

A case of 'ignorance'

UNWELCOME HOME AND AWAY

by George Alleyne

A significant number of Barbadians on the island are today enduring the double pain of leaving a foreign land where it was made clear they didn't belong and seeking resettlement here amidst another form of rejection.

That is the story of hundreds of 'Windrush Generation' Barbadians or their descendants who, in disgust at treatment in Britain, sought refuge and comfort in the land of their birth or that of parents, only to find that they are not exactly welcomed here.

Among the reasons for the estrangement felt by these persons after setting up house in Barbados are an inability to get along with resident family members with whom they previously had excellent long-distance relationships, and unfavourable titles or labels heaped upon them because of different approaches to matters.

Without mincing words, Minister of Culture John King has described as ignorant a tendency of some Barbadians to assign disparaging names to fellow Bajans who happen to be re-migrants, especially those of the Windrush Generation and their relatives.

The term 'Mad' ranks high – or lowest of low – among the disparaging monikers Barbadians on the island ascribe to those who sailed away or flew out over a 23-year period under illusions that they could make better for themselves, help family left behind, while rebuilding a war-ravaged so-called 'Mother Country', then return to their beloved homeland in about five years.

The 'Windrush Generation' comprised thousands of Barbadians, Jamaicans, and persons from Trinidad and Tobago who responded to a British call to emigrate between 1948 and 1971 to that colonial home country and assist in rebuilding it from devastation suffered from World War II.

The early waves of emigrants went by sea aboard the SS Empire Windrush from which was derived the categorisation of all these British Commonwealth citizens who went there. Disenchantment and alienation overcame many who found difficulty integrating into British society because of discriminatory practices, despite their years of labour to assist the UK in rebuilding.

Led to believe that as members of the Commonwealth they were British citizens, many found their rights to reside in the UK taken away following successive changes in laws there. Tired of the disillusionment and marginalisation in a country to which they gave much, some Barbadians returned to their island.

Addressing Barbadians 50 years and over, King said recently, "You would know that very often a lot of persons who returned to Barbados would be, in some instances, labelled with some strange things by people in Barbados who... [did] not have the benefit of experiencing life in a different part of the world and understanding all the challenges that they had to face. Sometimes a lot of the things are derogatory and very unkind. It is through – and I use this word in its full sense – ignorance often times."

The Minister told the opening of **The Enigma of Arrival** exhibition at the Barbados Museum last month, "I am a product of that very migration... a lot of those comments I heard made about my own parents". King, who had previously indicated that his parents brought him to Barbados at a tender age, said that he found the exhibition 'very interesting', and that it "has significance for me".

This exhibition, **Enigma of Arrival** takes the title from a 1987 novel by Nobel Laureate V. S. Naipaul, and is subtitled **The Politics and Poetics of Caribbean Migration to Britain**. It is put on by the Barbados Museum and Historical Society and runs until October 31.

It is a collaborative work of the University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus, researchers and European Union,



Kenneth Walters. Windrush re-migrants were committed to returning to Barbados.

Latin America and Caribbean Museums, "a consortium of academics, museum professionals and policy makers working in Scotland, Portugal, Spain, France, Peru, Chile, Costa Rica and the West Indies who are committed to community museology making a difference in the world".

The exhibition gives an audio-visual account of the migration experiences of Barbadians and other Caribbean people from the 1940s to the 1970s. The Museum stated, "The audience is introduced to the historical parameters and scope of Caribbean post-World War II migration to Britain and its legacy amongst later generations at home and abroad".

King, a two-time Barbados Calypso Monarch serving the island in cultural entertainment and political administration, is among the later generations, and by his statement has given face to Bajan Windrush re-migrants as a descendant.

There exists on the island an untold number of ancestors or elder relatives of people like King; these are original Barbadians who departed the island under an illusion of betterment for themselves and family.

In a Windrush experiences lecture series preceding this exhibition, UWI Cave Hill Registrar, Kenneth Walters, said research among those surviving re-migrants shows that, "87 per cent of them agreed that it was the right decision to return home even in the face of all the challenges they were having".

"So what does that tell you?" he asked during his presentation in the Museum's Walled Garden. "It means that they were committed to coming back to Barbados and committed to making a difference in terms of how they related to their country of origin."

Walters, who is also a post-graduate sociology student focusing on the issue of return migration, detailed the pain of some Windrush re-migrants interviewed for an oral history project.

"My return is a different return. Mine is I give them love and I come down here and they

give me hatred. And I en talking nuh more about them at all cause them is only rise my blood pressure. I done talk about them," said one Windrush re-migrant underscoring the disappointment felt upon returning to family members whom that person had financially supported from England.

Another spoke of the sharply different experiences between returning home as a visitor with gifts and coming back as a re-settler: "I used to visit all the time. I came here must be about dozens of times, visiting. Then everybody glad to see you and they greeting you then. Ooh. Before you unlock the suitcase everybody round the suitcase to see what you bring for them. Not now, it is something else different. Nuh suitcase now ain't coming in on holiday you know. Dese people, to think about it, is something else fuh true doh, you know."

Another example of the rejection Windrush re-migrants felt was that most appeared to find difficulty reintegrating into families in the communities they'd left. Walters' research showed that Barbadians on their outward journey departed "from every parish in almost equal amounts [except for] St Michael which had the lion's share".

He stated that however, "They returned to four parishes in large numbers, St Michael 22 per cent; St James 18 per cent; St Philip 18 per cent; and Christ Church, 17 per cent".

Britain last year started commemorating **Windrush Day** as part of a gesture of remorse to those Barbadian and other Caribbean people who began arriving on the SS Empire Windrush on June 22, 70 years earlier.

Though nations such as Barbados that benefitted from the Windrush Generation are encouraged to observe this anniversary, June 22, 2019 passed without a murmur here except for the opening of a highly researched and correspondingly informative exhibition at the Museum on June 21. After all who here cares, "Nuh suitcase now ain't coming in on holiday, you know".



Minister John King. Bajans rejecting Windrush re-migrants are ignorant.