6th December, 1954

CABINET

COLONIAL IMMIGRANTS

Memorandum by the Secretary of State for the Colonies

It is virtually certain that this Government or its successor will be driven by events and by the pressure of public opinion to enact legislation controlling the immigration into this country of British subjects from overseas. Our problem is how to balance against each other on the one hand the need to take action as soon as possible, before the problem of coloured immigration into this country has gone much further and leads to social and industrial problems damaging to this country and to our relations with coloured peoples overseas, and on the other the need to carry responsible Parliamentary and public opinion with us to the greatest possible extent both in what we do and in the way we do it.

2. My initial feeling was that the appointment of a Departmental Committee, as proposed by the Home Secretary in C. (54) 354 was simply postponing the issue, and that we had already, in the shape of various official reports, quite enough material to enable us to take a decision now. However, bearing in mind the fact that it would probably be impossible to find Parliamentary time for legislation on this subject during the forthcoming Session, an announcement of the Government's intention to legislate might simply serve as an invitation to potential immigrants to rush to this country while the going was good, and provide far too long an interval for public debate and exacerbation. Moreover, although there are many signs that responsible public opinion is moving in the direction of favouring immigration control, there is still to my mind a good deal to be done before it is solidly in favour of it. I believe therefore that the appointment of a Committee as proposed by the Home Secretary would have the double advantage of enabling us to postpone an announcement of our policy until nearer the time when the necessary legislation could be put in hand, and of enabling public opinion to develop further and be crystallised.

3. On the assumption therefore that a Committee will be set up, I do not think it necessary here and now to enter into arguments on the point whether control legislation should apply to all overseas British subjects or to overseas citizens of the United Kingdom and the Colonies (i.e. predominantly coloured persons only) although I may say here and now that for reasons which I would develop at the appropriate time I would have the gravest misgivings about the latter proposition. For present purposes, however, I am quite clear that, without prejudice to whatever decision may later be reached at the appropriate time, we should strenuously avoid doing or saying anything now which could be interpreted as favouring racially discriminatory action. That means to my mind that the terms of reference of the proposed Committee should avoid language which could be interpreted as an invitation to consider discriminatory
proposals. I fear that the use of the words "any class of" before "British subjects" in the third and fourth lines of the terms of reference proposed in paragraph 7 of C. (54) 354 would certainly be interpreted in that way both here and in the Colonies, whatever other explanation we sought to put upon them. Indeed I do not know what other explanation could plausibly be put forward.

4. I incline also to the view that we should deal with deportation and immigration control together, that is to say remit the whole subject to the proposed Departmental Committee and not now announce that we propose to go ahead with deportation legislation, if only because of the lapse of time between an announcement of this kind now and the time when it could be translated into legislation. I do not think an announcement of this kind would have any noticeably deterrent effect on immigration, since I do not imagine that many of the immigrants who cause us concern actually set out with the intention or expectation of behaving in such a way as might conceivably render them liable to deportation. Indeed my opinion is that in the long term our troubles really arise when the immigrant workers make good to the extent that there is some question of putting them in positions of responsibility over United Kingdom citizens. That I understand is a problem which has arisen in connection with immigrant workers irrespective of colour.

A.L-B.

Colonial Office, S.W.I.

4th December, 1954.