

Racism, Xenophobia, and Distribution

Multi-Issue Politics in Advanced Democracies

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History of Racism and Xenophobia in the United Kingdom

Here is the means of showing that the immigrant communities can organise to consolidate their members, to agitate and campaign against their fellow citizens, and to overawe and dominate the rest with the legal weapons which the ignorant and the ill-informed have provided. As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood.' The tragic and intractable phenomenon which we watch with horror on the other side of the Atlantic, but which there is interwoven with the history and existence of the State itself, is coming upon us here by our own volition and our own neglect . . . [Britons] found their wives unable to obtain hospital beds in childbirth, their children unable to obtain school places, their homes and neighbourhoods changed beyond recognition, their plans and prospects for the future defeated.

—J. Enoch Powell (Conservative MP), *The Observer*, April 21, 1968

5.1 Introduction

In the UK local elections of 2003, when asylum and race relations ranked just after education and health as issues most concerning British voters,¹ the British National Party (BNP)—a racist party born in 1982 and led at this

This chapter was written by Rafiada Dancygier.

writing by Cambridge University-educated Nick Griffin—fielded a record number of candidates across Britain, mostly in communities plagued by economic decline and high unemployment. The BNP played upon fears that ethnic minorities and asylum seekers received preferential treatment over white natives in the allocation of state resources and threatened to destroy the identity of the British nation.

As Table 5.1 shows, the number of asylum applications increased dramatically in the 1990s, although only a handful were granted asylum. Most applications came from the continents of "people of color" (Asia and Africa) (see also Figure 5.1).

The British National Party, as well as the British National Front, is very much like Le Pen's Front National in France, the Austrian Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs), and the Italian Social Movement/National Alliance. Thanks to the British electoral system (first-past-the-post elections in single-member districts), which generally produces two-party competition, the BNP and the National Front have never been a significant numerical force in British national politics. However, both parties have been effective in establishing racism and xenophobia as important wedge issues that compete with conventional class-based politics.

The fact that a substantial share of Britain's electorate now identifies with racist populism and ethno-nationalism has had a major effect on the country's mainstream parties. The Conservative Party in particular has tried to court the racist vote. Enoch Powell's "Rivers of Blood" speech of 1968 (cited in the epigraph) is exemplary. The most publicized example, however, is Margaret Thatcher's comment of 1978. When the British National Front fielded ninety-three candidates in that year's general election, Thatcher, as new leader of the Conservatives, deliberately signaled toughness on immigration by expressing her "sympathy" for those who feared the country was being "swamped by immigrants." The dramatic collapse of the British National Front in that year was directly due to the way the Conservatives were perceived by racist British voters. More recently, in March 2001, just a few months before the general election, the Conservatives' leader, William Hague, warned that a return of Labour to office would transform Britain into a "foreign land," in a speech that made the fight against "bogus" asylum seekers one of the Tories' central campaign themes.²

For the last three decades, the British electorate has perceived the Conservatives as the more consistent xenophobe of the two major parties. This has not always been the case. This chapter illustrates how Britain's two

Table 5.1 UK asylum applications and granted asylum by region of origin

Year	All regions	Europe	Americas	Africa	Middle East	Asia	Unknown
1986	4,300	200	1,100	1,200	1,800		
1990	26,205	2,200	245	13,870	2,650	6,890	350
1991	44,840	3,685	210	27,500	2,540	10,495	410
1992	24,610	8,435	465	7,630	1,980	6,100	10 (2.4%)
1993	22,370	4,535	745	10,295	1,520	5,175	100
1994	32,835	5,360	890	16,960	1,985	7,515	125
	825 (2.5%)	130 (2.4%)	10 (1.1%)	115 (0.7%)	520 (2.6%)	50 (0.7%)	

1995	43,965	7,050	1,340	22,545	2,295	10,685	50
	1,290 (2.9%)	355 (5.0%)	10 (0.8%)	80 (0.4%)	785 (3.4%)	60 (0.6%)	
1996	29,645	6,475	1,765	11,290	2,150	7,885	80
	2,240 (7.6%)	1,220 (18.8%)	15 (0.9%)	210 (1.9%)	745 (34.7%)	50 (0.6%)	
1997	32,495	9,145	2,825	9,515	2,335	8,570	105
	3,990 (12.3%)	1,870 (20.5%)	35 (1.2%)	1,460 (15.3%)	510 (21.8%)	115 (1.3%)	
1998	46,015	17,745	975	12,380	2,785	11,940	190
	5,345 (11.6%)	1,060 (6.0%)	175 (18.0%)	3,315 (26.8%)	695 (25.0%)	100 (0.8%)	
1999	71,155	28,280	2,025	18,435	4,165	17,465	785
	7,815 (11.0%)	6,480 (22.9%)	5 (0.3%)	785 (4.3%)	415 (10.0%)	65 (0.4%)	
2000	80,315	22,880	1,420	17,920	14,415	23,230	450
	10,370 (12.9%)	790 (3.5%)	120 (8.5%)	6,340 (35.4%)	1,350 (9.4%)	1,545 (6.6%)	225 (50%)

Source: 1986: Office for National Statistics, Social Trends 30—Asylum applications, by region of origin, 1986 to 1998; 1990–1993: Office for National

Statistics, 1998, Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 1997; 1994–2001: Office for National Statistics, 2003, Asylum Statistics United Kingdom 2002.

