**The Windrush Scandal and the individualisation of postcolonial immigration control in Britain**

Mike Slavena\*

aSchool of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln, Lincoln, UK

Mike Slaven  
Bridge House  
University of Lincoln   
Lincoln  
LN6 7TS  
UK  
mslaven@lincoln.ac.uk  
ORCID: [0000-0001-8651-4480](http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8651-4480)  
@mcslaven

\*corresponding author

Mike Slaven is Senior Lecturer in International Politics, School of Social and Political Sciences, University of Lincoln.

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This article argues a previously little-discussed policy shift, the individualisation of UK immigration control, is key to understanding the Windrush Scandal and the wider governance of racialised immigrants in Britain. Drawing on official records from 1963-1973, this article identifies how the UK shifted from an initial aggregate model of governing postcolonial immigrants, deemphasising individual policing, to a model centred on scrutinising individual immigrant compliance. Through interviews with 1980s-2010s UK policy actors, it identifies three policy legacies of this shift. First, it naturalised increasing individual scrutiny as the mechanism for reducing immigration volumes, making immanent the “hostile environment” logic. Second, it gradually increased expectations of individual immigrant documentation, after many Windrush victims arrived under document-light control systems. Third, centring immigrants’ individuality accorded with declining policy deliberation about immigration control’s potential impacts on already-settled minorities. Even absent formal changes to their status, this shift eroded the rights of long-settled immigrants in Britain.

**Keywords:** Windrush, hostile environment, illegalization, undocumented, Immigration Act 1971, Immigration Act 2014

**Introduction**

In 1963, eight-year-old Judy Griffith left Barbados for the United Kingdom to join her parents, who were among the post-World War II African Caribbean immigrants to Britain today known as the “Windrush generation” (Phoenix 1998). By today’s standards, the immigration control system which Griffith encountered would be unrecognisable. Legislation in 1962 gave dependent children of already-settled “Commonwealth citizens” (ex-imperial subjects) a statutory right to settle permanently in Britain. No visa was required, nor was individual documentation: Griffith and her sister voyaged to England on a shared passport (Griffith 2018). Permanent residency was granted at the port, documented by a passport stamp; in 1963, officials at ports recorded refusing entry to 429 Commonwealth citizens, and immediately granting permanent settlement to nearly 60,000 (TNA HO 344/197). After entry, the state had no system to monitor Commonwealth immigrants (Slaven & Boswell 2019) – who formally possessed equal economic, social, and political rights – and few powers to deport them (Bailkin 2008). Griffith’s status in Britain was, by all appearances, permanent and secure.

Fifty-one years later, however, when Griffith was applying for jobs, “I was told that I was an illegal immigrant,” she recalled in an interview with the British Library (Griffith 2018). Griffith’s passport containing her proof of status was long lost in the mail, but unlike before, employers were now requesting it, following the Immigration Act 2014. Unable to work, Griffith began gathering evidence to prove a lifetime in Britain. Thousands in similar situations were denied jobs, health care, or pensions – and even deported to countries they barely remembered (Gentleman 2019).

The “Windrush Scandal” has quickly become understood as a stark expression of the enduring state racism faced in the UK by racialised people with origins in former colonies (de Noronha 2019, 2413–2414). Public discussion has wondered how so many long-settled immigrants – widely considered “accepted” in Britain, the “‘right kind’ of migrants” (Peplow 2019, 228) – became suspect, “illegal.” The scandal has featured prominently in criticisms of Britain’s “hostile environment” for immigrants – a policy approach erecting “everyday borders” within society (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019), intensified by UK governments in the 2010s (Williams 2020) as the continuation of decades of racist anti-immigrant politics (El-Enany 2020, 30–33; Goodfellow 2019, 6).

Such accounts shed substantial light on the proximate mechanisms of the scandal in the 2010s, and how it embodies continued hostility toward racialised immigrants in the UK. Less understood, however, is the nature of huge differences in state practices over time which stories like Griffith’s expose – differences which suggest a reorientation in the British state’s image of the natural ways to govern the racialised postcolonial immigrant subject. From 1963, with a society of widespread open racism but little systematic state monitoring of individual postcolonial immigrants, by 2014, these immigrants were on face “accepted,” but subjected to forms of scrutiny previously unimaginable. If these changes constitute how the UK state “illegalised” (De Genova 2002) Windrush victims, this raises not only the question of how the scandal happened, but also what longer-run shifts within the UK state reoriented the governance of postcolonial immigrant subjects, making the scandal *possible*.

This article identifies the roots of the Windrush Scandal in a previously little-recognised policy shift: the individualisation of UK immigration control. At the start of the 1960s, the “problem” of postcolonial immigration in Britain was rendered as the combination of immigrants’ race and their aggregate numbers, necessitating population-level interventions such as numerical capping, while intensive individual scrutiny was seen as not in the state’s interest. Over the next decade, UK policy shifted to trying to reduce immigration instead by intensifying scrutiny of immigrants at an individualised level, fitting with more punitive public discourses of immigration control. From this shift, this article identifies three interpretive legacies within UK state administration, with lasting policy implications. First, this shift naturalised increased scrutiny of individual immigrants as the logical policy intervention for reducing immigration volumes, making immanent the “hostile environment” logic. Second, this logic was operationalised through rising expectations of individual documentation, eventually exposing many who had arrived under the relatively document-light aggregate control model. Third, the centring of immigrants’ individuality accorded with reducing deliberation about the impacts of immigration control policies on already-settled racial minorities.

