

## WINDRUSH RELUCTANCE

Professor Shawn-Naphtali Sobers

Speech given to a Windrush celebration event at Christ Church, Bath – 18th June 2023

[Ask a respected elder for permission to speak...]

Good morning all, and a heartfelt welcome to all our family and friends here from the Caribbean, who we are here today to honour.

It is important that I state at the beginning, that I am here not speaking on behalf of any organisation, that I am speaking from a personal perspective.

Also, I am not trying to put words into anybody's mouth. Not everyone will agree with everything I have to say, and some of the things I say may be uncomfortable to be said at a celebration event. As my surname is Sobers, I am taking the liberty at offering a Sober reflection in amongst the joy.

Part of the point of this short address, is to state that, I feel, if we are to continue to observe Windrush Day, it should as much be a reflection, a reasoning, a meditation, and a questioning, as well as celebration, which of course is also important.

The Empire Windrush was a passenger liner that was originally built as a German cruise ship named MV Monte Rosa in 1930. It was built to support the transportation of German migrants who were relocating to South America, and also to expand the new industry of affordable cruise liner holidays for the rise of a German middle class. However, at the outbreak of World War II, it was acquired by the Nazi regime and used as a training ship for naval cadets, and as a propaganda tool in the spread of Nazi ideology. One of the most shocking aspects of the ship's history, is that it was used to transport Norwegian Jews to Poland, to be taken to Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp.

In 1945 British troops took possession of the Monte Rosa from Germany and was treated as a trophy spoil of war. In 1947 it was officially registered as a British ship, and was refitted and renamed as the Empire Windrush, taking its name from the River Windrush, which runs through Gloucestershire. The vessel embarked on its first voyage under British ownership in 1948.

On May 24, 1948, the ship set sail from Kingston, Jamaica, carrying hundreds of passengers who were primarily from the Caribbean, including Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, and Barbados. The passengers were mainly young men who were seeking employment and economic opportunities in the United Kingdom. They were responding to Britain's call for labour to help rebuild the country after the war.

The journey across the Atlantic Ocean took approximately three weeks, and during this time, the passengers faced challenging conditions onboard the ship. However, their spirits remained high, fuelled by the hope and optimism of a new life in Britain, and all that was promised to them.

The Empire Windrush arrived at the Port of Tilbury in Essex, England, on June 22, 1948. This date has come to symbolize the beginning of what's now called the 'Windrush generation', and the post-war migration from the Caribbean. The arrival of the ship and its passengers has come to mark a significant moment in British history, and in the popular imagination now represents the first large-scale wave of arrivals from the Caribbean to the United Kingdom. After the Windrush, there were more journeys by different ships and planes, but it is the Windrush that has become the symbol of that era.

**There are two key points I'd like to reflect on at this moment** – and they maybe controversial points – as I believe it's important that we do not take the politics and aspects of social justice out of the Windrush conversation.

The first point is, that the islands the people were coming from were British colonies, that had been underdeveloped under that stewardship, from the slavery era and onwards in the system of colonisation that followed. The colonies were then further underdeveloped by funding a brain drain for that expertise to come to build up the so-called Mother Country. It was through the hard work and sacrifices of the elders who came here, to send back their hard-earned money to their families still in the Caribbean – when that responsibility should have been part of the compensation from the UK government as a vote of thanks for coming to build back up this country.

The second point of reflection is, that we are labelling an entire generation of our elders – those who came here from 1948 through to the 1970s – after a ship that is deeply colonial in its history, even before it reached the hands of the British. But to further stamp the colonial qualities, it had the name Empire added to the name of the river, proving that politics and the colonial project of expansion has been at the heart of this story from the very beginning.

The arrival of our elders was met with mixed reactions. While some British citizens welcomed our elders and recognized their contributions to post-war reconstruction, others expressed hostility and discrimination. Racism and discrimination were pervasive during this time, with Caribbean arrivals often facing difficulties finding housing, employment, and access to services.

Despite the challenges, our elders persevered and made significant contributions to British society. They played a vital role in various sectors, including healthcare, transportation, public services, and culture. The cultural impact of that post-war era can still be felt today, as their influence has enriched British arts, music, literature, and cuisine.

In recent years, these stories of migration from the Caribbean have received renewed attention and recognition. What has become known as the Windrush

Scandal, emerged in 2018, exposing the mistreatment and wrongful deportation of some individuals from the generation of post-war arrivals, many who came here when they were incredibly young with their parents, or to join them after they had been sent for. This scandal sparked public outrage and led to calls for justice and compensation for those affected.

This is why the stories of our elders need to be heard, and their contributions, struggles and sacrifices and achievements recognised. The stories remind us of the need to honour their legacy and not take their life journeys for granted.

And when I say listen to their stories, to be clear, I am not even just talking about experiences of racism and the signs that were seen in the windows of houses. Many of our elders did not have overt experiences of racism, and had positive experiences and built deep friendships with local people. All the stories from our elders need to be heard, they are **all** valid, as it from that we will learn the true complexity of this history – its nuances, its contradictions, the good and the bad, and the impact and implications on individual levels, and well as impacts on the Caribbean and the younger generations here that have followed.

You'll be able to see and hear some of those stories at Fairfield House this Thursday, from 3 – 7pm. They have a fantastic exhibition, and you'll be able to hear some of the experiences from people in-person. The stories are personal, and heartfelt, and thoughtful, some of them are extremely funny, and others will be upsetting and difficult to hear. But they all need to be heard, and that is the point.

We are now living in a sensitive era, where – I say with deep sadness – that many from post-war generation of arrivals are no longer with us, and taking their place with the ancestors. All of us here have had close family and friends that have passed away. And those of us who were born in the UK, to parents of those post-war Caribbean arrivals – we are fully aware that the baton is being passed to us, we will soon be the elders, and some of us already are, and passing the baton onto our youngsters. What are we doing with that baton? Some of us don't feel confident or equipped to be the new elders – we still feel like children. Maybe that is because the example that has been set for us by our own elders has been so great – we have some big shoes to fill!

What we have to remember is the baton that is being passed to us, was originally given to them by their parents, and down the line through history from their ancestors before them. On that baton are the fingerprints of every single one of our ancestors, bridging the past with the present. The baton has crossed the Atlantic at least twice, with our parents to us, and it survived the middle passage with our ancestors who were enslaved in West Africa and journeyed to the Caribbean, continuing to travel down the line for hundreds of years until it reaches us now. We do not wait for our elders to pass on, the baton, the responsibility, is already in our grasp.

So, with any celebration of Windrush, comes a responsibility and realisation that it is part of a much longer story, a story without end, as we are still living it. A story of struggle, survival and resilience. A recognition of injustice and demands for

accountability, and the pursuit of measures to address the lasting impact of inequality and discrimination.

Thank you to our elders, and our ancestors, for all the work you have done, for paving the way. It is now up to us to ensure your journey, and your strength and your resilience continues, through us, to fulfil your dreams.

Thank you.