Note: For each year, first row is number of applications; second row is number granted and approval rate. Typical countries of origin are: for Europe, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Macedonia, Moldova, Romania, Russia, Turkey, Ukraine, and Yugoslavia; for the Americas, Colombia, Ecuador, and Jamaica; for Africa, Algeria, Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Congo, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Kenya, Liberia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Uganda, Zimbabwe, and Zaïre; for the Middle East, Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon; and for Asia, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, China, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Vietnam.

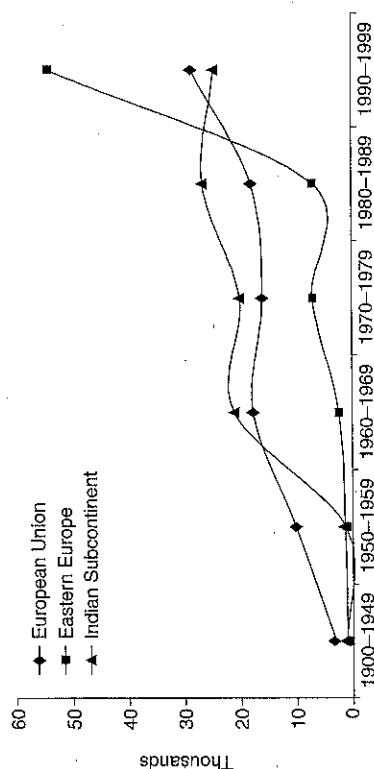


Figure 5.1 Time of arrival in the UK. Source: Russel Haque, "Migrants in the UK: A descriptive analysis of their characteristics and labour market performance, based on the Labour Force Survey," Technical Report, Department for Work and Pensions, 2002, Chart 6.

major parties have treated the issues of immigration and race relations since the post-war years. We begin by presenting a brief overview of immigration to Britain, a process that was set in motion rather accidentally, eluding careful political and economic planning. When the first waves of immigrants arrived after World War II, the two main parties' initial approach was one of issue containment. Early on, intraparty divisions between those who favored immigration for economic and ideological reasons and those who hoped to garner votes by fomenting xenophobia immobilized Labour and Tories alike. Unprepared and unwilling to let immigration disturb the precarious two-party balance and the class-based partisan cleavage structure, the two mainstream parties made joint efforts to keep the issue out of the national political agenda. However, a series of developments challenged and ultimately brought down this bipartisan commitment and ushered in a more adversarial political climate. In an electoral setting where hostility against foreign newcomers cuts across demographic, socioeconomic, and partisan lines and where anti-immigrant third parties threaten to be vote spoilers, the Conservative Party has occasionally flirted with extremism for electoral gains. Because several election campaigns have apparently demonstrated that pandering to xenophobic prejudices can bring in pivotal profits at the polls,

playing the race card is likely to remain a common weapon in the Conservatives' arsenal.

5.2 Immigration in Britain

Migration has long formed an integral part of Britain's national experience. For Britain, as a colonial power, emigration of Englishmen throughout the Commonwealth was a cornerstone of the mother country's economic, political, and foreign policy. On balance, emigrants have outnumbered immigrants over the past two centuries. Most went to Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and increasingly to the United States, in particular, after the discovery of gold in California.

Meanwhile, colonial ties also contributed to large inflows of immigrants, initially coming predominantly from Ireland and later from the West Indies, the Indian subcontinent, and Africa. While migrant labor was often crucial for furthering Britain's economic expansion, native Britons generally did not extend a friendly welcome to these newcomers. In the twentieth century, anti-immigrant sentiment often took on a racial dimension. Britain's first "race riots" occurred in 1919, when white mobs in several port cities attacked black workers who had come to Britain from West Africa and the West Indies to help in the war effort. Once the war ended, returning white soldiers, often unskilled and jobless, refused to work alongside black workers, whose labor was in any case no longer needed (Fryer 1984, 298-316).

The majority of today's immigrant population and its descendants arrived in Britain after World War II, in search of economic opportunity and prosperity. After the war, Britain, like most other European countries, was faced with a major shortage of labor, in particular in industries such as manufacturing and textiles. The expanding demand for labor was met by a variety of sources, including 500,000 refugees, displaced persons, and ex-prisoners of war from Europe between 1946 and 1951, and a further 350,000 European nationals between 1945 and 1957 (Solomos 1993). However, the overwhelming majority of immigrants came to Britain from Ireland and the New Commonwealth, or NCW, countries (a code word for "colored" in the UK), primarily from the West Indies and the Indian subcontinent (Miles and Brown 2003).

