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Immigration and opinion polls in postwar Britain

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Title: Immigration and Opinion Polls in Postwar Britain
Author: Marcus Collins

Introduction: How did white people in Britain respond to the first decades of mass non-white migration? Evidence from opinion polls reveals the dire state of ‘race relations’ in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s.

It is hard to think of a more weighty or controversial political topic in Britain today than public opinion towards immigration. Sympathy towards Syrian refugees led David Cameron to allow a small number to enter to Britain. Hostility towards migrants camped in Calais has resulted in a massive operation to secure British borders. And attitudes towards migrants will be a decisive factor when Britain votes whether or not to remain part of the European Union.

Contemporary public opinion of migration has been profoundly shaped by Britain’s past experience, most particularly by the unprecedented mass migration of non-white ethnic groups into Britain since the Second World War. Their impact on British society was recorded by another import – the Gallup opinion poll – which had arrived in Britain from America just a decade previously. This article considers what evidence from the polling companies Gallup, NOP and MORI tells us about the formation of attitudes towards non-white immigration from the first poll on the subject in 1954 to the election twenty-five years later of Margaret Thatcher.

Unlike other historical sources, opinion polls set out to discover the views of a representative sample of the entire adult population. That is what makes them so valuable, and helps to make contemporary history a distinct subject of study. Like any other historical source, however, opinion polls have to be treated with care and with caution. They are produced for specific purposes, often on behalf of organisations with a vested interest in the topic under discussion. Polls generally concern attitudes, not behaviours, and reported attitudes at that. What a person said to a polling agent in a face-to-face interview (the customary method during this period) might be different from what he or she might say in another setting, or indeed might think privately. While striving for objectivity, pollsters asked questions which reflect the inbuilt assumptions of their time using the language of their time. In 1968, for example, Gallup asked respondents ‘Which party do you think can best handle the problem of coloured people’: a question which would be conceived and phrased very differently today. Answers require interpretation and often lack vital contextual information. The responses given to the question above would depend on what ‘problem’ or problems respondents wished to be solved, be it assimilation, repatriation or discrimination. Individual polls can mislead if read in isolation.

Attitudes towards Immigration in the 1950s

‘Do you personally know or have you known any coloured people?’ asked Gallup in their first opinion poll on immigration in 1954. Forty-two per cent said yes, a surprisingly high figure considering that the 1951 census recorded just 94500 non-white people living in Britain: that is, about one person in every five hundred. The same poll found relatively low levels of declared prejudice. Only one in ten of those who had encountered non-whites considered them ‘worse’ than whites, and just 12% supported those who refused to work with non-white colleagues. The fact that Gallup saw fit to ask a question about integrated workplaces indicated that race relations were already strained. Yet the wholesale rejection of white superiority or a colour bar was somewhat more reassuring.

Gallup's first extended survey of attitudes toward immigration and race relations came four years later, in September 1958. The context was very different, as the poll had been prompted by the race riots which had erupted in Nottingham and Notting Hill in the preceding weeks. As in 1954, respondents' attitudes were not unabashedly racist. A mere nine per cent of them solely blamed non-whites for the riots, 16% wanted restrictions on immigration to be targeted at non-whites alone and there had been little change in the numbers thinking non-whites to be 'worse' than whites. However, a large minority of respondents (37%) opposed equal job opportunities for non-white immigrants and a majority (54%) opposed equal access for them to council housing. Still more dispiriting were the answers to hypothetical questions about non-white neighbours. Thirty per cent said that they would consider moving house if a non-white moved in next door, and 26% said they were certain to move 'if coloured people came to live in great numbers in [their] district.' Just 13% of respondents approved of mixed marriages, and 21% supported the status quo of unrestricted immigration from Commonwealth countries.

The next Gallup poll asked a question that was to be repeated regularly over the decades: 'Would you say that in this country the feeling between white people and coloured people is getting better, getting worse or remaining the same?' (table 1). Every year that the question was asked, there were more pessimists than optimists among those polled. And for every year except for 1964, those saying 'worse' outnumbered those who saw the situation as remaining the same.

'Would you say that in this country the feeling between white people and coloured people is getting better, getting worse or remaining the same?' (Gallup, 1959-1981)

	Better	Worse	Same	Don't know
1959	16	44	31	9
1964	24	26	41	9
1965	14	43	31	12
1966	18	39	33	10
1967	13	45	33	9
1968	6	55	32	7
1972	17	42	32	9
1976a	10	59	24	7
1976b	12	53	27	8
1977a	17	43	33	8
1977b	16	42	34	8
1978	14	46	33	7
1981a	15	40	37	8
1981b	25	40	37	8

So why was this? Although pollsters seldom asked direct questions about the causes of such unrelieved pessimism, an examination of polling evidence allow us to piece together answers.

