

MAY BROUGHT THE DRAWBRIDGE DOWN

It's not just the Windrush generation that suffered from Theresa May's callous incompetence in the Home Office and since - thousands of innocent people were caught up in her appeasement of the Daily Mail, says Norman Baker

Let's get one thing straight right away. Windrush was not an aberration, a dreadful mistake that somehow got through the system. It was the system.

The Tories of course have never really liked immigration, particularly when it involves people whose skin is not white. They can dress it up by talk of pressure on services and concerns about terrorism, but that is what it boils down to.

Back in 2010, the Tories decided they wanted to set a net migration figure. The Lib Dems, who did not endorse this, pointed out this was a hostage to fortune but it was a signature policy for Cameron and May, a way of keeping the Daily Mail happy and, they hoped, warding off Ukip.

DAFT IDEA

But what a daft idea it was. With free movement running through the EU like the word Brighton through a stick of rock, the numbers coming in and leaving were uncontrollable. They may as well have set a target for how many people they wanted to leave or enter Kettering, or for how many days the sun should shine.

Faced with this gaping hole, and with net migration figures way above what they promised, they decided to clamp down heavily on what they could control – migration from outside the EU.

And so we saw business people who wanted to invest in Britain, and overseas students willing to pay heavy fees to our universities, presented with numerous obstacles to entry, and often being turned away. It was clear what the message was: you are not wanted here – go home.

The only exceptions appeared to be dodgy Russian oligarchs, who were very welcome if they brought wheelbarrows of cash with them, and almost anyone from China, notwithstanding that they placed, and still place, significant restrictions on UK nationals

entering their country, especially if they are journalists who might report their appalling human rights abuses.

Why is it so difficult to get into your country, the Indians would ask? After all, we are a democracy and part of the Commonwealth. Why is so hard for us and so easy for the Chinese? To which there was no very good answer. How to lose friends and influence people – the wrong way.

The process a person from outside the EU has to go through to gain entry to the UK is expensive and burdensome, and the hurdles are high.

While it is right that the system is rigorous, it is not right that over-zealous officials, spurred on by clear signals from the home secretary and her special advisors, reject applications for entry for the most trivial of reasons.

You want to come for a family wedding in three months' time? Well, we are not sure you intend to return, but we will examine your application carefully

and give you and answer in about four months, unless we get a letter from an MP or you manage to get your case in the newspapers, in which case we will grudgingly look at it earlier.

The other lever the Tories were able to pull was the one that sought to deport people for good out of the UK. So the strategy they decided they wanted was to make life here as uncomfortable as possible for anyone here without leave to remain.

That included refugees

fleeing persecution and death in their own countries, if they had somehow through superhuman effort managed to find a way into Britain. The government naturally preferred to call them asylum seekers, a more loaded term than refugee.

The right-wing press would regularly print stories about asylum seekers living the life of luxury, or committing crime, or both. The reality was that the vast majority were completely law-abiding, many had skills this country could have used, and a great many were penniless, unsupported by the state and



reliant on goodwill from their diaspora or churches or charities, often for months or years until the Home Office got round to examining their case.

Why can't we let those applying for asylum work to support themselves and to contribute to society until their case is determined? The vast majority would welcome that. But of course the last thing the Tories want is for people they would rather were not here to become established.

Some of the Tories even wanted to severely restrict access to medical treatment, which was not only callous and inhumane but ultimately counter-productive, if a person happened to have a contagious condition.

And if that didn't work, well they could be jostled until they leave. Hence the notorious go-home vans, which the Tories deliberately introduced behind the back of the then Lib Dem Home Office minister Jeremy Browne. I wonder if they bothered to consult those sections of government, including in the Home Office itself, charged with building community cohesion?

Immigration enforcement officials were not just encouraged to unearth illegal immigrants and deport them, but were actually given weekly targets for arrests and deportations.

TARGETS FOR ARRESTS

Targets for arrests? How does that work? We're 23 short this week, Bill. Better round up some more usual suspects. Yes, I know we have no real evidence, but we can't miss our target.

And identifying people who could be deported, and so helping meet the migration target, also meant setting high hurdles for people here, hurdles they would really struggle to meet. For the Windrush generation, that meant requiring them to produce four pieces of evidence for every year they were here. Could you do that? I'm not sure I could.

It was suggested, quite reasonably, that all the government had to do was check the landing cards, the entry documents that each person would have completed as first arrived in the country. Simple really. Except that the government destroyed them all, against civil service advice.

And let's be quite clear. It was Theresa May who created this 'hostile environment'. She set out her intentions, including this exact phrase, in an article in the Daily Telegraph in 2012. The buck stops firmly with her.

It was right in the end that Amber Rudd had to go, largely because she seemed not to know what was going on in her own department, even maintaining she was unaware that targets of this sort existed. But it was the prime minister as her predecessor who had filled the chalice with poison.

The Lib Dems in coalition knocked off the roughest corners of this nasty approach, ending child detention, and resisting other harsh ideas, such as turning landlords into immigration officers.

“The only exceptions appeared to be dodgy Russian oligarchs, who were very welcome if they brought wheelbarrows of cash with them”

I attended a cabinet committee meeting when that last item was discussed. David Cameron, in the chair, was terribly keen but as well as Lib Dem concerns, he ran into the not insignificant figure of Eric Pickles who was unconcerned about the people being harassed but very concerned about the burden on landlords.

As David Cameron tried to sum up the meeting in his favour, blithely ignoring the concerns expressed, Pickles banged the table.

“You're not listening, prime minister,” he interrupted loudly. That particular cabinet committee did not meet again and Pickles was the only cabinet minister sacked after the 2015 election gave the Tories a majority.

You have to find allies on individual issues wherever you can, even Pickles. The situation was not helped by the Labour party which throughout the coalition years and indeed before, was even more right-wing on Home Office issues than the Tories. The party that tried to give you ID cards and 90 days detention without trial consciously put itself to the right of the Tories so as not to appear 'soft on crime'. It was a long way from Keir Hardie, from Roy Jenkins, even from Charles Clarke.

So now Rudd has gone and a whole host of Tories are telling us how shocked they were, how they had no idea this was all going on.

They refer to this as the Windrush issue, but Windrush was simply a manifestation of a nasty policy.

With Theresa May at the Home Office, the Tories became the 'nasty party' once again. Time will tell if Sajid Javid intends to make the Home Office more human again. Or will the waters close over, and it will be nasty business as usual?

Norman Baker was Liberal Democrat MP for Lewes 1997-2015 and a Home Office minister 2013-14. For more details about the Home Office, see his book *Against The Grain*, available from Biteback