Despite confronting severe labor shortages, however, British governments were wary of the prospect of expansive immigration from the colonies to Britain. In its report on the United Kingdom's demographic development, the

1949 Royal Commission on Population advised against large-scale immigration from Britain's colonies even as its gloomy forecasts warned of massive population declines and critical labor shortages. Instead, the commission promoted pro-natalist policies that would help maintain the "Britishness" of the United Kingdom. In particular, the commission's report ruled out immigration of nonwhite colonists, for British society could only be expected to receive migrants who were of "good human stock and were not prevented by their religion or race from intermarrying with the host population and becoming merged in it" (Paul 1997, 128, quoting the 1949 Report of the Royal Commission on Population). Indeed the British government had reservations about the absorption of "colored" workers into British society and feared that West Indian immigrants would prefer to live off unemployment benefits in Britain than to seek employment (Layton-Henry 1992, 12, 29). These fears were not voiced in regard to white European foreign workers, mostly soldiers, displaced persons, and former prisoners of war from Eastern Europe and Germany, whom the committee welcomed (Paul 1997, 78-79, 87-88).

Over the next four decades, successive governments enacted a series of immigration restrictions. These controls ultimately failed to prevent Britain from becoming the multicultural country it is today. Half a century after the Royal Commission advised against immigration, Britain's ethnic minority population numbers 4.64 million, or 7.6 percent of the population (see Table 5.2).³

While policymakers had been preoccupied with preserving and promoting the (white) British empire, they did not anticipate that their vision of the British Commonwealth, in which all subjects traveled, worked, and set-

Table 5.2 Ethnic minorities in Great Britain

Year	Nonwhites (percent)	Composition of minorities (percent)		
		South Asian	Black	Chinese
1961	0.73			
1971	2.16			
1981	3.73			
1991	5.50	49.1	29.1	5.5
2001	7.60	44.5	27.1	4.2
				16.4
				24.1

Source: Spencer (1997); Commission for Racial Equality, "Ethnic Minorities in Britain," CRE Factsheets, 1999; White (2002).

tled freely as British citizens, would facilitate extensive, permanent settlement of New Commonwealth colonists in Britain. The 1948 Nationality Act, which granted all Commonwealth subjects full citizenship rights in the United Kingdom by creating one common definition of British nationality, was born out of an attachment to the ideology of the Old Commonwealth of Canada, New Zealand, Australia, and South Africa. A bipartisan consensus supported the maintenance of free movement throughout the Commonwealth, for it was widely assumed that the main population transfers would consist of English emigration. The major side effect of the act—large-scale immigration from the West Indies, Africa, and the Indian subcontinent—was not even conceived of when the uncontroversial act passed through Parliament (Hansen 2000, 17). Thus, while the British government had decided against a policy of organized labor recruitment from abroad, the legal framework of Commonwealth citizenship made it possible for hundreds of thousands of immigrants to enter and settle in Britain.

Between 1948 and the first half of 1962 (the year of the first immigration controls, see below), net migration from the New Commonwealth and colonies had reached half a million. The majority of these newcomers hailed from the West Indies (55 percent), followed by immigrants from India (16 percent) and Pakistan (13 percent) (see Table 5.3a, own calculations and

Table 5.3a Net immigration from colonies and New Commonwealth: January 1, 1948, to June 30, 1962

Year	West Indies	India	Pakistan	Others	Total
1948-1953	14,000	2,500	1,500	10,000	28,000
1954	11,000	800	500	6,000	18,300
1955	27,550	5,800	1,850	7,500	42,700
1956	29,800	5,600	2,050	9,400	46,850
1957	23,000	6,600	5,200	7,600	42,400
1958	15,000	6,200	4,700	3,950	29,850
1959	16,400	2,950	850	1,400	21,600
1960	49,650	5,900	2,500	-350	57,700
1961	66,300	23,750	25,100	21,250	136,400
June 30, 1962	27,037	19,245	23,837	13,652	83,771

Source: Hiro (1991), app. 2.

Note: The 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act went into effect on July 1, 1962.

Table 5.3b Number of citizens of colonies and New Commonwealth allowed to settle in Britain: July 1, 1962, to December 31, 1972

Year	West Indies	UK passport holders from			Total
		India	Pakistan	East Africa	
July-Dec. 1962	7,004	2,855	1,106	7,849	18,814
1963	7,928	17,498	16,336	15,287	57,049
1964	14,848	15,513	10,980	20,776	62,117
1965	14,828	17,086	9,401	12,336	53,651
1966	10,928	16,708	10,245	8,721	46,602
1967	12,424	19,067	18,644	7,513	57,648
1968	7,013	23,147	13,426	12,617	56,203
1969	4,531	10,958	12,658	6,249	57,951
1970	3,934	7,158	9,863	6,839	33,501
1971	2,774	6,874	6,957	11,564	33,175
1972	2,453	7,589	5,399	34,825 ^a	59,850

Source: Hiro (1991), app. 2.