Through this analysis, this article contributes to understandings of how transitions from “explicitly racist immigration policy rooted in group-level assessments to a universal policy emphasising individual-level assessments” nonetheless “have the potential to (re)produce social inequalities on a large scale” (Elrick 2020, 15–16). Indeed, Paul Gilroy has called for analysis of “emergent forms of raciology more consistent with the agentic, individuating, rights-based approaches… changes [that] involve calculations about the relationship between past and present” (2012, 381). Examining this shift in the UK contributes to accounts which, by “focusing on immigration control,” allow for “theorizing historically specific racisms” produced by state practices (de Noronha 2019, 2418); recovering the historical specificity of immigration law, as Nicholas De Genova argues (2002), is key to denaturalising current forms of “illegality” and the state racism they enact.

The article proceeds in three parts. First, surveying literature on the Windrush Scandal, it identifies the need to complement analyses of “how” and “why” the scandal happened, with examinations of processes that “constitut[ed] particular interpretive dispositions” (Doty 1993, 298) toward immigration control which legitimated and naturalised certain approaches – the “how possible?” question (Robinson 2017, 509). Second, this article analyses 10,000 pages of archived official records from 1963-1973 to examine the aggregate-to-individualised policy shift. Third, it employs data from 27 interviews of UK immigration policy actors active from the 1980s-2010s to illuminate the three policy legacies identified. In conclusion, this analysis underlines how, even without formal legal changes to immigrants’ status, these shifts eroded the rights of long-settled immigrants in Britain.

**The Windrush Scandal: From “How?” to “How Possible?”**

The Windrush Scandal has become regarded as an essential illustration of the nature of racism and of anti-immigrant politics in contemporary Britain, provoking extensive public discussion. Analyses of “how” and “why” the Windrush Scandal developed have shed valuable light upon it, while making clear that policy changes in the 2010s which triggered the scandal extended existing trends – ones which contrast starkly with the immigration control logics operating when many Windrush victims migrated. Understanding the development of the scandal further requires identifying how persistent monitoring of postcolonial immigrants in the UK became seen as a sensible, natural way to govern this population – a “*how possible*” perspective (Doty 1993).

The Windrush Scandal has been most extensively analysed in non-academic accounts, often focusing on Conservative Party-led immigration policy changes in the 2010s and defects in state administrative culture. Amelia Gentleman’s book-length account (2019) identifies the historically rooted “sense of betrayal” felt by Windrush victims, amid longer-run racism they faced in British society (see Wardle & Obermuller 2019). Still, it identifies “two Conservative Party political pledges… [that] sit at the roots of all the Windrush suffering” (Gentleman 2019, 117): the “net migration pledge” in the 2010 election campaign to reduce net migration to the UK to below 100,000 per year; and then-Home Secretary Theresa May’s statement of intention in 2012 to create “a really hostile environment for illegal migration.” These pledges led to the heedless adoption of “hostile environment” policies which, through the Immigration Acts 2014 and 2016, “outsourced” immigration policing to actors outside the traditional immigration-control system, ensnaring long-settled immigrants when they sought housing, jobs, and welfare.

The most systematic analysis to date of the Windrush Scandal has been the independent report of the official Windrush Lessons Learned Review, led by the inspector of constabulary Wendy Williams (Williams 2020). This report locates the scandal at the confluence of many factors, including politically-led developments in the 2010s which sought to deter irregular immigration and outsource immigration control, while weakening administrative guardrails in order to expediate politically desired actions (Williams 2020, 61). Longstanding issues in Home Office culture made it “already at risk of not understanding the full consequences of the implementation of its policies” (Williams 2020, 119): it habitually discounted warnings from outside groups, adopted defensive postures, and pursued bureaucratic targets at the expense of decision-making quality, among other problems.

Academic discussion of the Windrush Scandal has tended not to use the scandal itself as a starting point, but rather, identify it as a case of wider phenomena. The scandal has been readily interpreted through the “(everyday) bordering” concept (Yuval-Davis et al. 2019, 97), where neoliberal states’ attempts to secure legitimacy turn to instantiating “bordering” throughout society; the Immigration Act 2014 has been analysed as emblematic of the phenomenon (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018). Likewise, the Windrush Scandal is often invoked in critiques of the “hostile environment,” as a nadir of a longer-run dehumanisation of racialised immigrants (Goodfellow 2019), in a project of neo-colonial seizure and violence (El-Enany 2020, 30–33). Similarly, the deportations which some Windrush victims suffered are encompassed within deportation’s use as a technology of racism, aimed as well at other African Caribbean immigrants deemed “unwanted” (de Noronha 2019, 2413–2414).

Contrastingly, scholarship focused on the scandal itself has typically examined public memory or discourse around the “Windrush generation” (e.g. Peplow, 2019; Wardle & Obermuller, 2019). Some analysts have emphasised that the “Windrush generation” encountered racist hostility from its arrival, long before the “hostile environment” existed in policy (Olusoga 2019). Trouble only arose for the government when victims no longer widely considered “unwanted” emerged (Bloom 2019, 491), but this nonetheless underlined how racialised people in the UK continue to have “more insecure claims to citizenship and belonging” (Shankley & Rhodes 2020, 213).

Such analyses reveal an important contrast: between the continuity of racism in Windrush victims’ experiences, and the major differences in the effects which immigration-control systems had at different times upon their lives in Britain. Amidst a continuation of hostility, these changes nonetheless suggest larger shifts in how the UK state interpreted the natural ways to govern the racialised postcolonial immigrant subject. Analyses which have emphasised the importance of longer-run policy changes have apprehended them in two principal ways. On one account, continued policy changes have destabilising cumulative impacts: eventually, state administration lost track of policy consequences, “a layering effect” which resulted in authorities “losing sight of the past” (Williams 2020, 88). On another account, longer-run policy changes are background for proximate decisions in the 2010s centred in analysis. Here, while the 2010s Conservatives “built on similar initiatives brought in by both main parties over decades” (Gentleman 2019, 131) and “the hostile environment was another step on the long road towards a more restrictive immigration regime… it was also a departure in terms of the scale and seriousness of the effects which would be directly felt by individuals” (Williams 2020, 118).

