COLOURED PEOPLE FROM BRITISH COLONIAL TERRITORIES

MEMORANDUM BY THE SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE COLONIES

Introduction
(a) At the Cabinet's meeting on 20th March (C.M. (50) 13th Conclusions, Minute 7), I was invited to submit, after consultation with the Home Secretary, the Minister of Labour and the Minister of Health, a memorandum on the problems arising from the immigration into this country of coloured people from British Colonial territories.
(b) In this paper the word "colonial" refers collectively to all the Colonies, Protectorates and Trust Territories administered under the Colonial Office.

General Background
1. The community of colonial people and their families in this country is estimated to number from 20,000 to 30,000. For the most part these persons live in Liverpool, Cardiff and Manchester, on Tyneside and in the East End of London; there are smaller groups in other centres, notably in Birmingham, Leeds, Hull and Bolton. Although they tend to congregate together and to prefer their own society, the great majority look on themselves as residents of the United Kingdom and have no intention of returning to their Colonies of origin.

Pre-war Position
2. Before the 1914-18 war, few coloured people of colonial origin lived here. During that war many colonials served in the Merchant Navy and later settled down in this country. Some were able to remain in sea-going employment, but up to the beginning of the 1939 war, there was a steady fall in the demand for colonial firemen, and the majority had to find employment ashore. This was not easy owing to prevalent unemployment, and there were racial difficulties which led to occasional riots.

Developments during the war
3. On the outbreak of the 1939 war, coloured colonials were recruited in the Colonies and were brought over to this country for war service. Others came over voluntarily. The main developments were—
(a) A group of 1,200 British Honduranians were brought here to fell timber in Scotland. Of these only 700 accepted repatriation. Most of the rest have settled down in Scotland and the North of England.
(b) About 1,000 West Indian technicians and trainees were recruited for service in war factories on Merseyside and in Lancashire. (Mr. L. Constantine was employed by the Ministry of Labour as a Welfare Officer to look after this group of men during their war service.)
(c) 10,000 West Indians were recruited for service in the Royal Air Force to serve in Britain as ground crews. When the war ended, approximately 8,000 of these men were repatriated, and the rest took their discharge here.
Some thousands of men were either recruited or enlisted in the Merchant Navy. Large numbers of them were engaged to fill casual vacancies and not all of them were based on United Kingdom ports. With the return to normal conditions the demand for the services of coloured colonial seamen has been much reduced.

4. All the men recruited under special schemes were eligible for repatriation; but, though persistent efforts were made to induce as many of them as possible to return home, a good many preferred to remain in this country. Some of these have not settled down satisfactorily and are unemployed from time to time.

5. Another reinforcement of the colonial population came from stowaways, chiefly from the West Indies and West Africa. Before the war, the number of coloured stowaways was not large, and most were refused permission to land because they could not satisfy Immigration Officers by producing passports that they were British or British-protected persons. From 1941 onwards, however, the number increased. At about the same time it was being represented to the Government that the treatment of coloured protected persons was out of keeping with the circumstances of the times and the policy of His Majesty's Government as regards colonial peoples, and that it contrasted unfavourably with the fact that these protected persons were treated by British Consulates in foreign territories in the same way as British subjects, and were also subject to the same war-time discipline as United Kingdom seamen. In 1942, therefore, the special restrictions as to registration, &c., of coloured seamen from the Protectorates were abolished and coloured persons coming here as seamen for discharge, as passengers, or as stowaways were not refused admission for lack of documentary evidence as to their national status. They had at that time no difficulty in finding employment here.

Developments since the War

6. Since 1945 there has been a substantial increase in the number of coloured persons arriving in the United Kingdom. They comprise fare-paying passengers and stowaways, mainly from the West Indies and West Africa, and coloured seamen signed on in overseas ports who take their discharge here in the hope of finding regular sea employment. The causes of the influx are complex: in the case of the West Indies it appears to be due to unemployment and under-employment in that area, and the presumption that the labour shortage here was so acute that employment could easily be found: in the case of West Africa, the higher standard of living and social services here appear to be the main attraction.

7. A large number of the immigrant workers who have arrived here since the war comprise West Indians who served in the Royal Air Force during the war and used their gratuities to pay their passages back to the United Kingdom. They are not handicapped by language difficulties and have a much better understanding of British ways of life than the average West African. There are no statistics available but it is understood that approximately 2,000 migrant workers have arrived from the West Indies, chiefly from Jamaica, since 1945, mostly in large parties travelling in troopships at cheap rates. In 1949, the number of such arrivals dropped considerably. This was due partly to shipping difficulties and partly to the fact that fewer men could now afford the cost of passages. Nevertheless until unemployment in Jamaica is reduced there is bound to be a desire among many persons there to seek work overseas.