Immigration as a ‘Problem’

The first thing to appreciate is that immigration was portrayed as a problem during this period. Indeed, it was perceived as a ‘very serious social problem’ by a majority of those questioned in a series of polls conducted by Gallup from 1965 onwards (table 2). To be sure, it was not seen to be as serious a problem as crimes of violence, drug taking, bad housing or juvenile delinquency. It was, however, considered to be more serious than organised large-scale crime, gang warfare and (until the 1980s) rape.

Table 2: Percentage agreeing that ‘immigration; coloured persons’ was a very serious social problem in response to the question ‘Do you regard any of these as raising very serious social problems in Britain today?’* (Gallup, 1965-1978)

1965	55
1967	55
1969	69
1971	52
1972	65
1973	61
1975	53
1976a	71
1976b	70
1976c	63
1977a	55
1977b	54
1977c	59
1978	59

* Phrased in 1972 as ‘Do you regard any of these as being very serious social problems in Britain today?’ and from 1973 onwards as ‘Do you think any of these are very serious social problems in Britain today or not?)

The fundamental problem, as most people saw it, was that immigration brought more costs than gains to Britain: hence the answers contained in table 3.

Table 3: Do you think that on the whole this country has benefited or been harmed through immigrants coming to settle here from the Commonwealth? (Gallup, 1965-1978)

	Benefited	Harmed	No difference	Don't know
1965	16	52	20	12
1967	9	60	19	12
1968	16	61	14	9
1972	20	47	22	11
1976	19	55	16	10
1978	20	45	23	12

Do you think that on the whole this country has benefited or been harmed through immigrants coming to settle here from the Commonwealth? (Gallup, 1965-1978)

Respondents to this question in 1967 were asked to select the ‘main causes of any opposition to coloured people immigrating to this country’ from a list provided to them of some popular prejudices (table 4). Their answers did not necessarily reflect their own views (although 60% believed that non-white immigration had harmed the country), but showed the relative popularity of sundry generalisations about how ‘they’ fell short of native standards.

Table 4: ‘Would you choose one or two of the things listed as being among the main causes of any opposition to coloured people immigrating to this country?’ (Gallup, October 1967)

They have to be supported by our welfare services	49
They congregate in a neighbourhood and turn it into a slum	41
They have different habits and customs	36
They take away work from Britishers [sic]	30
Some of them become landlords and charge terrible rents	24
They undercut wages	10
They exploit vice and crime for gain	8
None of them	7

Most white people were deeply unconvinced of multiculturalism. Even defenders of immigration were more inclined to see it as an act of charity (‘Britain has always provided for unfortunate people’) or obligation (‘It's our duty to the Commonwealth’) than as a means of ‘strengthen[ing] Britain by introducing new ideas’, according to a Gallup poll conducted in April 1968. Around a third of people agreed that ‘Coloured immigrants add to the richness and variety of this country’ in 1978, but a MORI poll conducted in 1984 suggested that the cultural benefits of multiculturalism did not register with most people. When asked to name an aspect of life which had been ‘improved by the arrival of immigrants since the Second World War’, the highest numbers mentioned the practical benefits of their employment in the NHS and ‘local services such as shops’. Twenty-seven per cent acknowledged that immigrants had improved the quality of British cuisine, but the same proportion saw no benefits whatsoever brought about by immigration and only small minorities credited immigrants with improving British music (18%), art (7%) and literature (4%).

As well as rejecting the virtues of multiculturalism in theory, British people denied its existence in practice. Only 15% of those polled in 1977 envisaged the future of Britain as the 'peaceful multi-racial society' envisaged by such liberal politicians as Roy Jenkins. Sixty per cent of respondents expected immigration to produce tensions: a third of them within a segregated society and two-thirds within a more mixed, but no more placid nation. The race riots which sporadically occurred during this period gave form to people's fears. Enoch Powell's vision of 'rivers of blood' coursing through Britain's streets was shared by 78% of the population when rephrased by NOP as the idea that 'there is a danger of racial violence in Britain unless the inflow of immigrants is cut down by government action'. A decade later, when Margaret Thatcher voiced the fear that 'this country might be rather swamped by people of a different culture', her sentiments were likewise endorsed by 70% of those polled by Gallup in February 1978.

The Politics of Immigration

Exacerbating discontent about the perceived problem of immigration was that it was one which politicians appeared unwilling or unable to solve. Politicians worked on two fronts during this period: by restricting immigration and by ensuring fair treatment of immigrants. The general public saw the first goal to be a much more pressing concern, with twice as many considering 'controlling immigration' (66%) as 'improving race relations' (33%) to be an extremely important matter in 1978. Large majorities accordingly supported the restrictive Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968 and Immigration Act of 1971. More ambivalence was expressed over the Race Relations Acts of 1965, 1968 and 1976, which aimed to outlaw discrimination in housing, work and social life. Those polled were split down the middle in 1968 over the general principle of whether or not it should be illegal 'to discriminate against people because of their colour' and a plurality was opposed to specific provisions outlawing discrimination when hiring workers and selling houses.