While these accounts shed extremely valuable light, they leave less explored how UK immigration governance fundamentally reoriented to create the possibility that persistent monitoring of immigration compliance could be introduced long after settlement, in stark contrast to the immigration-control system under which many Windrush victims arrived. Analysis of the Immigration Act 2014, for instance, recognises that it extended already-visible outsourcing logics (Gentleman 2019, 131; Yuval-Davis et al. 2018), especially as this has been occurring in the UK welfare state since the 1990s (Slaven et al. 2021, 872–876); the logic of 2010s “hostile environment” policies was, in some way, already available to policymakers. In this sense, while accounts of the Windrush Scandal have examined “*why*” and “*how*” it happened – identifying immediately preceding policy changes as crucial junctures – analysis is also needed of longer processes that naturalised as legitimate and sensible the kinds of policies contained in the 2014 Act. Distinct from linear causal investigation, this is the “*how possible*” question (Doty 1993).

The starting point of “how-possible” analysis is that policy decisions rest upon frequently tacit understandings of the nature policy problems and how it makes sense to approach them. How-possible questions “examine how meanings are produced and attached to various social subjects/objects, thus constituting particular interpretive dispositions which create certain possibilities and preclude others” (Doty 1993, 298). The focus is “not *why* a particular course of action was chosen but *how* it was possible, and indeed common-sensible” (Weldes 1996, 284). Returning to Judy Griffith’s story as an example, interpretive dispositions toward immigration control today would “preclude” family immigrants arriving to settle legally in the UK without a visa – but not so in 1963. Likewise, on entry, the state issued Griffith only stamp in a passport, which she had rarely shown before 2014; at some point, the notion of routinely showing documents became naturalised. What led these concepts, not considered natural in the 1960s, to become “possible”?

*Methods*

Methodologically, how-possible questions may be addressed through an interpretivist process tracing approach (Robinson 2017, 509) that reconstructs policy processes by understanding how policymakers “renegotiate[d] their internal and external roles” vis-à-vis images of social problems (Robinson 2017, 512). This can achieve insight into the interrelationship among the ideas producing policy change – ideas that “define the problems to be solved by such policies; the issues to be considered; the goals to be achieved; the norms, methods and instruments to be applied” (Schmidt 2008, 306). To access how “particular interpretive dispositions” (Doty 1993, 298) have developed, evidence of deliberative processes within public administration is crucial. As naturalised interpretations often become tacit, focusing on periods of “puzzling” (Hoppe 2011) – when particular interpretations are being deliberated – is key.

To do so, this article analyses 10,000 pages of official documents in the UK National Archives, dating from 1963, after the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962 was enacted, until 1973, when the UK implemented the Immigration Act 1971, still the legislative foundation of UK immigration control. These documents are drawn mainly from Home Office files, but also include documents from involved departments like the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and Cabinet Office. This article then analyses the legacies of changes identified during that period by drawing from 27 semi-structured interviews with UK immigration policy actors active from the late 1980s to the 2010s (a period for which official documents remain largely sealed), leading up to the Windrush Scandal. The interview sample mainly comprised high-ranking civil servants in the Home Office, sampled for their likely knowledge of both administrative and political challenges in the area, but also includes political advisers and some members of external policy networks. The interviews lasted roughly an hour each, were largely in person (three were phone interviews), and are drawn from two interview rounds (seven interviews took place in 2012, and 20 in 2017-2018). The following section analyses policy changes in the 1963-1973 period, before a further section compares recent interview data against earlier archival evidence, to draw out lasting interpretive legacies of earlier policy shifts.

**The Shift to Individualised Control of Postcolonial Immigration: 1963-1973**

Between 1963 and 1973 – when many Windrush victims, particularly those who immigrated as children, arrived in Britain – the UK’s approach to controlling postcolonial immigration shifted from an initial aggregate model, which deemphasised the policing of individual compliance, to an individualised model which sought to reduce immigration volumes through stricter individualised scrutiny and monitoring. The aggregate control model was enacted by the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, the UK’s first legislation to restrict immigrants from the Commonwealth (the former British Empire), who held varieties of post-imperial citizenship allowing them to migrate freely to the UK (Hansen 2000). The 1962 Act aimed for migration management in aggregate, “to keep a broad control on numbers rather than to control individuals” (“Skeleton of Home Secretary’s Paper,” n.d. [1964], TNA HO 344/172). The policy goal was reducing “addition to the volume of coloured immigration to this country” (“Draft Memorandum to the Commonwealth Immigration Committee,” n.d. [1965], TNA HO 344/281). Amidst an accelerating, explicit racialisation of immigration debates in the UK during this period (Small & Solomos 2006), managing Britain’s racial demographics at population level (Hampshire 2005) was the stated goal.

Though the 1962 Act created rules of eligibility to immigrate, it instituted few tools to ensure compliance or punish violations, deemphasising policing these criteria. The legislation created settlement eligibility for holders of a capped number of work vouchers, and for spouses and dependent children of future voucher holders and existing settled Commonwealth immigrants. Capping primary labour migrants aimed to produce corresponding reductions in family migration, and thus overall immigration levels, while Commonwealth students or visitors were to be admitted freely. However, Commonwealth citizens admitted to study, work, or join family were not monitored to ensure they did that, nor usually were they formally required to do so. Policymakers saw this immigration control system as distinctly ports-based; no system monitored after-entry activity. Immigration officers could inspect Commonwealth citizens up to 24 hours after arrival and return those deemed ineligible, but it was not an offense for Commonwealth immigrants to evade immigration control entirely. As one official explained, the new control system

was never intended to operate as a fine-toothed instrument; the main purpose was to achieve a significant reduction in the total volume of immigration while at the same time, enabling those who were given a statutory right to come to the United Kingdom to get here without more trouble than absolutely necessary, either to them as individuals or to the authorities. (Wood to Ream, 14 Aug. 1963, TNA HO 344/95)

This model contrasted with the one already operating for “aliens,” foreigners from outside the Commonwealth, including continental Europe. Predominantly white, aliens were considered politically uncontroversial and likely to return home. The aliens system focused on verifying that admitted individuals filled specific labour market gaps or social (e.g. family) roles, but imposed no numerical caps, since that would potentially obstruct seeing such gaps filled. Aliens immigrating to work were required to have a specific job offer, to work in that position, and to register with the police – none of which were required for Commonwealth immigrants.

