

An Unworthy Tradition

The immigration bill currently before parliament continues two trends in British immigration and nationality law and practice.

Firstly, it attacks the rights of long-settled Commonwealth immigrants, and breaks promises made to them by previous (Conservative) governments. In the last months of 1987 thousands of black Commonwealth citizens, settled here since before 1973, rushed to register as British citizens before their right to do so ended on December 31.

Exactly the same group of people are now finding that their absolute right to family unity here will be undermined by the immigration bill. In future, they will have to pass whatever tests the government of the day wishes to set: presently including a means test and the notorious primary purpose test, being used to refuse 50% of Indian husbands who apply to join their wives here. The government is claiming that the bill removes discrimination: the absolute right to family unity applied previously only to some men. But this discrimination could and should be removed by levelling up rights, not reducing them.

Secondly, the bill is part of a continuing process of restricting individuals' ability to challenge Home Office decisions. Rights of appeal against deportation are an important safeguard, particularly when people face separation from their families and homes; yet the bill ensures that the decision to deport someone will not be open to independent review. There will be less time to mobilise an anti-deportation campaign if an individual can be quickly and summarily removed once a decision to deport is made.

The Campaign Against Racist Laws is organising a demonstration on March 6. The British Council of Churches has also protested publicly - the Minister of State at the Home Office accused them of stirring up unnecessary fears among the black community. •

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