Anti-discriminatory measures went too far for many whites, who 'often seemed to resent what they saw as positive discrimination in favour of immigrants' according to an NOP poll conducted in 1978. Anti-immigration legislation conversely did not go anything like far enough for most people. Whereas 90% of respondents agreed with the restrictive intentions of the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, 63% of them thought that the restrictions were insufficiently strict. Approximately three-quarters of the British population agreed with Enoch Powell's demand that year for non-white immigration to be halted completely, and three-fifths agreed with his still more inflammatory call for the repatriation of non-whites already resident in Britain.

Disappointment over the manifest failure of politicians to reduce immigration, when combined with ambivalence over legislative efforts to combat discrimination, resulted in the negative verdict on governmental immigration policies shown in table 5. The only years when more people approved than disapproved of immigration policy was in 1970 and 1979, when new Conservative prime ministers promised to tackle the issue. Edward Heath's leniency towards Asian migrants forced out of East Africa ended his popularity on this score. Margaret Thatcher's tougher line earned her popularity among opponents of immigration and opprobrium among a more tolerant minority.

Table 5: 'In general, do you approve or disapprove of the way the Government is handling immigration?' (Gallup, 1968-1981)

	Approve	Disapprove	Neither/Don't know
1968	26	56	18
1969	23	56	21
1970	22	61	17
1970	34	32	34
1971	28	46	26
1972	26	63	11

1973	23	61	16
1974	23	47	30
1975	25	51	24
1978c	28	59	13
1978b	26	59	15
1978c	25	57	18
1979a	22	60	18
1979b	24	60	16
1979c	26	54	20
1979d	40	37	23
1979e	37	46	17
1980	40	41	18
1981	30	46	24

Some liberalisation of attitudes towards non-white migrants had occurred by the time Margaret Thatcher was elected at the end of the 1970s. The most notable shift was over mixed marriages, with those opposed shrinking from 71% in 1958 to 57% in 1968, 42% in 1973 and 25% in 1977. The numbers who disliked the prospect of non-whites as neighbours, friends or classmates to their children also declined when Gallup posed identical questions to respondents in 1981 and 1964. Sixty-one per cent of people told MORI in 1980 that ‘discrimination against coloured people’ was morally wrong.

Yet opinion polls of the late seventies and early eighties still contained plenty of evidence that many white people had not come to terms with mass non-white immigration, three decades after it began in earnest with the arrival of the Empire Windrush in 1948. A 1977 Gallup poll discovered that a third of white people did not consider second-generation immigrants to be British and Gallup polls conducted in 1978 and 1981 found that large minorities still supported a policy of repatriation that was ever more impractical, not to mention immoral, with every further year that migrants stayed put. At this point, only about one in thirty of the population was non-white (3.5% according to the 1981 census). The general population was almost totally unprepared for the ethnically diverse society which Britain was to become in the late twentieth and early twenty first centuries.

Chronology:

1948: British Nationality Act confirms unrestricted right of entry into Britain for all Commonwealth citizens.

1948: The beginning of mass non-white immigration to Britain signalled by the arrival of SS Windrush from Jamaica.

1958: Riots between white and West Indian youths occur in Nottingham and Notting Hill.

1962: Commonwealth Immigrants Act is the first of several legislative attempts to restrict immigration.

1965: Race Relations Act ushers in a series of laws targeting racial discrimination.

1968: Enoch Powell is sacked from the Conservative shadow cabinet after predicting racial violence in Britain if repatriation of immigrants is not implemented and non-whites rally against the host population.

1979: Margaret Thatcher is elected as prime minister. In a 1978 interview, she had sympathised with those fearing that 'this country might be rather swamped by people of a different culture'.

Suggestions for further reading:

Roger Ballard, 'Britain's Visible Minorities: A Demographic Overview' (1999): casas.org.uk/papers/pdfpapers/demography.pdf

Kevin McConway, *Opinion Polls in a Nutshell* [video] (2015): http://www.open.edu/openlearn/science-maths-technology/mathematics-and-statistics/opinion-polls-nutshell

National Archives, *Moving Here: 200 Years of Migration in England* [website] (2013): http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/http:/www.movinghere.org.uk/

Enoch Powell, 'Rivers of Blood speech (1968): http://www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/3643823/Enoch-Powells-Rivers-of-Blood-speech.html

Short autobiography:

Dr Marcus Collins is Senior Lecturer in Cultural History at Loughborough University. He is currently finishing a book on The Beatles and starting one on the BBC.

Discussion questions:

1. What are the pros and cons of using opinion polls as evidence of public opinion towards migration and 'race'?
2. What, if any, changes in attitudes towards immigration can be seen in opinion polls conducted from the 1950s to the 1970s?
3. What were the policy alternatives open to governments in this period in respect to immigration and race relations? According to polling evidence, what would have been the most popular policies among the general public?