Three main reasons underlay this difference in policy design. First was the foreign policy-oriented concern of retaining relative privilege for Commonwealth citizens, which included white immigrants from “Old Commonwealth” settler colonies (Hansen 2000). Second was that policymakers perceived that Commonwealth labour migrants mostly would permanently settle, and subjecting them to continued monitoring or limiting family reunification rights could hinder integration and thus damage “race relations.” Third was a sense of operational difficulty, reflecting awareness of gaps in state monitoring and enforcement capacity, characteristic of UK administration (Boswell & Badenhoop 2021). Officials thought that scrutinising Commonwealth immigrants would be resource-intensive, counterproductive, and mostly immaterial to reducing numbers: “Even the full aliens system would be difficult to apply effectively to citizens of the new Commonwealth because those who wanted to evade the control could too often disappear” (Cunningham to Soskice, 24 November 1964, TNA HO 344/65).

This view that attempting tighter individual scrutiny was not in the state’s interest connected to an approach hesitant toward limiting the formal rights of immigrants once present in Britain. Policymakers’ concept of “race relations” prompted dramatic curtailments of the mobility rights of hundreds of millions of racialised people, while simultaneously holding that, within British society itself, “race relations” would be damaged by state control or monitoring practices that may be perceived as too unfair to, and antagonise, settled minorities. The post-1962 system thus accorded with official caution about increasing internal and port-based scrutiny. Data on grants of settlement versus refusals underlines how Commonwealth immigrants’ accounts of entitlement to entry at ports initially were treated relatively unsuspiciously (TNA HO 344/197). Accordingly, the system did not emphasise individual documentation: while a passport was required to enter the UK, only primary labour immigrants required further documentation (a work voucher). Once in Britain, Commonwealth immigrants possessed equal social, economic, and political rights, with no general obligation to comply with conditions or monitoring, or reapply for leave.

These parallel UK immigration control systems thus represented two simultaneously operating control models: An aggregate one meant to limit numbers of racialised postcolonial immigrants, where rigorous individual scrutiny was seen as inefficient, beside the point of numerical control, and averse to “race relations;” and an individualised one for aliens, which sought to verify and monitor individual immigrants’ eligibility and compliance through pre-entry screening, continued monitoring, and limited after-entry rights judged to befit immigrants who would mostly return home.

By 1973, however, reforms had largely erased these distinctions, elevating individualised control over Commonwealth immigrants as well. Why?

From the mid-1960s, the purported failure to reduce non-white immigration enough became intertwined with the state’s supposed lack of strictness in catching rulebreakers. Commonwealth immigration reduced from a 1961 peak, but remained around late-1950s levels (about 50,000 per year). Under the aggregate control model, the remedy was to reduce the number of people from ex-colonies entitled to immigrate, by limiting immigration of new heads of households and, consequently, their family. Believing that fraud was not widespread, officials accepted this system as pragmatic, albeit loose. As one Home Office policymaker wrote, “We have been assuming that, in the long term, reduction in the number of vouchers is bound to lead to a decline in the number of dependants…. However, we really have no information about this” (Otton to Lodge, 8 Jan. 1968, TNA HO 344/205).

Criticism of this system steadily escalated. In 1965, responding to politicised concerns that Commonwealth immigration remained too high, the Labour Party government employed the 1962 Act’s key policy levers, lowering the work voucher cap and ending discretionary concessions permitting settlement by more distantly related family (*Immigration from the Commonwealth* 1965). Amid controversies over immigration rates, lack of control over Commonwealth immigrants at an individualised level began to be raised in Parliament (HL Deb 10 March 1965, vol 264, col 70). While the government promised greater scrutiny at the ports, initially, the aggregate logic largely held; the home secretary still accepted “it would be highly invidious to apply the full system at present in force in regard to aliens” (Soskice to Cunningham, 18 Nov. 1964, TNA HO 344/65).

Nonetheless, pressures increased as, after 1965, child dependants began to dominate persistent Commonwealth settlement figures, and political discourse on immigration shifted toward punitive images. While policymakers thought “evasion of the control” was overstated as a public problem and marginal to reducing immigration, the Home Office began responding to concerns about rulebreaking with symbolic policies increasing individualised scrutiny (Slaven & Boswell 2019). Immigration officers eventually devoted greater effort to verifying the age and family relationships of child dependants, instituting increasingly invasive interrogation and physical examinations (“Brief No. 2: Commonwealth Immigration: Evasion,” Nov. 1968, TNA HO 344/55). While port rejections accordingly increased, reaching 2,219 in 1967 from 429 in 1963 (FitzGerald to Ennals, 12 Feb. 1968, TNA HO 344/188), this remained, as predicted, marginal to steady Commonwealth immigration rates. Policymakers used the hasty drafting of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968, infamous for basing the right of abode for UK citizens on British descent, to criminalise clandestine entry – responding to panicked media coverage of a small number of clandestine landings, despite considering this immaterial to reducing immigration (Slaven & Boswell 2019, 1486–1488). In 1969, officials began requiring “entry certificates” for child Commonwealth dependants, even though officials similarly believed this would not reduce numbers, since it would not reduce the number of people legally entitled to immigrate (TNA HO 344/77).

