Was post-war britain tolerant and multicultural?

“ Post-war Britain is best described as a tolerant and multicultural nation”. Discuss.

In discussing this proposition, it is necessary to define tolerant and multicultural to intentionally confine the parameters of the discussion. Within this essay ‘ tolerant’ will be defined as an attitude of mind that implies non-judgemental acceptance of different lifestyles or beliefs, and ‘ multicultural’ as a society that contains several and distinct cultural or ethnic groups. Generally speaking, a nation has to show willingness to accept other social and ethnic groups within its society. Much literature has explored how migration shaped Britain since World War II, including both the outlooks of Authority, Establishment and the British People towards immigrants. It is widely accepted there have been four development phases since 1948: the first wave of pioneers from the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent, who were mainly single men both skilled and semi-skilled, next came an unskilled labour force, followed by their wives and children, and ultimately the British-born generation. This ‘ chain’ migration clearly affected the demographics of Britain and it is likely the indigenous population was not expecting such a large influx of migrants, and the resultant pressure and increasing competition for limited resources in housing, employment and social services. It is possible that the ‘ rowdy’ behaviour of the immigrant population caused frictions between distinct communities. This essay will also address the question of ethnic groups within the general Commonwealth migration that came to be targets of racism, due to the fact they were non-white and stood out in a generally white population. From the 1948 British Nationality Act, government practised a laizzez-faire approach to migration,

and only following increasing public opposition did they institute controls on immigration from 1962.

British identity came to be identified as tolerant, this mind-set emanated from Victorian and Imperialist values of honour, respect, justice and fair play. This was further embedded in the minds of the British population with the experiences of World War II. Nevertheless, according to Chris Waters, Britain's sense of national unity started to disintegrate after 1945.[1]A possible explanation for this disintegration might be the introduction of the 1948 British Nationality Act, this created a new immigration system without restrictions: *every person born within the United Kingdom and Colonies ... shall be a citizen of the United Kingdom and Colonies by birth ... or descent* .[2]The resultant effect of this legislation led directly to the sailing the Empire Windrush in 1948 from Jamaica to London carrying 492 non-white passengers, and increased migration generally from the Caribbean and the Asian subcontinent. These workers flocked to the mother country to fill labour vacancies, especially in the transport and health services. The labour government, 1945-1951, initially believed that by sharing out the new arrivals across the country they would assimilate and integrate into British society, adopting ' British values'. However, this approach became impracticable for two likely reasons. Firstly, society at large perceived the migrants as contrary to British values,[3]and a threat to national cohesion. Secondly, the migrants wanted to stick together in the same locale. Inner cities became predominantly inhabited by immigrants who brought new religions, cultures, languages and dress. Moreover, immigration statistics highlighted the increasing impact new immigrants placed on housing and

employment. It has been estimated, by the mid-1950s, persons of colour entering Britain rose to about 20, 000 per year.[4]There may have been a divergence in attitude between general populace and governments' policies that had an approach of non-intervention, with the Establishment perhaps believing the problems would just go away. The 1948 Act did not distinguish immigration from any parts of the Commonwealth, and it may be the case that members of the Cabinet were unwilling to enact legislation that differentiated between white and non-white migrants.

In the 1950s there was increasing hostility towards non-white immigrants culminating in the Notting Hill riots of 1958. These riots are often cited as a catalyst that led to immigration control, however, it does appear that the racial aspect was not recognised at the time. Successive legislations in 1962, 1968 and 1971 restricted immigration to the UK, and this was further constrained in 1981 when Britain closed its doors to the Commonwealth. In 1968 Enoch Powell warned of what he saw as the consequences of unregulated immigration. His incendiary ' *Rivers of Blood'* [5]speech still enflames emotions. In this speech, he highlighted the dangers of unchecked immigration and advocated the cessation of immigration to Britain. In addition, he urged a policy of repatriation for all those immigrants already settled in the UK. It is interesting to note that the 1971 Act, curbing immigration, subsequently followed. Some historians argue that successive government legislations, at this time, both defined the British National identity as white and circumscribed racist sentiments, convincing the public by stressing the dangers of uncontrolled colonial migration,[6]especially the one produced by a large-scale family reunion. This opinion is further

underpinned by both Labours and Conservatives who believed that civil unrest would be avoided by imposing strict migration controls. A different stance is taken by Randall Hensen when he asserts that the State did not promote racism, on the contrary, it accepted the transformation of the UK into a multicultural society, and that it had begun in the 1950s. [7]Succeeding governments promoted anti-discriminatory legislations in the forms of the Race Relations Acts of 1965 and 1968, gradually reducing injustice relative to housing and employment. It is thus evident that these acts were aimed at avoiding discriminations based on race and colour. It is then reasonable to assume that racism had been politically recognised for the first time. The first serious discussion and analysis of multiculturalism in Britain emerged from Bhikhu Parekh's study. His interpretation is that a multicultural society consists of several cultures that have an open and equal dialogue between them, which in turn should foster a strong sense of unity and respect amongst its citizens,[8]ultimately, minorities are less likely to assimilate if assimilation is imposed from above. To sum up, the idea of multiculturalism is tied to a concept of national identity and culture. The impact of race anti-discrimination legislation sought to modify the population's behaviour stating clearly what was, and what was not, acceptable in public life. However, it cannot be asserted that a nation is truly multicultural when it is only conforming to legislation.

