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Subject: What Are We Giving Thanks For?

Friends

The attached is what I wrote at the beginning of April in response to an invitation to a service in Westminster Abbey in June to mark 70 years of the arrival of the Windrush. Needless to say, I will not attend the service or I will have to publicly call out the C of Es and RCs, not to mention representatives of the government, on their hypocrisy and hubris.

It would appear that among the essential criteria for being in government, the Cabinet especially, is to have a brass neck and a surfeit of shamelessness and cynicism. In the middle of the Windrush deportation scandal, Theresa May announces a Stephen Lawrence Day. She is the same Home Secretary who saw more black people murdered while in the custody of the police and the UK Border Agency under her watch both as Home Secretary and as Prime Minister than any of her predecessors, with not one of those responsible being found guilty of criminal conduct, or even criminal neglect. As such, descendants of the Windrush generation have been killed by the police in far greater numbers than by neo-fascists or ferret eyed racists. Unsurprisingly, there is no suggestion of a Roger Sylvester Day, or a Sean Riggs Day, or a Azelle Rodney Day, or a Christopher Alder Day. Yet, there are many among us who regard May’s co-optation of Stephen Lawrence as a victory, no less than having the state recognise ‘the contribution of the Windrush generation’ in a service in its ‘inner temple’, Westminster Abbey... so enamoured are we of the blandishments of the system. History reminds us that ancestral African cargo was bought with handfuls of trinkets.

But then, one of the things imperial and post-imperial Britain has always been cock sure about is that it has God on its side, if not in its pocket.

Keep the faith!

GJ

70th Anniversary of Windrush 1948

A Point of View

Gus John

7 April 2018

Let Us Pray

The British has a quaint way of marking anniversaries. With or without pomp and ceremony, the state invites the nation to join it in prayer, often for those whose anniversary it is marking, but far too seldom for itself, especially when it has so much to repent and make reparations for.

So with the Windrush.
An ecumenical service is planned to take place in Westminster Abbey in June to mark the 70th anniversary of the arrival of the Empire Windrush. Ironically, it would be hugely surprising if those gathered in that place were not to celebrate the contribution of those who arrived on the Windrush, others who were to follow them and the descendants of all of them to the rebuilding of post-war Britain and the shaping of modern Britain.

The one thing upon which we clearly have had no influence whatsoever is the British state’s conflation of immigration and race and the British nation’s stubborn belief that Britishness must and can only equate with whiteness. So, four generations after the Windrush, the descendants of those who arrived then and in the decades that followed are still labelled ‘ethnic minorities’ and potentially illegal immigrants.

**The Black Presence and the Struggle Against Racism in Britain Pre-dates 1948**

While I have high regard for Arthur Torrington and the work he and the Windrush Foundation have done and continue to do, I have massive misgivings about the entire Windrush project and I would go so far as to say it is not only completely wrongheaded, it runs the risk of distorting British colonial and post-colonial history and the struggles of former colonial subjects with Britain, both in the former colonies and in Britain itself.

To focus upon and make iconic the arrival of the Windrush in 1948 carrying 492 members of the Global African Diaspora from the Caribbean, a region that imperial Britain had made home to their enslaved Ancestors, is to suggest that there was not an African presence in Britain prior to 1948, including a sizeable number of people from the Caribbean. Those people were an integral part of British political and cultural life and members, if not initiators, of social movements in Britain. As such, they played a great part in connecting the British population and especially the British working class with the history and contemporary struggles of colonial subjects in the British West Indies and the French and Dutch West Indies (Martinique, Guadeloupe, Aruba, Curacao, Surinam, etc); struggles for bread, justice and freedom as well as for national independence and the end of colonial rule.

Crucially, they were part of the African Diaspora in Britain and made common cause with their brothers and sisters from the African continent who were resident in Britain or were part of an itinerant population of merchant seamen, migrant workers, or artists and artisans. Britain’s continuing colonial domination and suppression of the territories from which they came was always high on their agenda and those who had come to the UK from Africa, as well as those from the Caribbean, worked together to take the struggle against colonialism to the British state and to gain support in doing so from the workers’ movement and from progressive people in
Britain. They also worked in support of the anti-colonial and liberation struggles in the countries from which they had come.