Still, political pressure on the aggregate model intensified from 1968, when, responding to anti-immigrant campaigners led by Enoch Powell, the Conservative Party leader, Edward Heath, began championing sweeping immigration reforms. “Commonwealth immigration legislation will be strengthened to ensure that the most strict control can be exercised,” Conservatives pledged, identifying the key way to achieve this: “joining it with the legislation governing the entry of aliens” (Conservative Party 1968, 24). While pledging that the status of already-settled Commonwealth immigrants would not change – and that dependants’ rights to join family would remain – the Conservatives proposed subjecting new Commonwealth immigrants to much more extensive individual scrutiny and monitoring: “No one will in future be granted an immediate unconditional right to stay here. Work permits will be issued only for a limited number of specific jobs. … [I]mmigrants, visitors and students will have to register their whereabouts” (Conservative Party 1968, 24).

Home Office policymakers criticised these proposals as ignoring tensions between aggregate and individualised control models which they had employed in regard to distinct populations, toward distinct policy goals. They argued that increased individual scrutiny did not, in itself, offer tools for guaranteeing reduced immigration numbers, which instead required numerical caps.

[The] ability to control numbers is the crucial distinction between the Commonwealth and aliens controls. To go over to the aliens system for Commonwealth citizens would entail giving up this numerical control … [Regarding dependents] since there is no proposal to limit the number of permits issued… there is nothing in the Conservative proposals which would reduce numbers of dependants arriving. The mere erection of an administratively expensive system of control will have no impact on numbers. (“Mr. Heath’s Statement of Commonwealth Immigration Policy,” n.d., TNA HO 344/55)

Furthermore, they argued that an individual-scrutiny approach could cause possibly severe social consequences.

The other main emphasis in the Opposition’s proposals is on the need for a much tighter system of control after arrival.… [W]hat is to be the purpose of this elaborate system of control? … Will this help race relations and integration? … Could we honestly say we were not creating a category of second class citizens? (“Expiring Laws Continuance Bill, Notes for Home Secretary’s Speech,” 12 Nov. 1968, TNA HO 344/55).

Nonetheless, the Conservative electoral victory in 1970 made the demise of the aggregate model imminent. Ironically, this model was by then meeting its stated goals: Commonwealth settlement fell 40 percent between 1967 and 1969 (FitzGerald to Faulkner, 16 June 1970, TNA HO 344/353). As the new home secretary wrote to Heath, now prime minister, “permanent immigration from the Commonwealth is already down to little more than a trickle. … The job is virtually done by the existing system” (Maudling to Heath, 27 Aug. 1970, TNA PREM 15/444). But the Conservatives had been elected pledging tighter individualised control, which Heath committed politically to pursue (Williams 2015), leading officials to soon accept this “perhaps inevitable trend” (Holden to FitzGerald, 14 July 1970, HO 376/169). The Immigration Act 1971 – taking effect in 1973 – erased the distinct aggregate control model for Commonwealth immigrants, placing future Commonwealth arrivals under greater individualised scrutiny and a broadened concept of “illegal entry.” It also formally placed on immigrants the burden to prove their status in cases of doubt (Tuckett 2019, 120). The only distinctions which remained were that Commonwealth immigrants retained their political rights, and were not required to register with police.

Thus, from 1963 to 1973, the UK state’s basic interpretive disposition toward the governance of racialised postcolonial immigrants shifted: from an image of groups with distinct past imperial connections whose overall numbers had to be limited, and individualised scrutiny of whom would not serve the state’s interest; to a collective of individuals, whose rights in Britain were formally less, and whose individual compliance with rules could be policed more persistently. The 1971 Act was not supposed to impact the status of the many Commonwealth immigrants already settled in Britain – a commitment that governments retained in following decades (Williams 2020, 54–59). Its enactment nonetheless marked a shift in prevailing state understandings of governing postcolonial migration, which would have wide-ranging consequences.

**Three Policy Legacies of the Individualisation of UK Immigration Control**

Despite the significance of the shift described above, interview data with UK immigration policymakers active from the 1980s onward reflect little lasting awareness that today’s individualised immigration control represents a historically distinct mode of British immigration governance. As aggregate governance approaches faded from memory, individualised scrutiny became the natural, “common-sensible” approach for later UK policymakers. Such changes over time led the Home Office to “forget” that many had immigrated to the UK under profoundly different systems (Williams 2020, 49). However, rather than merely obscuring past policies beneath changes, this shift left particular legacies in three “interpretive dispositions” which became dominant in UK immigration control, and later helped to precipitate the Windrush Scandal.

*Individual scrutiny for aggregate goals*

Since the 1971 Act, the overwhelming way that UK policymakers have pursued political objectives to reduce various forms of controversial migration has been to intensify scrutiny of individual immigrants’ qualification and compliance, rather than to cap admissions numbers. While policy goals often remained numerical, mechanisms were largely individualised. By the 2010s, the principal policy logic of immigration control had become, as one policymaker summarised, “We can do everything we can to eliminate all abuse of the system, which will reduce numbers” (Interview 24). Under this formulation, increased requirements, intensified scrutiny, and more thorough monitoring will reduce immigration aggregately. A cumulative phenomenon is understood as governed through a series of individualised interventions.