By the 1970s, many of the migrants had now British-born children, and there was an exponential rise in the number of births from migrants originating from the Indian subcontinent. This effect caused relocation in other parts of the United Kingdom known as ' spatial development'[9]. It is recognised that

these groups were tied closely to a distinct set of mores, often emanating from a religious context. Thus, the British community, in receipt of this translocation, may have felt a resentment towards an unfamiliar community, often not recognising an ‘ alien’ culture. Goulbourne asserts that to fully participate in society a person needs access to housing, jobs and education, and it is in these three areas that migrants experienced the most problems and resistance.[10]Clearly, increased competition for limited resources created an obstacle to integration and discriminatory practices started to emerge in both housing, education and the working environment. Similar discrimination occurred within the black community whereby the police were accused of both ‘ violence and bullying’. These accusations led directly to the Brixton Riots of 1981. For Nairns, racism derives from nationalism, the one that has been instilled in the minds of the British people by the right-wing politicians eager to preserve the Whites as the true bearers of the national identity. On the other hand, Anderson claims that racism stems from the ideologies of class,[11]in this case between the white working men and the migrants being excluded, to seize the available resources. Within this last construct, race could be described as only ‘ fictional’.[12]Nevertheless, not all Blacks and Asians were targeted, and the State promoted a series of legislations to avoid a collision, introducing laws aiming at discouraging intolerant practices in the work place and the education environment. It can be therefore stated that, whoever showed a positive commitment to Britain, and to the English way of life, received appreciation from the local and national communities: it was a two-way relationship. On these grounds, it is likely that multiculturalism was not a failure, rather it was implemented, by

the means of the Race Relations Acts, and was a positive influence for Britain promoting equality.

Whilst this essay supports the premise that post-war Britain is best described as a tolerant and multicultural nation, there have been many different events that have happened since the free-for-all in 1948 British Nationality Act. The laissez-faire approach of various governments to immigration from 1948 stoked intolerant attitudes to non-white immigrants, which resulted in the Rivers of Blood speech and the 1981 Brixton Riots, that eventually led to the effective ‘ closing the doors’ as legislated in the 1981 Immigration Act. The failure to support immigrants to assimilate and integrate into British society, combined with legislation to prohibit acts of racism, led to the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts that forced a more multicultural approach to diversity. Hence, the State has been instrumental to protect racial ethnic diversity and to promote difference. On the other hand, it has also been demonstrated that British society was less inclined to accept minority groups due to the prejudice that they would ‘ taint’ the very essence of their identity. This was at a time when the loss of the Imperial pre-eminence and the experiences of the WWII were being nostalgically reconstructed, making still further frictions between white and non-white communities. Competition for resources, i. e. housing, jobs and education, exacerbated public sentiment leading to further tensions. At the same time, propaganda from various right-wing politicians juxtaposed Britishness as being ‘ white’, hence these ideologies might have played an important part in shaping people’s attitudes towards those of a different race. Thereby, the argument shifted, in the late 1950s, towards race relations with some parts of British society

campaigning against racial discrimination and migration controls. With regards to multiculturalism, this paper has also attempted to show that both British and newcomers were not willing to accept each other customs. For the former it was an aggression to their values, and for the latter a feeling of social exclusion in terms of low pay, unemployment and bad housing. Tolerance and multiculturalism in Britain have received much attention in the past fifty years, but as Paul Gilroy claims, there is still no understanding why Britain was unable to come to terms with its minority groups,[13]and many questions remain unanswered. Eventually, in response to Gilroy's challenge, it could be alleged that if the State had implemented clear integration policies sooner, then tolerance and multiculturalism would have been a constant since 1948 due to the self-declared openness of the British society. In conclusion, it can be suggested that multiculturalism was implemented not via assimilation, but by the means of legislation and that they are still at the core of a tolerant and multicultural Britain in the twenty-first century.

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[1]Chris, Waters, "' Dark Strangers" in our midst: discourses of race and nation in Britain, 1947-1963, *Journal of British Studies* , vol. 36, No. 2, Twentieth British studies, (April, 1997), p. 208

[2]British Nationality Act 1948, Part II, sections 4 and 5, [accessed9 th March 1017]

[3]Chris, Waters, "' Dark Strangers", p. 217

[4]Ibid., p. 209

[5]Enoch Powell’s Rivers Of Blood Speech, [accessed 9 th March 2017]

[6]Paul Kathleen cited in Randall, Hansen, *Citizenship and immigration in Post-War Britain : the institutional origins of a multicultural nation* , (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 13

[7]Randall, Hansen, *Citizenship and immigration* , p. 17

[8]Parekh, Bhikhu, C., *Rethinking multiculturalism: cultural diversity and political theory* , (Palgrave, 2000), pp. 13, 196-197

[9]Colin, Holmes, *A tolerant country?: immigrants, refugees, and minorities in Britain* , (London, 1991), p. 4

[10]Goulbourne, Harry, *Race relations in Britain since 1945* , (Palgrave, 1998), p. 76

[11]Nairns and Anderson cited in Paul, Gilroy, *There ain’t no black in the Union Jack the cultural politics of race and nation* , (New ed. London, 2002), p. 43

[12]Stuart, Hall, “ Race, Articulation, and Societies Structured in Dominance” *Sociological Theories: Race and Colonialism* , (Paris: UNESCO, 1980), p. 338

[13]Gilroy, Paul, *There ain’t no black in the Union Jack the cultural politics of race and nation* , (New ed. London, 2002), p. 37