paintings on our first day as nervous new entrants, entering a world which our grandparents would never have been allowed to enter. What would these men have made of us and our entry into the Diplomatic Service, an elite stream which had been reserved for the very best, undoubtedly white, men from privileged society?

We have come a long way over the last 70 years: the FCO now has more BAME Ambassadors than ever before, and this year we celebrated the first black female career diplomat being appointed into an Ambassadorial Post; in 2017, over 23% of our graduate entry scheme intake came from a BAME background, one of the highest levels across Whitehall; and we hope to see the first BAME member appointed to the FCO Board in 2018.

This progress is not the result of accident. This is due to the commitment made by Foreign Secretaries and Permanent Secretaries over the last twenty years to help improve Race diversity in the FCO, and a group of BAME staff who no longer accepted the status quo. This is not about meeting targets or what some critics term as 'fluffy diversity talk'. The FCO is a public sector organisation and has a duty to ensure that it represents the very best of diverse British society on the global stage through our diplomatic posts overseas. Our values of fairness and opportunity for all are reflected in the people that represent us. This is why we have championed outreach efforts to universities and colleges throughout the UK over the last five years aimed at attracting the very best diverse talent; why we support young people from under-privileged

backgrounds with their career aspirations; and why we took the formal co-chair role of the FCO's BAME Network on International Women's Day this year.

Our diversity is one of the UK's greatest diplomatic strengths. When we have represented our country at global forums and at negotiating tables, those on the other side recognise the unique perspective that our individual history has given us. Our diversity allows us to forge lasting and meaningful connections with more people, including those sceptical of the UK's modern-day foreign policy, under the heavy weight of our colonial past. The UK's diversity is a major USP for our nation.

This History Note also shows that there is still a long way to go. Thankfully, the more shocking overt racism James Southern presents here, such as a former Civil Service Commissioner's view that 'coloured' people were not suitable for the diplomatic service, is no longer acceptable or accepted. Yet it remains a sad fact that despite the progress above, racism still exists, within our institution as in wider society, and in the attitudes of some of the people we encounter through work. We continue to live in a global society which is more connected than ever, yet people can still judge you by the colour of your skin or your accent. People sometimes still expect or demand to see a 'white officer' at Embassies overseas or refuse to accept that home for us is the UK. When we talk at outreach events in the UK or accompany foreign delegations, our hosts will often mistake us for being part of the foreign delegation, not part of the home team. We still do not have enough black applicants applying or being successful at the Fast Stream (we need to know why this is the case); and too many of our BAME staff are stuck in the most junior grades.

This has to change, and the time to change is now. We cannot wait for history to rectify itself as generations change. We all have a collective responsibility to make this change happen. We owe this to the people we serve and our future generations. We hope that those reading this publication are challenged to look at how they can join us in our efforts to bring in and bring up the best BAME diverse talent in the FCO – we need more allies. The piercing gaze of the colonial rulers doesn't bother us now. This is our history too, and we all share a responsibility to make lasting changes for the next generation of British diplomats, from all walks of life.