Note: The 1971 Immigration Act went into effect on July 1, 1973.

a. This figure includes about 27,000 Ugandan Asians.

Table 5.3b-c for later years). These migrants were eager to fill job vacancies and generally took up employment in declining or less profitable sectors of the economy—manufacturing, mining, textiles, and transport, for example—that had become undesirable to the native workforce. With the exception of those working in the health sector, these foreign workers tended to take jobs that required skills well below their qualifications and training (Fryer 1984, 374).

The process of mass migration was thus set in motion. Supply and demand dynamics were embedded in a liberal legal framework that allowed for expansive immigration. Ill-equipped for this almost accidental inflow of migrants, the British political elite had no well-conceived policy blueprint to follow and instead opted for a strategy of issue containment.

5.3 An Issue of "High Potential"

British politicians, policymakers, and, most of all, the British public had not been prepared for the influx of immigrants and the establishment of im-

Table 5.3c Number of citizens of colonies and New Commonwealth allowed to settle in Britain: July 1, 1973, to December 31, 1988

	UK passport holders from						
	West Indies	India	Pakistan	Bangladesh	East Africa	Others	Total
1973	2,685	6,240	3,638	1,753	10,443	7,488	32,247
1974	3,198	6,654	4,401	1,022	13,436	13,820	42,531
1975	3,698	10,195	7,724	3,276	13,792	14,580	53,265
1976	2,697	11,021	11,699	3,975	11,655	13,966	55,013
1977	2,237	7,339	13,331	3,306	6,401	11,541	44,155
1978	1,753	9,886	12,425	4,385	5,350	9,140	42,939
1979	1,282	9,268	10,945	3,915	4,038	7,599	37,047
1980	1,080	7,930	9,080	5,210	3,030 ^a	7,290	33,620
1981	980	6,590	8,970	5,810	2,780	6,240	31,370
1982	770	5,410	7,750	7,020	2,720	6,710	30,380
1983	750	5,380	6,440	4,870	3,280	6,830	27,550
1984	680	5,140	5,510	4,180	2,690	6,600	24,800
1985	770	5,500	6,680	5,330	2,180	6,590	27,050
1986	830	4,210	5,580	4,760	1,680	5,600	22,660
1987	890	4,610	3,930	3,080	1,860	6,460	20,830
1988	1,030	5,020	4,280	2,890	1,910	7,670	22,800

Source: Hiro (1991), app. 2.

a. The classification was changed from "UK passport holders from East Africa" to "British Overseas Citizens."

migrant communities in their neighborhoods. Having ruled out organized immigration as an official policy, British government leaders at the time nevertheless did not put a stop to immigration and also did next to nothing to assist in the accommodation or employment of their fellow immigrant citizens (Castles and Kosack 1973, 275). A similar attitude of "benign neglect" pervaded government strategy in tackling the issue of immigration politically. From the inception of mass immigration, Labour and Conservative leaders tacitly agreed that it would be most advantageous to both parties if immigration were kept under the political radar, for not only would politicization of the issue prove internally divisive for the two parties but the electoral gains to be collected from such politicization were also far from certain. Notwithstanding these reservations, immigration controls soon received utmost political

publicity. As anti-immigrant sentiment grew and intensified among a large share of the British public, anti-immigrant factions within the Conservative Party gained momentum. The Conservative government decided to impose immigration controls in 1961, which would be further tightened by the following Labour government in 1965 and 1968.

5.3.1 Between Imposed Silence and Outspoken Racism

Most observers attribute the bipartisan conspiratorial silence on immigration to two related variables: the inflexibility of the British political system to address issues that cut across traditional cleavage structures in general and the internal divisions within the two parties on the specific matter of immigration in particular. With regard to the first constraint, Miller writes:

A two-party system must treat one issue as the basis for political division and the other [cross-cutting issue] as a dangerously misleading distraction that would erode party discipline if not suppressed. The parties can choose, and must choose, those subjects on which they will fight and those on which they will present a united front, for the alternative is to retreat from party government itself. As long as the parties are in collusion on policies which are generally popular . . . the situation is stable. (Miller 1980, 17)

In the 1950s and 1960s, the Labour and Tory leadership consensus to suppress public discussion about immigration in the face of growing public interest in the subject was an open secret and commented on by contemporary observers. Deakin (1965) notes that "the tacit agreement of central party headquarters prevents the twin issues of immigration and colour from becoming a major feature of the national [1964] election campaign" (10). In concluding, he blames protest votes and abstentions in this election on the intransigent electoral configuration: "Where an issue cuts across the established lines in this way the British electoral system severely limits the way in which a voter can register his discontent" (158). This tacit consensus also had much to do with the internal divisions on the issues of immigration and race that deadlocked constructive policymaking.