8. In response to representations from the colonies themselves, my predecessor set up a Departmental Committee in 1948 to advise whether there was any scope in the United Kingdom for the introduction under official auspices of surplus colonial labour. It was not found possible to promote any schemes which would give substantial help to the colonies, but two small groups of people have been recruited from St. Helena and Barbados.

9. Since the war there have been three occasions upon which disturbances between groups of coloured persons and others have called for special police action to restore law and order. These were at Liverpool from 31st July to 2nd August, 1948, at Deptford on 18th July, 1949, and at an industrial hostel near Birmingham from 6th to 8th August, 1949. Isolated disturbances occur from time to time involving individual coloured men, and the police in the areas with aggregations of coloured persons keep a special watch for any incidents likely to provoke a general disturbance.
The present situation

10. It is among the new voluntary arrivals and persons who came here for war service and did not return that the main problems of housing, employment and relief of distress now arise.

11. In view of the continuing influx, an inter-Departmental meeting was held at the Home Office on 18th February, 1949, to consider what action could be taken by the Government Departments concerned, namely the Colonial Office, the Home Office, the Ministry of Labour, the Ministry of Health the Ministry of Transport and the National Assistance Board. It was decided to concentrate action under the following heads:

(a) To press Colonial Governments to reduce the flow at the source by making it known that jobs and accommodation in the United Kingdom are not too easily found, by not issuing passports to persons who cannot pay their passages or are obviously of the type who do not welcome regular employment, and by imposing greater controls at the ports to prevent stowing away.

(b) To stiffen up immigration practice at United Kingdom ports by a return to the pre-1942 practice of requiring all arrivals from any destination to produce satisfactory evidence of British nationality.

(c) To set up a working party of representatives of the Government Departments concerned to tackle the problem of those colonials already here by dispersal, by finding employment and accommodation, and by arranging for voluntary repatriation of the misfits.

Action Taken

12. Action so far taken under these heads is briefly as follows:

(a) (i) In general Colonial Governments have made it their practice to warn potential immigrants of conditions in the United Kingdom and to refuse passports in proper cases. My predecessor sent a despatch to the Governors of the Colonies suggesting ways and means of preventing stowing away in colonial ports. It is too early yet to say how far Colonial Governments will be able to take effective measures.

(ii) Many stowaways from West Africa have produced British Travel Certificates. These documents are issued by the British authorities in West African territories only for travel between those territories, but, as they certify the holder's nationality, Immigration Officers in the United Kingdom have had no option but to accept them. I am seeing whether these Certificates can be changed into documents merely certifying identity and place of residence, without any reference to national status: if this can be done it should reduce substantially the number of stowaways from West Africa who are admitted here.

(b) (i) On 19th September, 1949, the Home Office issued revised instructions to Immigration Officers enabling them to refuse leave to land to persons who cannot provide satisfactory evidence that they are British subjects or British protected persons. This was in effect a return to the pre-1942 practice, and as a result there has been a slight decline in the number of stowaways given leave to land.

(ii) I have sent a despatch to all maritime Colonies recommending the introduction of a standard certificate of nationality and identity for all colonial seamen and the verification of these men's nationality before the document is issued. If this standard document is brought into use it will reduce the possibility of aliens entering the United Kingdom as British subjects with forged or improperly issued certificates.

(c) The inter-Departmental working party began work in May 1949. The questions with which it is mainly concerned are:

(i) Accommodation.—The stowaways and migrant workers have settled in the main centres of colonial population and have thus aggravated the poor conditions under which coloured people are living. An added difficulty is that, in places such as Liverpool and Cardiff, there is a general lack of employment. Many of the men are unmarried and
are not eligible for housing by local authorities. There is some prejudice on the part of landladies and others against accommodating coloured people.

(ii) Employment.—This prejudice is exacerbated in areas where there is substantial general unemployment or in establishments where white women are employed.

The principal obstacle, however, is the attitude of some of the coloured colonials themselves and their undisciplined behaviour when they secure employment. This applies to the men who are new to this country and not to the second generation. Nevertheless, the problem of unemployment is comparatively small. A special enquiry undertaken by the Ministry of Labour last July showed that in the main centres there were about 1,200 men out of work. The majority of these were in Liverpool (540), London (East End) (278), Wales (mainly Cardiff) (101) and Manchester (129). Of this total of 1,200 nearly 500 were men who represented themselves as seamen.