Examples of this include the following:

- The 1st Pan African Congress was held in London in 1900, organised by Henry Sylvester-Williams from Trinidad, a barrister who had studied in England.
- The West African Students Union (WASU) was formed in London by Lapido Solanke and Dr H.C. Bankole-Bright in 1925. WASU invited and was joined by a number of students from the British West Indies.
- The League of Coloured Peoples was formed in London by Jamaican born, Harold Moody, a physician, in 1931, with a mostly Caribbean membership as well as people from Africa and Asia.
- The Pan-African Federation was formed in Manchester in 1944. Organisations that came together to form the Federation included:
  - Negro Association (Manchester)
  - Coloured Workers Association (London)
  - Coloured Peoples Association (Edinburgh)
  - African Union (Glasgow University)
  - United Committee of Colonial and Coloured Peoples' Associations (Cardiff)
  - Association of Students of African Descent (Dublin)
  - West African Youth League (Sierra Leone section) represented by Isaac Wallace-Johnson
  - Kikuyu Central Association (Kenya) represented by Jomo Kenyatta
  - Friends of African Freedom Society (Gold Coast)
  - West African Students Union of Great Britain

The Pan-African Federation adopted the following aims:

- To promote the well-being and unity of African peoples and peoples of African descent throughout the world.
- To demand self-determination and independence of African peoples, and other subject races from the domination of powers claiming sovereignty and trusteeship over them.
- To secure equality of civil rights for African peoples and the total abolition of all forms of racial discrimination.
- To strive to co-operate between African peoples and others who share our aspirations.

Membership of those organisations included personnel who had been members of regiments that had seen active service in two World Wars. Indeed, the above aims
were reiterated in resolutions passed by the 5th Pan-African Congress that was held in Manchester (Chorlton Town Hall) in 1945. At that conference as at the PAF conference one year earlier, Africans from the Continent and the West Indies were arguing that if they could give their lives for King and country in defence of freedom from fascism and Nazi expansionism, they and all African people were entitled to equality and civil rights and to freedom from racial discrimination in Britain and wherever Britain reproduced itself.


I have a concern that by focusing on the Windrush, the nation is being encouraged to ignore the fact a) that a good number of the 492 arrivants on the Windrush were ex-service personnel who had returned to the Caribbean, Jamaica in particular, and had experienced destitution and a total lack of regard for their parlous circumstances by the British colonial administration in those islands and were therefore forced to return to Britain as migrant workers and b) that prior to the Windrush and for the same reasons, on 21 December 1947, six months before the Windrush docked, some 200 ex-service personnel had arrived in Southampton from the Caribbean aboard the Steam Ship Almanzora. Among them was Allan Willmott, one of the few remaining Caribbean ex-servicemen who re-migrated to Britain. No one hears about them and about the way Britain abandoned them to their fate once they returned to the Caribbean after demob, thus necessitating their return to this country in search of bread and opportunity to rebuild their lives.

https://www.whyarewestindians.co.uk/node/198

By projecting ‘The Windrush’ as representing the birth of multi-racial Britain, the suggestion that Britain had cause and opportunity for the very first time to engage with African people and especially with descendants of enslaved Africans whom it had moulded in its own image is not only false but dangerous. It is dangerous for five main reasons:

- First, it rather suggests that Britain was mono-racial prior to the arrival of the Windrush passengers and those that followed them in the 1950s and 1960s and that until then the nation was at ease with itself and with the foreigners it had magnanimously welcomed from elsewhere.
- Second, it erases the struggle of earlier generations of Africans from the Continent and from the West Indies for equal rights and justice and against racism and fascism in Britain, struggles which the Windrush and later generations themselves had to join, or replicate.
• Third, it compounds the divisions, generated and reinforced by the British themselves, between Caribbean people and African people as two separate ethnic groups, rather than as one people, belonging to a Global African Diaspora, with a common heritage and with an interrupted history.
• Fourth, it robs white British people no less than black British people of an important part of their history and of knowledge that is crucial to their understanding of one another and of the evolution of modern Britain.
• Fifth and perhaps most importantly, it encourages the view in this and future generations that the Black Presence in Britain began in 1948 with the arrival of the Windrush and that, therefore, the history of British race relations dates back to 1948, because prior to that date there was no black population and no political events at the interface between the state and that black presence to speak of.

