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Speech by Mr. David Lammy, MP (Labour). Shadow Secretary of State for Justice. Delivered in Westminster Hall on debating the subject: “Minors Entering the UK: 1948 to 1971” 30 April, 2018

Mr Austin, I am very proud to stand here on behalf of the 178,000 people who have signed the petition. I am proud to stand here on behalf of the 492 British citizens who arrived on Empire Windrush from Jamaica 70 years ago. I am proud to stand here on behalf of the 72,000 British citizens who arrived on these shores between the passage of the British Nationality Act 1948 and the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, including my own father, who arrived from Guyana in 1956.

It is a dark episode in our nation’s history that this petition was even required. It is a dark day indeed that we are here in Parliament having to stand up for the right of people who have always given so much to this country and expected so little in return. We need to remember our history at this moment. In Britain, when we talk about slavery we tend to talk about its abolition, and in particular William Wilberforce. The Windrush  story does not begin in 1948; the Windrush story begins in the 17th century, when British slave traders stole 12 million Africans from their homes, took them to the Caribbean and sold them into slavery to work on plantations. The wealth of this country was built on the backs of the ancestors of the Windrush generation. We are here today because you were there.

My ancestors were British subjects, but they were not British subjects because they came to Britain. They were British subjects because Britain came to them, took them across the Atlantic, colonised them, sold them into slavery, profited from their labour and made them British subjects. That is why I am here, and it is why the Windrush generation are here.

There is no British history without the history of the empire. As the late, great Stuart Hall put it:

“I am the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.”

Seventy years ago, as Britain lay in ruins after the second world war, the call went out to the colonies from the mother country. Britain asked the Windrush generation to come and rebuild the country, to work in our national health service, on the buses and on the trains, as cleaners, as security guards. Once again, Caribbean labour was used. They faced down the “No blacks, no dogs, no Irish” signs. They did the jobs nobody else wanted to do. They were spat at in the street. They were assaulted by teddy boys, skinheads and the National Front. They lived five to a room in Rachmanite squalor. They were called, and they served, but my God did they suffer for the privilege of coming to this country.

But by God, they also triumphed. Sir Trevor McDonald, Frank Bruno, Sir Lenny Henry, Jessica Ennis-Hill—they are national treasures, knights of the realm, heavyweight champions of the world and Olympic champions, wrapped in the British flag. They are sons and daughters of the Windrush generation and as British as they come. After all this, the Government want to send that generation back across the ocean. They want to make life hostile for the Windrush children—to strip them of their rights, deny them healthcare, kick them out of their jobs, make them homeless and stop their benefits.

The Windrush children are imprisoned in this country—as we have seen of those who have been detained—centuries after their ancestors were shackled and taken across the ocean in slave ships. They are pensioners imprisoned in their own country. That is a disgrace, and it happened here because of a refusal to remember our history. Last week, at Prime Minister’s questions, the Prime Minister said that

“we…owe it to them and to the British people”.[—[*Official Report*, 25 April 2018; Vol. 639, c. 881.]](https://hansard.parliament.uk/search/column?VolumeNumber=639&ColumnNumber=881&House=1)

The former Home Secretary said that the Windrush generation should be considered British and should be able to get their British citizenship if they so choose. This is the point the Government simply do not understand: the Windrush generation are the British people. They are British citizens. They came here as citizens. That is the precise reason why this is such an injustice. Their British citizenship is, and has always been, theirs by right. It is not something that the Government can now choose to grant them.

I remind the Government of chapter 56 of the British Nationality Act 1948, which says:

“Every person who under this Act is a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies…shall by virtue of that citizenship have the status of a British subject.”

The Bill uses “British nationality” by virtue of citizenship. I read that Bill again last week when looking over the case notes of my constituents caught up in the Windrush crisis. Patrick Henry is a British citizen who arrived in Britain in 1959. He is a teaching assistant. He told me, “I feel like a prisoner who has committed no crime,” because he is being denied citizenship. Clive Smith, a British citizen who arrived here in 1964, showed the Home Office his school reports and was still threatened with deportation.

Rosario Wilson is a British citizen with no right to be here because Saint Lucia became independent in 1979. Wilberforce Sullivan is a British citizen who paid taxes for 40 years. He was told in 2011 that he was no longer able to work. Dennis Laidley is a British citizen with tax records going back to the 1960s. He was denied a passport and was unable to visit his sick mother. Jeffrey Greaves, a British citizen who arrived here in 1964, was threatened with deportation by the Home Office. Cecile Laurencin, a British citizen with 44 years of national insurance contribution to this country, payslips and bank account details, had her application for naturalisation rejected. Huthley Sealey, a British citizen, is unable to claim benefits or access healthcare in this country. Mark Balfourth, a British citizen who arrived here in 1962 aged 7, was refused access to benefits.

The Windrush generation have waited for too long for rights that are theirs. There comes a time when the cup of endurance runs over. There comes a time when the burden of living like a criminal in one’s own country becomes too heavy to bear any longer. That is why in the last few weeks we have seen an outpouring of pain and grief that had built up over many years. Yet Ministers have tried to conflate the issue with illegal immigration. On Thursday, the former Home Secretary said she was personally committed to tackling illegal migration, to making it difficult for illegal migrants to live here and to removing people who are here illegally.