Regarding the second constraint, the two parties were split into several factions. The Conservative Party was roughly split into three. The first faction, the "Tory Radicals," was steadfastly opposed to discrimination and committed to racial integration. However, "this group is distinguished not so much by its

general bias towards philanthropy, nor for its racial drive, but for its understanding of modern economics" (Foot 1965, 153). Recognizing the vital need for immigrant labor in economic reconstruction and expansion, the Tory Radicals sought to copy the guestworker schemes that many West European countries had adopted. The "Traditional Right" represented a second opinion on the matter. Dedicated to the ideals of the Commonwealth, this group viewed free movement of its subjects as an essential foundation of the British Empire, which it hoped to preserve. A final faction, labeled the "New Right," was vehemently opposed to immigration and drew most of its support from the Tory middle class. Fearing that immigrant communities would dilute the British character of the nation, they lobbied for immigration controls as the only way to prevent this type of "mongrelization" (Foot 1965, 153-157; Messina 1989, 24-25).

The Labour Party was equally split. In fact, two Labour factions had views on immigration and race very similar to those of the Tory Radicals and Traditionalists, endorsing continued immigration for commitments to economic and Commonwealth principles, respectively. Contending that an immigrant invasion would eat away the privileges of the British working class, a third faction stoked anxieties and anti-immigrant hostility among its lower-class supporters in the hopes of attractive electoral returns (Foot 1965, 189-190; Messina 1989, 28-29).

Given this constellation of interests, the respective party leaderships calculated that addressing the issue of immigration would have risked fractious infighting within the parties and upset the traditional balance of Britain's political system. However, while the alliance of the Radicals and the Traditionalists, both within and across parties, had helped to keep Britain's borders open to nonwhite migrants and the topic closed for discussion, public sentiment against continued immigration hardened and events unfolded that would force the issue to the center of national attention.

5.3.2 The Local Impact of Immigration: Competition and Discontent

Beneath the veneer of principled acceptance of immigration fostered at the level of national politics, tensions in the localities where immigrants actually settled soon made themselves felt. Immigrants predominantly settled in urban areas where the labor shortages were most severe, particularly in Greater London and the West Midlands conurbations (Birmingham), but also in the Greater Manchester area and West Yorkshire (Layton-Henry 1992, 14). Once

the newcomers were settled, a process of chain migration set in that contributed to the further concentration of the immigrant population in certain areas. The uneven geographical distribution of the migrant communities was quite visible early on.⁴ By the mid-1960s, many of the 630 parliamentary constituencies housed no NCW immigrants and in more than half, these immigrants constituted less than 1 percent of the resident population. However, in 51 constituencies NCW immigrants made up between 5 and 15 percent of the resident population (Money 1997, 700–701).

The spatial concentration of immigrants exacerbated an already critical housing situation in many cities and towns. While tight labor markets muted the competition in the employment sector in the early years of immigrant arrival, the situation on the overcrowded housing market was quite different. In the 1960s, England and Wales faced severe housing shortages; millions of houses were old and dilapidated and in need of replacement, and households were often forced to share accommodations with other families. In light of this adverse set-up, the entry of migrant workers into the housing market was often greeted with resentment and discrimination. Landlords regularly put up “No Coloured” and “Europeans Only” signs, and local newspaper advertisements did not refrain from specifying that immigrants “of colour” need not apply (Daniel 1968, 154; Hiro 1991, 50). Constrained in their accommodation choices, immigrants often settled for the purchase of cheap, run-down houses, abandoned by the native population, which were occupied by several households at a time. This overcrowding brought about unsanitary conditions and inevitable further property damage, and soon many immigrant neighborhoods were associated with urban decay and ghettoization in the public’s mind (Moore 1975, 11). When immigrants became eligible for state-subsidized council housing, their accommodations did not always improve and the resentment by the local population—who often felt that they were more entitled to these government benefits than the migrant newcomers—only intensified.⁵ Many reports that studied immigration at the time concluded that “housing [was] both the greatest problem that [confronted] the immigrants themselves and the sphere in which the greatest tensions [were] likely to arise between immigrants and the local people” (Paterson 1969, 194).