A significant number of Caribbean people had settled in Britain after demob from both World Wars. Their presence and their attempts at settling in places such as Cardiff, London, Liverpool and Manchester gave rise to racial conflict on a large scale. 2018 marks the anniversary of the arrival of the Windrush. 2019 marks the anniversary of the most brutal racial attacks on black ex-service personnel who were seeking to lead a normal life among people with whom and for whom they had fought in a life-changing World War. The racial hostility and the murderous racial attacks they faced were a direct consequence of Britain’s failure to deal with the legacy of Empire and to expunge racism from the DNA of the nation in much the same way that it had implanted it over centuries through the racial theories it had propounded as a justification for the enslavement of Africans. That failure in all its manifestations, including the refusal to place ‘race’ at the centre of policy formulation and to define a role for schooling and education in problematising ‘whiteness’, dismantling theories of white supremacy and combating all forms of racism, account for many of the disparities black people in the society from both the African and Asian diaspora suffer to this day.

As I wrote in an article for the Black Activist journal in the USA (July 2014):

‘...In fact, there had been a continuous black presence in Britain for at least 400 years before the Empire Windrush docked in June 1948. While it is not possible to state the exact number of Africans that lived in the UK from one century to the next, what is known is that they were to be found in all strata of the society and hailed from the African continent and the African Diaspora. Many were scholars and scientists, artisans and missionaries, musical composers and dramatists, medical doctors, biologists and horticulturalists. Others were seafarers and military personnel.'
British historians’ failure to acknowledge that historic African presence and the phenomenal contribution Africans made to Britain’s economy and to its intellectual, political, cultural and scientific life led to the widely held view that there was no significant African presence before the Windrush. It also encouraged the erroneous belief that Africans in Britain during those centuries were just temporary residents, or were victims of imperialist domination and expansion and were typically poor, poorly educated and dispossessed.

A little known fact, for example, is that a black man by the name of John Edmonstone, born in Guiana, taught taxidermy to Charles Darwin in Edinburgh in the 1820s.

Contrary to the view most British folk have of the older African presence in Britain, there is evidence that Africans were not subservient and unwanted people who spent their entire lives combating racism and social exclusion while conforming to the prevailing social consensus in the society and begging to be included. They formed social movements, and worked with reformers in the majority society to bring about change and to challenge the social and political systems that conferred privileges on the minority while confining the majority, i.e., the working class, women, children, the poor and disabled, to a life of servitude and hardship. They participated in protest and were active in movements such as the Suffragettes, the Chartists, the Abolitionists, the Fabians and the Communists.
On Wednesday 16th July 2014, a blue heritage plaque, courtesy of the Nubian Jak Heritage Plaque Scheme, was unveiled at The Medical Centre, 209 Harrow Road, London, W2 5EH, along the route of the internationally famous annual Notting Hill Carnival, in memory of ‘the Black Doctor of Paddington’, Dr John Alcindor (1873-1924). Born in Trinidad, Alcindor won an Island Scholarship and studied medicine at Edinburgh University between 1893 and 1899. In July 1899, he moved to London where he worked for a number of doctors and hospitals before establishing his own surgery along the Harrow Road. There, he would publish medical research and serve the local population as a highly respected doctor, health campaigner and anti-poverty activist until his death at the age of 51. During the First World War, he was not allowed to serve in the British armed forces as a medical officer because of his African origin. Blacks were debarred from joining the ranks of the officer corps. Instead, John Alcindor served with the British Red Cross and was awarded their medal.

Dr John Alcindor
Alcindor’s medical research and his work on epidemiology among the poor in London challenged prevailing attitudes towards working people and their health needs and that body of work is still regarded today as laying the foundations for what was to become the Beveridge Report (1942). That report (on Social Insurance and Allied Services) led to the establishment of the Welfare State, including the expansion of National Insurance and the creation of the National Health Service.