Officials in the 1960s saw this formulation as logically flawed and liable to exacerbate social problems. Political pledges to reduce migration regard distinct volumes: for instance, the “tens of thousands” (as in the UK’s 2010s “net migration pledge”). Earlier policymakers held that increased individualised scrutiny of immigrants contained no direct tool for adhering to these aggregate goals. Premising control on individualised determinations in place of gross measures like numerical capping can reduce immigration against a hypothetical level, but if enough immigrants qualify, numbers may actually increase, notwithstanding increased strictness toward individuals. After the Conservatives came to power in 1970, the home secretary conveyed these concerns to the prime minister, Heath: “I know that it is your strong personal view that there should be a single system governing the admission of aliens and Commonwealth citizens. … I must advise you that there are real problems about having a single entry system” (Maudling to Heath, 24 June 1970, TNA PREM 15/44). Heath, favouring politically expedient legislation, did not grasp the issue: “I have never quite understood the difficulty about the limitation of numbers” (Heath to Maudling, 3 July 1970, TNA HO 15/444). The 1971 Act followed.

Consequently, increasing individual scrutiny started becoming naturalised as the logical intervention to meet political objectives to reduce controversial immigration volumes. This logic was cemented by extended controversies around reducing varieties of immigration where the UK state contended with individual rights claims. As early as the 1970s, with family migrants the dominant category of racialised immigrants which UK policymakers aimed to reduce, explicit quotas were out of favour (Shearmur 2021, 61–62). Later, in asylum, where “the main political driver of policy [was] reducing the number of asylum seekers” (Interview 1), policymakers took the basic approach of increasing individualised scrutiny of asylum seekers: “The criteria of the Refugee Convention were fairly clear and strict. Did they match up or not?” (Interview 2). The individualised judgment of such cases cemented a subjectivity of (frequently racialised) immigrants focused on individual qualification and compliance. Officials scrutinised applications for “things that cast doubt on credibility” (Interview 7) and deterred applications through limiting asylum seekers’ social and economic rights. Similarly, in the 2000s, when European Union labour migration became politically controversial, UK policymakers addressed pressures to reduce volumes through the same formulation of scrutinising individual compliance. This meant “more action against EU nationals who… don’t have a right in the first place because they’re not exercising a treaty right” (Interview 25), and, to the extent treaties allowed, limiting access to the welfare state through a Workers Registration Scheme monitoring that “they had completed 12 months’ continuous employment, [without which] they weren’t able to access benefits” (Interview 25).

In these developments, the “hostile environment” repertoire – increased individualised scrutiny and monitoring, including in the welfare state – comes clearly into view. Given that, as noted, this formulation lacks direct mechanisms to meet political pledges around migration numbers, what also emerges is the prospect that these approaches will be continuously escalated, amid faltering efforts to meet political goals. Indicating just how entrenched this individualised logic had become, the UK applied this in areas where it was less behoved to contend with individual rights claims, such as non-EU labour migration. By the 2000s, immigration control was becoming notably pervaded by notions of differentiating “good” and “bad” individual immigrants, partly through expanded monitoring (Flynn 2005). This individualised logic had become so firmly rooted that when the Conservatives, post-2010, pursued their “net migration pledge,” policymakers did not consider caps the main mechanism for pursuing this, and caps in the major area where they were employed – non-EU workers – went unmet until 2015. Even “in aim of reducing migration to the tens of thousands,” one policymaker explained, “the most relevant things we’ve done are to raise the skills level” against which individual applicants were scrutinised (Interview 21).

These developments underscore how profoundly policymakers’ image of the subject of the “unwanted” immigrant had shifted since the 1960s. No longer was this subject to be governed through policies that sought to keep a “broad control on numbers” of members of particular racialised communities, but rather, through intensified individual scrutiny at the border and beyond. This shift led to the “hostile environment” logic being not only possible and available, but immanent, as the pursuit of generalised restriction in the 2010s (Gentleman 2019, 117–144) entailed a generalised growth of individual scrutiny.

*Growing expectations of individual documentation*

As the above logic of individualised scrutiny became naturalised in UK immigration control, it was operationalised through gradually increased expectations of individual documentation. Individualised models for controlling racialised immigrants were initially instituted mainly to meet political pledges, without administrative enthusiasm; no extensive new infrastructure for documenting immigrants quickly accompanied this shift. Nonetheless, over time, policymakers began associating relative undocumentedness with various forms of illegality, rather than considering it a possibly legitimate product of earlier non-individualised systems which had not emphasised individual documentation. This interpretive shift became very consequential as the UK state amplified internal enforcement.

Pre-1973, passports had been required for immigrants, but many travelled on shared, not individual, passports. While primary labour migrants additionally needed a work voucher, dependants did not require further documentation until 1969. In a ports-based system, such documents were not considered relevant after entry. 1960s policymakers saw pragmatic reasons not to require more documents. Even as suspicions of child Commonwealth dependants increased, for instance, policymakers recognised that requiring more documentation would result in refusing admission to some eligible child dependants, initially considering this “impossible… on legal and political grounds” (“Note for the Home Secretary on C.I (65)29: White Paper on Future Policy,” n.d. [1965], TNA HO 344/317), as it would harm race relations. The purposefully document-light nature of the aggregate model is essential in contextualising the relative undocumentedness of many Windrush victims.

Under the aggregate control model, undocumentedness was not axiomatically associated with types of illegality the state was compelled to combat. As it receded, however, such interpretations became naturalised. Much like 1960s policymakers, later UK policymakers remained conscious that British administration relatively lacked population monitoring capability, frequently reflecting that “we’re not like France and Germany… where there have been identity cards and various forms of random checking… it’s just a totally different starting point” (Interview 8), which made the UK an “easy place to disappear into and then very hard for us to find people” (Interview 12). However, while in the earlier period, this represented a reason to not require more documents or have control premised on them, in the later period, as individualised control had become naturalised, this became associated with the liabilities of a historically porous system.