As these poor housing conditions turned many working-class neighborhoods into slums, the white residents that had remained became particularly prone to anti-immigrant hostility. Before long, this antagonism escalated into

violence directed against the newcomers. Isolated street disturbances had become routine in some areas, but nothing had prepared the country for the antiracist rioting that took place in the summer of 1958 in Nottingham and Notting Hill. Following a series of altercations between West Indian immigrants and white youths in Nottingham, the latter went on what they referred to as “nigger hunts.” Thousands of white males, predominantly lower-class youths, ganged up to attack West Indian immigrants in fighting that lasted several days. The political reaction was swift: the local MPs (one Conservative, one Labour) immediately called for a complete stop of immigration and endorsed aggressive repatriation measures (Fryer 1984, 377). About a week later, Notting Hill, a London neighborhood that was then predominantly West Indian, witnessed similar civil unrest. Hundreds participated in racially inspired violent attacks, resulting in the arrest of 140 rioters, most of whom were white. The violent gangs were spurred on by racist propaganda materials that put the entire blame for the squalid living conditions in the neighborhood on the immigrant population. When some West Indian immigrants decided to fight back in self-defense, some accused the police of failing to protect the immigrants because the officers themselves were harboring racist resentments (Fryer 1984, 378–380; Hansen 2000, 80–81; Hiro 1991, 38–40; Layton-Henry 1992, 38–39).

The effects of the riots were far-reaching. Helped by extensive press and television coverage and public debate, they succeeded in transforming immigration from a local issue into a persistent national headline that reached even the most remote, rural, all-white areas. The riots put a dramatic end to the prepolitical “Age of Innocence” (Hiro 1991, 40) and ushered in a more conflictual state of affairs. Prior to the 1958 violence, the political elite had managed to keep the lid on issues related to immigration and race relations, allowing pressures to simmer at the local level and on the back benches. Although the riots were widely condemned by the mainstream political establishment, some MPs sought to understand and even sympathize with the white rioters, whom they pitied as victims of an immigrant invasion. This show of understanding was most likely also motivated by the first opinion polls on immigration and interracial relations, conducted as a result of the riots. According to most surveys, the vast majority of the British public rejected unrestricted migration by the early 1960s, and it soon became clear that opposition to liberal immigration laws cut across partisan lines (Messina 1989, 26–27). In 1961, a Gallup poll found that 67 percent favored controls and a further 6 percent endorsed a

complete ban (Deakin 1965, 5). The first reaction of shock, disgust, and condemnation thus soon gave way to a more hostile climate and the Conservative Macmillan government felt increased pressure to heed the public's calls for immigration controls.

5.3.3 The Politics of Appeasement: The First Immigration Controls

Several institutional channels helped mobilize the opposition to Britain's liberal immigration regime within the Conservative Party. Conservative activists relayed their constituencies' hostility to the party leadership by issuing thirty-nine resolutions at the 1961 Annual Conservative Party Conference, calling for an immediate halt to unrestricted immigration. These efforts were amplified by the growing pressure groups that had formed around the issue as well as by vocal xenophobic MPs who clamored for control to stop the "appalling flood" of immigrants (Foot 1965, 134).

Driven by rumors of an impending ban, nonwhite immigrants started arriving in Britain in ever-increasing numbers, which only boosted the cause of the restrictionist lobby. Whereas net immigration from New Commonwealth countries totaled almost 60,000 in 1960, this number had more than doubled to over 136,000 by 1961 (see Table 5.3a). In light of these developments, the Cabinet decided to introduce control legislation in October 1961. The proposed bill represented a compromise, aimed at appeasing the pro-immigration factions within the party, as it restricted primary immigration by instituting an employment voucher scheme but allowed the unrestricted immigration of dependents. The Labour Party virulently opposed the legislation, and its leader, Hugh Gaitskell, condemned it as a "miserable, shameful, shabby bill" (Messina 1989, 28). To be sure, the Labour Party contained an outspoken anti-immigrant wing of its own. But in contrast to the Conservative Party, its activists had not built up an effective pressure network at the branch level (Deakin 1965, 3-4; Foot 1965, 134; Messina 1989, 24-30).

After months of parliamentary infighting that resulted in numerous amendments, the Commonwealth Immigrants Act passed in 1962 with its central provisions intact.⁶ While, on the surface, the act used employment-based measures to curb immigration, many observers denounced it as racially discriminatory—its controls were targeted at nonwhite immigrants and conspicuously excluded Irish citizens. Additionally, the conditions at the time belied any alleged economic rationales of the act. The restrictions came in a

period when Britain was experiencing full employment, and economists, both within and outside government, forecast critical labor shortages (Money 1997, 698). As the parliamentary debates testify, the 1962 act was deemed a social, not an economic, necessity. The controls were hoped to alleviate the frictions between the native and the immigrant populations that had arisen as a result of congested schools and housing and insufficient health and welfare services. These tensions were magnified by suspicion of and hostility against cultural, religious, and racial differences. However, given the act's failure to include any kind of dispersal or registration provisions, immigrants would continue to settle in locations of greatest labor scarcity and industrial expansion, which were precisely those industrial areas that suffered from the negative consequences of overcrowding in the first place (Coleman 1994, 39; Patterson 1969, 19-20). Moreover, the decision to allow the continued entry of dependents precipitated even larger inflows of immigrants. In the two years immediately following the act (1963-1965), 57,710 Commonwealth migrants arrived with a labor voucher in hand, but almost twice as many family members entered Britain for permanent settlement during those years (Messina 2001, 264).