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- <sup>2</sup> Mandip Sahota, interview with James Southern, 21 July 2015.
- <sup>3</sup> Miranda Kaufmann, *Black Tudors: The Untold Story* (London, 2017).
- <sup>4</sup> Marc Matera, *Black London: The Imperial Metropolis and Decolonization in the Twentieth Century* (Oakland, 2015).
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- <sup>6</sup> Percival Waterfield, 'Memorandum by the Civil Service Commissioners for the Information and Guidance of all Chairmen of Selection Boards: Coloured British Candidates', 3 January 1951, TNA/DO/35/2593.
- <sup>7</sup> Algernon Sinker, 'Memorandum by the Civil Service Commissioners for the Information and Guidance of all Chairmen of Selection Boards: Coloured British Candidates', October 1951, TNA/DO/35/2593.
- <sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>10</sup> 'Recruitment of Coloured Persons to the Civil Service: Memorandum by the Chancellor of the Exchequer', 1 February 1954, TNA/CSC/5/919.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>15</sup> 'Assignment of Coloured Candidates from General Service Competitions', CSC Circular, 23 February 1960, TNA/CSC/5/1849.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>19</sup> Thomas Lloyd (Colonial Office) to Algernon Sinker, 19 February 1951, TNA/CSC/5/918.
- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>21</sup> Alice Bacon to Ray Gunter, 19 August 1966, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>23</sup> 'Nationality Regulation for the Diplomatic Service', TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>24</sup> Dennis Fowler, Foreign Office Minute, 11 November 1965, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>27</sup> James McGhie, Foreign Office Minute, 11 November 1965.
- <sup>28</sup> Stephen Olver, Foreign Office Minute, 3 December 1965.
- <sup>29</sup> Philip Finney (former Indian Police Service officer and former head of Special Branch of the Nyasaland Police) to Michael Morgan (Security Department), 4 May 1966, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>30</sup> Michael Morgan to Stephen Olver, 19 May 1966, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>31</sup> Douglas Phillips (DSAO) to Ewen Fergusson (Foreign Office), 14 October 1966, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>32</sup> George Thomson to Alice Bacon, 11 October 1966, TNA/FO/366/3640.
- <sup>33</sup> Bill Schwarz, *Memories of Empire, Volume I: The White Man's World* (Oxford, 2011), 11, 20-21; see also Jordanna Bailkin, *The Afterlife of Empire* (London, 2012).
- <sup>34</sup> Roy Jenkins, quoted in Graham Huggan, 'Virtual Multiculturalism: The Case of Contemporary Britain', in *Britain at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Ulrich Broich and Susan Bassnett (New York, 2001), 70.
- <sup>35</sup> Colin Crowe, Foreign Office Minute, 3 November 1967, TNA/FO/79/2.
- <sup>36</sup> Roy Jenkins to Harold Lever, 14 November 1967, TNA/FO/79/3.
- <sup>37</sup> Edward Larmour (Foreign Office), 'Establishment Officers Meeting – 1 February', Foreign Office Circular, 2 February 1968, TNA/FO/79/4.
- <sup>38</sup> Nicholas Bosanquet (Runnymede Trust), *Race and Employment in Britain* (London, 1973); David J. Smith, *Racial Disadvantage in Employment* (London, 1974)
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- <sup>40</sup> R.H. Howorth (Civil Service Department) to E.J. Morgan (Civil Service Department), 20 December 1979, TNA/CSC/5/1889.
- <sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>42</sup> DJ Macleod (Chief Psychologist, CSSB) to Mr. Duncan, 27 February 1980, TNA/CSC/5/1889.
- <sup>43</sup> HC Deb., 1 April 1985, vol. 76, cc. 449W.

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- <sup>44</sup> *Report of Her Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners* (London, HMSO: 1986), 7-10.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.
- <sup>47</sup> *Report of Her Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners* (London, HMSO: 1987), 10.
- <sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>49</sup> HC Deb., 22 June 1988, vol. 135, cc. 581-3W.
- <sup>50</sup> Matthew Parris, interview with James Southern, 2 May 2018.
- <sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* See also Parris' *Chance Witness: An Outsider's Life in Politics* (Viking, 2002).
- <sup>53</sup> *Report of Her Majesty's Civil Service Commissioners* (London, HMSO: 1991-1992), 8.
- <sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*
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- <sup>57</sup> FCO Chief Clerk's Newsletter, 1997(Nov).
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- <sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>63</sup> Cited in David Childs, *Britain Since 1945: A Political History* (London, 2006), 368.
- <sup>64</sup> For an informative general overview see Joe Mulhall, 'Going Mainstream: The Mainstreaming of Anti-Muslim Prejudice in Europe and North America', *Hope Not Hat 'Counter-Jihad' Monitoring Report*, Issue 1 (2017).
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- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>70</sup> Navab, interview with James Southern, 12 June 2018.
- <sup>71</sup> Rachel, questionnaire response, 19 June 2018.
- <sup>72</sup> Zayn, questionnaire response, 7 June 2018.
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- <sup>74</sup> Michael, interview with James Southern, 27 June 2018.
- <sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*
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