Undocumentedness therefore became associated with various forms of problematic irregularity, rather than being considered the product of earlier state practices. Accordingly, by the 1980s, increasing document requirements had become a “common-sensible” immigration policy tool, further naturalising expectations that authorised immigrants will have documents. Initial policy responses to increased asylum seeking from South Asia in 1986-1987 increased pre-departure document requirements. Lacking documents became associated with fraud; “destroy[ing] their documents” was one “mechanism people used to try and get round” controls (Interview 4), to inhibit attempts to return them. Efforts to prevent people from arriving in the UK without documentation, such as refusing visas to people deemed likely to claim asylum or attempt to settle, affirmed the perceived link between lack of individual documentation and unauthorised immigration.

Later policymakers also perceived that people who entered the UK on time-limited visas or with contingent leave would often overstay and work. For such people, “it was pretty easy to get a National Insurance number,… they worked” (Interview 11), as one parliamentarian reflected. Under the aggregate model, such cases did not preoccupy policymakers, but as the Home Office became expected politically to control diversifying forms of post-Cold War migration, this orientation shifted. As a former political adviser recalled, from a position where immigration control had been based at the ports,

Suddenly [the Home Office] had to do a lot of internal enforcement activity and case management. … You had internal case management for asylum seekers;… you had many more people coming on visas and other routes for whom there was then questions about enforcement if they overstayed or whatever. Suddenly, the Home Office needed the capabilities and the administrative capacity to operate those sorts of systems, and it just hadn’t had them. (Interview 16)

The building of this architecture after higher expectations of immigrant documentation had already become naturalised meant that those assumptions became entrenched. In this way, while policymakers remained aware of the UK’s limited population monitoring capabilities, an interpretive image nonetheless took root whereby relative undocumentedness indicated people who had taken unauthorised advantage of patchy practices, rather than postcolonial immigrants who could very well be legally settled.

*Individualising immigrants, decentring race*

As the individualised model of immigration control became naturalised, earlier concerns about antagonising settled postcolonial minority communities became decreasingly prominent as a topic of deliberation among British immigration policymakers. To UK policymakers of the 1960s, immigration policy had been plainly about race, as controlling immigration was explicitly connected to goals of controlling intercommunal relations among racial groups within Britain, in empire’s aftermath. The racism of these policies (described as a “colour bar”) was a prominent topic in political discourse (Solomos 1993, 66). Among policymakers, a paternalist consensus around “race relations” entailed, effectively, slashing non-white immigration while trying to avoid (perceptions of) domestic discrimination (Hansen 2000, 137–139). While white immigrants from “Old Commonwealth” settler colonies were not controversial and policymakers contemplated “exempt[ing] them from the provisions,” mid-1960s policymakers had concluded “this would be open and admitted discrimination and presumably would not be acceptable” (Garner to Beswick, “Immigration Controls,” TNA FO 50/72, 24 May 1967). Even when the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968 formally privileged British descent – and thereby race – in UK residence rights, policymakers nonetheless justified this around “whether we were likely to be able to achieve increased tolerance [with] uncontrolled entry” (Callaghan to Pitt, “Draft Letter,” TNA HO 344/325, n.d. [1968]). Within this policy of maintaining “race relations,” immigration policymakers targeted racialised immigrants with restrictions, with the argument they were necessary for integration and tranquillity (Small & Solomos, 2006, p. 243); but concerns with integration meant a (somewhat paradoxical) simultaneous goal that entry policies not antagonise settled racial minority groups by being perceived too strongly as unfair to them.

This is absent from policymaker interview data from later periods. While “race relations” persisted as a key framework in migration policy through at least the 1970s, and later in discussions of integration, by the mid-1990s, notions that immigration restriction was necessary for race relations remained in (mainly Conservative) politicians’ rhetoric (Spencer 2005), but there was little of the previously accompanying deliberation about immigration control’s impacts on settled racial minorities. The receding of this intercommunal way of thinking about UK immigration policy goals fit with wider trends, as European states decreasingly perceived their immigration policy dilemmas as relating to distinct groups to whom they had imperial or societal connections, but instead to more generic, shared images of “unwanted” migrants from the Global South (Shearmur 2021, 148–149).

After the New Labour government broke with an exclusively restrictionist orientation in immigration policy, liberalising some areas, even this residual race relations-migration policy link faded. This tracked surface-level changes in UK immigration politics, accompanying wider shifts in social norms around explicit racism: Policymakers no longer perceived race as a factor immanent in political demands around immigration, which instead focused on “a fair system, one that was properly enforced and administered” (Interview 16), in respect to individual cases. The notions of individual worthiness or deservingness that policymakers employed avoided explicit racial discussion while implicitly encoding it in economic and cultural terms (Sales, 2002). Correspondingly, policymakers were deliberating much less about group effects, as policy images instead focused overwhelmingly on scrupulous decision-making and enforcement in individual cases.

The emergence of asylum as a prominent source of new racialised immigrants in Britain helped to cement shifts toward individuation, as discussed earlier. Even in often dealing consciously with asylum seekers from ex-colonies, policymakers did not see themselves as addressing questions around racism or race relations, but rather questions of, “Are you being fair? Are you breaching people’s human rights?” (Interview 3), and criticisms that “we were getting decisions wrong” (Interview 12). Policymakers deliberated about the consequences of proposed policies, but upon individualised lives rather than communities. During efforts to deter asylum-seeking in the 1990s, for instance, the question of “whether it was an immoral proposal” to restrict asylum seekers’ welfare access rested on “whether it could result in people being left destitute” (Interview 7); whether policies amounted to racialised disadvantage, or would be criticised this way, had lost salience.