There is a constant turnover of men, and except in Liverpool, and to some extent Cardiff, the total of unemployed does not represent a static figure of men who are unable to obtain work. For example, while there were 137 coloured colonial unemployed in Manchester in November, the Ministry of Labour had placed 262 in employment in the previous six months, 82 had obtained seagoing employment and 55 had found work by their own efforts. At Stepney, where there is a relatively large coloured colonial community, 203 men had been found employment in the month ended 6th February this year.

The Ministry of Labour are trying to transfer men in areas such as Liverpool and London to areas in the country where there are acute labour shortages. In spite of accommodation difficulties some success has already been achieved with the help of the National Service Hostels Corporation.

The most difficult problem is that of seamen, genuine or otherwise, who cannot get seagoing employment and who are often neither suitable for, nor willing to take, shore employment away from the ports.

(iii) Repatriation.—Destitute or incapacitated persons who would otherwise be likely to become a continual charge on public funds can now be repatriated to their colonies at public expense. The cost of repatriation is met by the National Assistance Board if it can be established that the cost cannot be met from any other source. Before men are sent home, enquiries are made in the colonies to see if the next-of-kin can meet the whole or part of the cost.

There are some individuals who are outside the scope of the present repatriation arrangements. Generally these are able-bodied men for whom work can be found by the Ministry of Labour. Men in this category are only offered repatriation when they are likely to become a continual charge on public funds and it is clearly in the public interest that they should be sent home. Some difficulty has been caused by shipowners who engage colonial seamen in foreign or Dominion ports without a repatriation clause in the articles of agreement. In general, it is not possible to exercise control over the recruitment of these men in foreign ships, but a despatch is being sent to Colonial Governments to see if any effective measures can be taken locally to obtain this control. A bigger difficulty arises from the fact that a number of colonial seamen on arrival in the United Kingdom have forfeited or voluntarily waived their repatriation rights. These men are usually paid off here, but, as there is no shortage of labour in the shipping industry, it has not been possible for more than a handful of them to be absorbed in seagoing employment. The Ministry of Transport and the shipping industry have recently reminded overseas representatives and the Masters of ships respectively to see that in all cases where colonial seamen are signed on there should be a repatriation clause in the articles of agreement, so that on arrival in this country the men may be repatriated at the expense of the shipping company concerned. No British coloured person can, however, be compelled to accept repatriation if he does not wish to go, and in many cases men recruited in this way decide to stay and try their luck.
(iv) Colour discrimination.—As already mentioned, there is a certain amount of prejudice in this country against coloured people; for example, reluctance on the part of landladies to accept them as lodgers, and other manifestations on the part of private employers and workers and in social activities. This prejudice is not, however, capable of being overcome by direct legislative or administrative action. The Information Department of the Colonial Office is carrying out a planned programme of work designed to make the British public better informed about the Colonies and their peoples and to promote mutual understanding. Apart from this, the best service which the Colonial Office and other Departments of Government can render in this field is to grapple with the administrative problems in connection with the immigration, residence and employment of the relatively small group of coloured people who have not yet been absorbed into the normal life and work of the country, to see that they have their fair share of the amenities and opportunities available to the community in general, and to stimulate voluntary interest and service on their behalf.

**Future Action**

13. My Department has been under some pressure from Parliamentary and public sources to take special action in the way of setting up clubs and providing welfare officers to attend to the special needs of these people. It would, however, be a wrong policy to treat the colonial residents as a class apart from the community in general, though it must be recognised that they do need special guidance. Apart from the settled colonial community only some three or four thousand persons are involved, and by careful and continual attention to their needs I am confident that the problem can be kept within bounds without resort to any drastic measures. There are, however, certain lines of action which my Department can follow to prevent the problem from growing in size and getting out of hand. These lines are generally as follows:

(i) Pressure will be maintained on Colonial Governments to take all possible measures to prevent the embarkation of stowaways in Colonial ports. It will not be possible for any action to be taken to control their embarkation in foreign ports, apart from pressure on shipping companies.

(ii) The Colonial Office will, in consultation with Colonial Governments, continue to discourage the migration of unskilled workers from the West Indies, and to reduce the opportunities for aliens to obtain irregular documents which might gain them entry to the United Kingdom. Colonial Governments will be kept fully informed of the difficulties which men may expect to find on arrival in this country and will be asked to make them widely known among the public.

(iii) Efforts will continue to be made in consultation with voluntary organisations and local authorities to deal effectively with the social welfare of new additions to the colonial communities in the United Kingdom, particularly in regard to housing and social amenities. With this object in view, I propose to consult with non-official voluntary organisations such as the British Council of Churches and the National Council of Social Service.

(iv) The Colonial Office will continue to co-operate with the Ministry of Labour in their efforts to reduce by dispersal the number of unemployed colonials living in areas where work is not readily available.

J. G.

Colonial Office, 18th May, 1950.