5.3.4 Smethwick and the Birth of the Race-Card Thesis

In addition to its failure to stem the flow of immigrants, the 1962 act also failed to curb the growing politicization of immigration and race-related issues. The public's continued rejection of unrestricted immigration and increasing pressure from local constituencies of both parties also led the new Labour leader, Harold Wilson, to concede the need for controls when the act was first due for renewal in November 1963. Having committed to restrictions, the Tory and Labour leaderships hoped to avoid the contentious immigration issue in the 1964 general election. The party manifestos' treatment of the issues was very guarded and neutral, and the Liberal Party did not even mention the subject directly. With the exception of a few marginal seats, the parties also avoided openly courting the immigrant vote, for fear that such a move would alienate the white electorate.⁷ Finally, the major parties' central organizations also discouraged local candidates to exploit native resentment against immigrants in their campaigns (Deakin 1965, 10, 160-161).

All these efforts were, however, brought to naught in the constituency of Smethwick (an industrial city in the West Midlands with an immigrant population of 6 percent), whose Conservative candidate, Peter Griffiths, was able to dominate the campaign with his staunchly anti-immigrant platform and

whose unexpected victory had a ripple effect that was felt for years to come. The widely publicized election outcome was notable for several reasons. First, Griffiths's xenophobic campaign, associated with the hateful slogan "If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour," managed to win a seat in a constituency that had been solidly Labour for twenty years. Second, Griffiths's triumph occurred against the national tide. While the overall electorate moved to the left, Smethwick registered the biggest pro-Conservative swing of any seat in the whole country, 10.4 percent against the national average and even 8.8 percent against the average for the West Midlands. Third, and most significant, Smethwick was held up as an example of the electoral advantage that a party could gain by playing the race card in local politics. Gordon Walker, the defeated Labour candidate, was in fact very popular among his constituents,⁸ but his focus on national matters during the campaign caused many former supporters who were concerned about the local impact of continued immigration and who had been convinced by his opponent's attacks that Walker would promote a policy of "Let 'em all come," to cast their ballot for Griffiths instead (Hartley-Brewer 1965, 80-103; Saggar 2000, 175-178).

5.3.5 Containment Continues as Controls Are Tightened

Smethwick certainly left its mark on Britain's electoral landscape and on its calculating strategists, but its immediate impact was softened by the still-operating bipartisan consensus of silence on the immigration issue. The major parties' dogged attempts to keep immigration and race relations out of inter-party competition may have failed insofar as the public's interest in these issues rose and hostility against immigration did not abate. However, the Tory and Labour leadership managed to prevent the twin themes of race and immigration from influencing the general elections of 1964 and 1966 on a nationwide scale.

Throughout the 1960s, over 80 percent of the British electorate consistently agreed with the statement that "too many immigrants have been let into this country." Moreover, in the election years of 1964, 1966, and 1970, about 50 percent of those surveyed felt "very strongly" and an additional third felt "fairly strongly" about immigration. To Labour's chagrin, concern over immigration varied by class, with its working-class constituents being most likely to oppose immigration (Butler and Stokes 1974, 303). Given the high salience of the issue in voters' minds and their clear, one-sided preferences, why did im-

migration fail to make a nationwide impact on the election campaigns of the 1960s?

Indeed, Butler and Stokes considered immigration to be a topic of "high potential" in these elections. But they also showed that voters did not differentiate between the two parties when it came to this contentious issue. Prior to the elections of 1964 and 1966, the majority of those polled (41 and 53 percent, respectively) thought that there was no difference between the parties when it came to "keep[ing] immigrants out" (Butler and Stokes 1974, 306).

Internal divisions within the parties contributed to the electorate's assessment. Additionally, Labour had moved considerably into the restrictionist direction. Wilson's endorsement of the controls instituted by the 1962 act and his government's further, more stringent restrictions imposed on immigration in the White Paper of 1965 blurred any differences the parties may have had on immigration in the electorate's mind.⁹ This was quite the intended effect. According to Butler and Stokes, after the Smethwick episode "had revealed the dynamite that lay in the issue, the new Government quickly moved to a position on immigration control that was quite as tough as that of its predecessor" (1974, 304). Labour's narrow majority of three in Parliament and its justified fears that a large share of its electorate harbored deep racial prejudices made the government especially vulnerable on the race and immigration front. It thus gave in to xenophobic mass opinion by imposing harsher controls, but also passed anti-discrimination legislation, the 1965 Race Relations Act, which sought to outlaw racial or religious discrimination in public places. Lacking effective enforcement mechanisms and limited in scope—the act did not cover the realms where offenses were most egregious, employment and housing—the legislation was widely considered a cosmetic way for Labour to "maintain something of its anti-racist credentials" (Layton-Henry 1992, 50). Indeed, Labour's progressive critics contended that by linking antidiscrimination legislation to tighter, race-based immigration restrictions, the act was simply a way for the party "to appear to be slamming the door in a more civilized fashion than the Tories" (Fryer 1984, 383). While such a cynical characterization may be unfair to the intentions of Labour's liberal wing, the fact remains that in the mid-1960s, there was little to distinguish the Conservatives and Labour on matters of immigration and race relations.

