CABINET

COLONIAL IMMIGRANTS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Home Department and Minister for Welsh Affairs

On 10th March the Cabinet considered a memorandum by my predecessor (C. (54) 94) about the immigration of British subjects from Colonial territories, and invited the Home Secretary, the Commonwealth Secretary and the Colonial Secretary to consider further whether, in addition to a power to deport such people who became criminals or dependent on public funds, power should be taken to control the entry of British subjects into this country (C. C. (54) 17th Conclusions, Minute 6). The Lord President of the Council was joined in the deliberations and a Working Party of officials set up to examine the administrative aspects of the problem. We have now considered the whole question in the light of their report.

2. In the meantime, the position has altered, in that the flow of immigrants, mainly from the West Indies, has greatly increased. It is expected that about 10,000 people will come here from the West Indies this year with the intention of remaining permanently, compared with an estimated figure of 2,200 for last year. Colonial Governments cannot be expected to control this flow and no limit to the numbers likely to come here, in particular from Jamaica, is in sight. At the present rate immigration from the West Indies alone would in three or four years raise the coloured population to a total of something like 100,000, and as the law stands there is no means of putting any limit on the number of Commonwealth citizens from overseas who may choose to settle here. The flow of immigrants to this country may well increase regularly over the next few months in much the way in which illegal Jewish immigration to Palestine speeded up once it became known by the foreign owners of indifferent shipping that there was an easy means of earning a lot of money quickly.

3. The only effective method of restricting this immigration is to impose a form of control on the entry of British subjects into the United Kingdom, and their employment here, similar to that imposed on aliens, including wide powers of deportation. There would of course be no question of interfering with the right of persons belonging to the United Kingdom to come and go as they pleased, nor would it be necessary or desirable to extend the control to citizens of the Irish Republic. Conditional upon this, the control would have to be applied to all British subjects alike, though it would be made to operate with the minimum of inconvenience to Commonwealth citizens. The necessary legislation would however undoubtedly be criticised both by those who disliked the interference with the traditional freedom of British subjects to come to the Mother Country at will and by those who would allege that the institution of a control had been inspired by racial prejudice. On the other hand, it would seem from the increased public discussion that the extent of the present immigration is causing many to revise their opinions and to favour some form of control.
4. A power limited to the deportation of British subjects who turned out for one reason or another to be undesirable additions to our population would be open to fewer objections, but it would not be free from controversy and it would be wholly ineffective as a means of controlling the flow of immigration.

5. Having regard to the increasing public interest, I have been led to think that it would now be appropriate to appoint a Departmental Committee which would make it possible to present a balanced statement on it before proposals for legislation are submitted to Parliament. In accordance with the conclusions of the Cabinet, the Prime Minister said in the House of Commons on 18th March, that he was not convinced that a Committee to consider the problem would serve a useful purpose at that time. As shown in paragraph 2 above, however, circumstances have changed since the Cabinet came to that conclusion. There have been a number of Questions in the House of Commons suggesting the setting up of a Committee to enquire into the position of coloured people in Great Britain. Mr. J.B. Hynd raised the general subject on the adjournment on 5th November, and ended his speech by asking that, if the Government had not positive plans in mind to deal with all the implications of the situation, they should agree to the setting up of a public inquiry; and the Minister of State for Colonial Affairs in reply said that the suggestion was being considered. He was pressed by Sir Edward Keeling to give an assurance before the Christmas adjournment that the Committee would be set up.

6. In view of the urgency of the problem, it would be necessary that any Committee should be constituted as quickly as possible and that it should be asked to submit an early report and I see no reason why any lengthy inquiry should be necessary.

7. I have consulted the Lord President, the Commonwealth Secretary, the Colonial Secretary and the Minister of Labour and National Service and I propose that a Departmental Committee should be appointed with the following terms of reference:

To consider and report whether any, and if so, what changes in the law relating to the admission to, and stay in the United Kingdom of any class of British subjects are necessary or desirable in the national interest and in the interest of the immigrants themselves.

8. I seek authority to make an early announcement to this effect in the House of Commons. It will be necessary to let the Commonwealth countries know what we propose and the reasons for it before any formal announcement is made. Moreover, since this is not a matter of Party politics but is one of national concern which will have to be tackled soon by whichever Party is in power, I think it would be a good thing if the Prime Minister could see the Leader of the Opposition and let him know what is proposed before any announcement is made.

G.L.L-G.

Home Office, S.W.1.

20th November, 1954.