This individualised way of approaching immigration control extended beyond asylum and into areas less loaded with individual rights claims, including labour migration. The increasing importance of “economic worthiness” (Consterdine 2020, 193–196) in UK immigration policy from the early 2000s continued to centre individual qualification in migration policy images. Deliberations over these policies did not prominently feature possible criticisms of racial impacts. For example, in discussing efforts to reduce labour migration under the 2010s Conservative-led government, one 2010s policymaker recounted,

A lot of people coming in were coming in to do fairly low-skilled jobs, like cooks. There’s a hell of a lot of Indian restaurant, Chinese takeaway stuff going on.... As soon as we raised the skills level, you take out loads of occupations that are just not eligible anymore. (Interview 21)

Such discussion remains rooted in the concept of individual skill level qualification adjustments, without reflection that such policies may be (criticised as) entrenching systematic racial disadvantage – despite the overt presence of racialised groups in the policy image. This underscores how, by the 2014 Act, race had been buried well below the level of conscious policy deliberation, as immigration control no longer was understood as being about communal impacts, but rather about deciding individual cases. The 1971 Act’s shift away from aggregate conceptualisations of immigration control seemed lasting, in favour of a thoroughly individualised subjectivity of the postcolonial immigrant.

**Conclusion**

Noting fundamental contrasts in how UK immigration control systems approached racialised postcolonial immigrants in the 1960s versus the 2010s, this article asked how the UK state’s image of the governance of the postcolonial immigrant subject shifted so profoundly that the Windrush Scandal became possible. It argues that British immigration governance underwent a shift – the *individualisation* of postcolonial immigration control – which had wide-ranging consequences for UK immigration control generally, and particularly for Windrush victims. This shift ended 1960s attempts to govern postcolonial immigration through an aggregate model focused on reducing numerical volumes, which did not emphasise individual monitoring or necessitate limited after-entry rights, and regarded intensified individual scrutiny as not in the state’s interest. In its place, increased scrutiny of individual qualification and compliance became naturalised as a self-evident mechanism to pursue immigration policy goals.

This article identifies three lasting legacies of this shift in UK policymakers’ interpretive dispositions toward governing (postcolonial) immigration. First, this shift naturalised increased individual scrutiny as the logical policy intervention to respond to pressures to reduce immigrant numbers – making the “everyday bordering” logic of the “hostile environment” (Yuval-Davis et al. 2018) immanent. Second, where the Windrush victims had arrived under an aggregate model that did not emphasise individual documentation, individualised control naturalised higher expectations of it; undocumentedness became synonymous with illegality where it had not been before, opening the proximate vector by which Windrush victims were “illegalised” (Tuckett 2019). Third, rising emphasis on immigrants’ individuality accorded with a declining focus on “race relations” and (perceived) group impacts in immigration control: systemic fairness became understood as embodied in scrupulous individualised decisions, and policy deliberations no longer prominently considered avoiding overly antagonising settled minority groups as a priority.

This article contributes to examinations of how racism manifests differently amidst historical processes of individuation (Gilroy 2012, 381), and how state bordering practices which generate distinct racisms (De Genova 2002; de Noronha 2019) have accordingly developed. In so doing, it contributes to understanding of the UK’s Windrush Scandal, augmenting analyses which have emphasised continuity in hostility toward racialised immigrants in the UK (El-Enany 2020; Goodfellow 2019) with an account of why state practices toward them have differed so dramatically across time. Amid discussions of how “de-racialization in formal law” has “reshaped… immigrants’ rights” (Cook-Martín & FitzGerald 2015, 1320), this analysis draws attention to how longer-run shifts in programmatic ideas guiding immigration control can create illegality and undermine the rights even of long-settled immigrants, without formal changes to their status.

As this article underlines, intensified scrutiny is not a neutral development for immigrants, simply providing more information to make a governing machinery more scrupulous. Intensified individual scrutiny makes practically contingent what may otherwise be formally secure. It goes hand-in-hand with a “categorical fetishism” (Crawley & Skleparis 2018) which advances an image of fairness that accords with administrative imperatives to adopt procedures widely seen as legitimate (Boswell 2007, 91), but risks sidelining equity and justice. More bureaucratic activity also makes inevitable more bureaucratic mistakes, which administrations may have limited impetus to rectify (Oliver 2020). Where UK policymakers in the 1960s had been aware of irrationalities in zealous individual scrutiny, the shift that followed generated blind spots where the Windrush Scandal emerged.

Through its detailed UK case study, this article contributes to discussions of how the shift away from consciously racial policymaking and toward individualised judgments in majority-white countries’ migration policies has altered how these systems may entrench social inequalities (Elrick 2020). Single-case studies like this one are not generalisable, but they often suggest possibilities meriting further research. This study outlines particular consequences growing from the UK’s attempt to scrutinise and monitor immigrants from a position where the British state historically had lacked such population-monitoring capabilities (Boswell & Badenhoop 2021). Further research might investigate whether such consequences also occur in states with administrative histories and common-law frameworks like Britain’s. The shift in the UK state’s image of postcolonial migrant subjects – from a mass of people with distinct imperial connections, to be governed at population level, for whom individual monitoring did not accord with state objectives; to a collective of individuals with attenuated rights, and subject to extended scrutiny – suggests particular ways immigration control logics have shifted as empire has receded. Investigations of immigration bureaucracies in other former imperial powers may shed light on whether this is commonplace in the immigration-control trajectories of ex-coloniser states.

What needs no further evidence, however, is how these seemingly abstract and long-developing changes had dire effects on thousands of people who had long called Britain home. Judy Griffith did not suffer the grimmest formal consequences faced by some Windrush victims, since she was able eventually to prove her status. But, beyond its material harm, “The thing that was so hard for me to get my head around is the sense of loss that came with it.… I can never feel a part of this country anymore,” she recounted in her British Library interview. In the end, the Home Office, which had given her no more than a stamp in a shared passport when she came to settle legally in Britain, provided Griffith a certificate affirming that she held the status of British citizen – as of 2018. “What’s happened to all the other years?” she wondered (Griffith 2018). “Where have they gone?”

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