The wording on the heritage plaque reads:

JOHN ALCINDOR  1873 – 1924
DOCTOR, RESEARCHER, CRICKETER AND COMMUNITY ACTIVIST
HAD A SURGERY ON THIS SITE

Alcindor worked with Henry Sylvester Williams, a Trinidadian barrister, who organised the first Pan African Conference in London in 1900. He later attended both the 1921 and 1923 Pan African Congress in London and collaborated with WEB Du Bois.

The British population’s ignorance of the history of the African presence in Britain was matched by its cultural supremacist assumptions about itself and its lack of basic knowledge about the social and economic background of the Windrush generation. Apart from believing that ‘the West Indies’ was a continuous land mass called ‘Jamaica’, far too many British people felt that post-war African immigrants were uneducated if not illiterate labourers, or peasant farmers, or plantation workers. ‘Coloured immigrants’ were therefore
considered to be needy, unskilled, totally lacking in agency and incapable of being positive role models for their own children on account of poor education, low level employment, poor parenting skills and dysfunctional family units that are typified by ‘absent fathers’.

As a consequence, ‘coloured immigrants’ (as we were typically described) were felt to be responsible for the social decay and the appalling conditions that pre-existed in the inner city areas we inhabited. Soon, the narrative in the media, no less than in the Parliament and in civil society, was that we were variously: ‘taking jobs that should go to English people’; lowering the profile of the neighbourhood and the price of the properties of white people, thus causing white flight, an exodus of white residents who had lived in those same areas for generations; living off the welfare state; having confrontations with the police and making unreasonable demands for equal rights and justice.

Those views were prevalent especially in areas where the white working class had long been forgotten and where it suited politicians of all parties to encourage the view that immigration was associated with ‘race’ and ‘race’ signalled problems and inter-ethnic conflict, not least because the ‘immigrants’ were robbing white people of their birthright.

This was exemplified by an instance of clear incitement to racism that took place in Smethwick in the West Midlands during the 1964 general election. A Wikipedia entry about Smethwick reads:

After the Second World War, Smethwick attracted a large number of immigrants from Commonwealth countries, the largest ethnic group being Sikhs from the Punjab in India. There was also a background of factory closures and a growing waiting list for local council accommodation. In 1962 race riots hit Smethwick. (The Conservative candidate, Peter) Griffiths ran a campaign critical of the opposition’s, and the government’s, policies, including immigration policies.

The Conservatives were accused of using the slogan ‘if you want a nigger for a neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour’, though the Conservatives claimed that these posters were the work of far right groups. The Socialist Review claimed that Gordon Walker (the sitting Labour MP) had himself pandered to such sentiment when his local party ran an eve-of-poll leaflet claiming that increased immigration was the result of Conservative government policies....'
The Windrush and Brexit

The 2018 Windrush anniversary is being marked even as Britain is laboriously extricating itself from the rest of Europe as from an acrimonious wrecked marriage. Despite the 1944 Pan-African Federation Conference and the subsequent work of the PAF, despite the 1945 Pan African Congress, despite the work of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination (CARD) in 1965 and the subsequent Acts of Parliament prohibiting race discrimination and promoting equal opportunity, the debate about ‘coloured immigrants’ and refugees and asylum seekers in brown and black skins, not to mention ‘economic migrants’, propelled the Brexit vote and its aftermath.

It is a gross distortion of history, therefore, for the beginning of the flow of Caribbean migrant labour to Britain, following the decision of the British state to relocate surplus labour from its colonies where it no longer had use for them, to Britain where it had plenty need for them to rebuild the nation after two devastating world wars, to be seen as a historic event warranting pomp and ceremony as only the British could stage.

It would be a crying shame if the irony of this anniversary being marked at the same time as ‘coloured immigrant’ grandparents and great grandparents are burying their Black British offspring who have known no other home than Britain in such gut-wrenching numbers, when they themselves are not being forcibly ejected from Britain for not updating or even keeping their residency documents, were to be lost on the nation and the organisers of these anniversary events.

