New Blackfriars

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Comment: *Shadow over CHOGM*

On 27 March 2018 Fr Peter Clarke OP died in Barbados, a few days before his 86th birthday, nearly a year since the sixtieth anniversary of his ordination at Blackfriars, Oxford. Fr Peter was the last English-born Dominican to spend his whole life as a priest in the Caribbean, mostly in Grenada.

For over a century the Dominican friars in Britain have been interested in Caribbean politics and culture. In 1901 they accepted the invitation by Vincent Flood, Archbishop of Port of Spain (Trinidad), an Irish Dominican, to staff the parishes in Grenada, then a British colony, with mostly Catholic people under his episcopal jurisdiction. (The two islands lie about 100 miles apart.) For years the Colonial Office wanted the Holy See to provide English-speaking clergy for what were now British colonies (Grenada since 1763, Trinidad 1802), whose peoples had suffered decades of regime change among rival European empires. At last, in 1895, Irish Dominicans, subjects of the Queen back then, replaced French Dominicans in Trinidad, which soon led to English Dominicans undertaking pastoral responsibility for Grenada.

The British Empire first became the British Commonwealth of Nations in 1921, in the wording of the oath to be taken by members of parliament of the Irish Free State. By the 1960s, as one colony after another became a sovereign state (Grenada in 1974), the Empire became the Commonwealth in everyday parlance. Now, with 53 countries, it includes 2.4 billion people, from India to Tuvalu and Nauru. CHOGM, the biennial meeting of the Commonwealth heads of government, took place in London this year in late April, chaired by the host country's leader, Mrs May. The event was seized on in some quarters to flag up the trading network of which 'global Britain' expects to be the centre post-Brexit, thus showing the 16 million voters who favoured remaining in the EU that leaving will not isolate and impoverish the country as 'remoaners' predict. 'British values' will again prevail (fairness, sense of humour etc).

However, CHOGM was overshadowed by revelations about abusive treatment of Caribbean people in the current anti-migrant climate. In 2014, as Home Secretary in the Coalition, Mrs May announced her intention to create, in her unforgettable words, 'a really hostile environment' for illegal immigrants. Vans bearing 'Go Home' posters were allowed to parade in six London boroughs. Much more damagingly, staff in hospitals, schools, and other such

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institutions, now have to have documentary proof that a person has rights to a job, free health care, education and so on.

So far, however, the people whose lives have been disrupted by the anti-immigration policies are people who came from the Empire, initially invited to provide labour to rebuild Britain. This immigration began when the Empire Windrush passenger ship docked at Tilbury from Jamaica on 22 June 1948. The photographs of these young men and women descending the gangplank have become iconic. They are dressed in what was middle-class British Sunday best back then. They came in the knowledge that their compatriots volunteered to fight for Britain in World War I, let alone in WW II. They believed they were British, as indeed they were legally, culturally also if they had high-school education (Shakespeare etc.). While there are many shameful accounts of the racist insults with which they were often greeted, they settled, making their lives in Britain (England mostly, put off by rumours of Scottish weather), raising children, paying taxes, and so on. If they ever returned to the Caribbean it was mostly only for a parent's funeral or a sibling's wedding.

Hundreds of cases in which people have been cruelly abused began to surface in the media just as the Commonwealth heads of government were pictured with the Queen in the Buckingham Palace ballroom. Icilda Williams, to name only one victim of the 'hostile environment' policy, now 84, left Jamaica in 1962, just months before it went from a British colony to an independent state, travelling on a British passport: she worked in hospitals, married, settled in Bradford, raised seven children, and so on. Recently, in her octogenarian leisure, Mrs Williams went on holiday to Jamaica, and then found that she will not be allowed back into the UK until she provides documentation, such as nobody could provide, proving she has lived here uninterruptedly for fifty years. Many people have been treated far more cruelly, some threatened with deportation within ten days, others required to repay social benefits or asked to pay legal fees far beyond their resources. Consider the man, long retired from work, asked to pay £54,000 for his NHS prostate cancer treatment.

Initially Mrs May refused to meet the leaders of the twelve Caribbean states who asked to discuss all this with her, changed her mind when she was told of the widespread public anger (uniting *The Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*), so apologized in a CHOGM session to the Caribbean leaders for the bureaucratic treatment right now of migrants from the region who have lived in Britain for decades, many of whom arrived as very young children with their parents.

It's not a story that projects the UK as the open, fair and generous society that one likes to think it is.

Fergus Kerr OP

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