The link between school exclusion and youth offending has been long established, as has been the disproportionate number of descendants of the Windrush generation that have for generations been excluded from schools (six times more than their white peers in the 1990s and six times more now, albeit the government’s statistics say only three times more likely now), including from Church of England and Roman Catholic schools. Many of those schools engage in the same practice of racial profiling as the police and identify innocent black male students as members of gangs, or as students whose conduct reflects ‘gang culture’. In this sense, therefore, the established churches that would be central to the anniversary service in June have contributed massively to the social exclusion of descendants of the Windrush generation and indirectly to their over-representation in the industrial prison complex.

But, they contributed no less to the social and religious exclusion of the Windrush generation itself, people whose ancestors were made to embrace and practice Anglicanism, Roman Catholicism, Methodism, etc., and hand down those practices to them through baptism and the central role of the Church in regulating the affairs of the nation states from which the migrants originated. In fact, the Black-led churches
that will undoubtedly be part of the planned Windrush anniversary service were to a large extent a product of the racial segregation that the established churches themselves practised when the Windrush arrivants and those coming after them sought to take what they believed to be their rightful place among their white counterparts, fully expecting welcome, accommodation and hospitality at best, if not partnership in their struggle against racial discrimination and class oppression.

It is my personal belief – not that I am claiming to have the ear of the Creator more than any other mortal – that Mother/Father/Spirit God will rejoice much more at evidence of the Church ecumenically protesting the brutality of the state in deporting undocumented Windrush folk who have lived all their lives in this country but were negligent in hanging on to their iconic blue British colonial passport and not regularising their British nationality, than in giving thanks for the fact that, beginning with the Windrush generation, Caribbean people have so enriched life in Britain and contributed to its development into a modern multi-ethnic state. For, while that is undoubtedly true, it is a modern multi-ethnic state which has an industrial prison complex where descendants of the Windrush generation are more populous than any other section of the population, where we are over-represented in most manifestations of social malaise and grossly under-represented in positions of influence, decision making and the exercise of social and economic power, in government as in pretty much every societal institution.

**Reparations Day and NOT an Annual Windrush Day?**

As for the call ‘to celebrate an annual Windrush Day on 22nd June’, I believe this is to be resisted for all the above reasons. Apart from being historically inaccurate, it would be hugely divisive and would encourage the further marginalisation of all those ‘migrants’ in the global African and Asian Diaspora who lived, worked and struggled in Britain for generations before the Empire Windrush arrived at Tilbury Docks in June 1948.

Instead, it would be great to see the Ecumenical Church and the Church of England in particular, joining the campaign for reparations and reparatory justice and examining itself with regard to ‘truth, acknowledgment, reparation and repentance’ as far as its historical role in African enslavement and chattel slavery in the West Indies is concerned, added to its role in buttressing racism and the marginalisation of the Global African Diaspora here in Britain before and since 1948.

The Church of England has managed to elect and consecrate only one Bishop of Caribbean heritage in the 70 years since 1948. Barbadian born Wilfred Wood was consecrated a Bishop in 1985, having been a priest in London since 1962. He served as Bishop of Woolwich until 2003. It was to be a further 24 years before
another African, Nigerian born Karowei Dorgu, would be made the second black bishop to be consecrated in the Church of England in Britain.

The Church has enough to answer for as it is.

It should not, therefore, be part of a process by which future generations of Black and White British people and people across the globe come to associate 1948 and the arrival of the Windrush with the beginning of the growth of multiracial Britain, thus confining to the dustbins of history the contribution of earlier generations of African people to the development of this nation, to the struggle to get Britain to deal with the legacy of Empire and the racism within the DNA of the nation, as well as their historical contribution to the anti-colonial struggles in the Caribbean and in Africa.

Instead, I have faith that angels would sound trumpets in Westminster Abbey if there were an acknowledgment that the call for reparations and reparatory justice is a righteous one and one which the Church of England has a will to set up a nationwide body to consider in its own right and on account of its own involvement in the trade of the enslaved forebears of the Windrush generation, preferably with a high ranking representative of the Monarch playing an active part on account of their own historical involvement.

But then, I also have faith that pigs will one day fly.

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