The late 1960s confronted the Labour government with further challenges as East African Asians, mostly from Kenya, started migrating en masse to

Britain. Having lived in Kenya for generations, these Asians now suffered discrimination from the newly independent Kenyan government, whose pursuit of "Africanization" policies threatened the Asians' livelihoods and ultimately drove many of them to leave the country.¹⁰ Their status, "Citizens of the United Kingdom and colonies" (CUKC), as created by the 1948 Nationality Act, was not covered by the controls of the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act and thus allowed them free entry into Britain. In 1967, almost 14,000 East Asians arrived from Kenya, presenting the Labour government with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, Britain had a moral and legal obligation to take in these migrants who not only were British passport holders but also faced a hostile government at home.¹¹ On the other hand, the Wilson government was well aware that the continued admission of thousands of nonwhite migrants—13,000 had arrived in the first two months of 1968 alone—would cause hysteria among its xenophobic electorate. In the end, the government sided with the xenophobes. The 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, hastily prepared and rushed through Parliament, stripped East Asian Africans of their right to enter Britain.¹² The legislation was applauded by the public (72 percent approved of the controls), but loathed by Liberal, Labour, and Conservative politicians alike, who accused the government of strengthening, rather than appeasing, the immigration control movement by pandering to racist opinion (Hansen 2000, 153–164; Layton-Henry 1992, 78–79).

Labour's immigration controls proved to be as harsh as the restrictions sought by its Conservative predecessor. Despite Labour's tough stance in the Kenyan Asian crisis, however, the British electorate soon began to prefer the Tories as their anti-immigrant party of choice. Indeed, by the time the 1970 election season got under way, Tories clearly enjoyed a head start among the restrictionist electorate. The ascent of Enoch Powell, the Conservatives' most notorious racist to this day, the election of Margaret Thatcher as party leader, and the shift of the Labour Party to a less ambiguous, more liberal immigration and integration policy helped to bring down the era of bipartisan consensus politics.

5.4 From Powell to Thatcher: Challenging the Consensus

By the late 1960s, no amount of bipartisan collusion could have kept the issue of immigration out of the national spotlight. It seemed that restrictionist legislation did nothing to diminish the electoral salience of the issue and had

instead legitimized a political discourse that catered to racist fear-mongering. The Labour government's promotion of additional antidiscrimination legislation also failed to defuse the politicization of race. Instead, it played into the hands of racist populists, who stirred up the fears and resentment of a multi-racial Britain.

5.4.1 The "Powell Effect"

Attempting to reclaim some of its progressive standing, the Wilson government passed the 1968 Race Relations Act, which represented a substantial improvement over existing antidiscrimination legislation. Among other things, the act widened the scope of previous legislation to outlaw racial discrimination in the areas of housing and employment and created an institutional framework at the local level, backed by government funding, to ensure more effective enforcement of its provisions (Ben-Tovim 1986, 29). In addition to tightening the screws on discrimination, the secondary goal of the legislation was to absolve the national leadership from having to tackle problems having to do with race relations at the national level by erecting institutional channels, or "racial buffers," at the level of the local authorities (Katznelson 1973, 179–181; Messina 1989, 44–47). This goal was foiled initially, however, as the announcement of the new Race Relations Act provoked vocal outrage from the Conservative Party's most infamous racist propagandist, Enoch Powell.

Powell had been known for his xenophobic outbursts in the past. A member of the opposition's Shadow Cabinet, he was its most ardent advocate of immigration control and repatriation. Yet the speech that he gave in Birmingham two days before the introduction of the 1968 Race Relations Bill instantaneously catapulted him to nationwide notoriety and made him the personification of the anti-immigrant movement. In his so-called Rivers of Blood speech (see epigraph), Powell turned the logic of the antidiscrimination legislation on its head, arguing that the bill was yet another tool that the immigrant would use to intimidate and dominate the native population.

The media's incessant coverage of the hateful speech helped disseminate the xenophobe's ideas to the public, who extolled Powell with thousands of letters of support and in several opinion polls showed 67 to 82 percent in his favor. Edward Heath, the Conservative leader, was conspicuously less enthusiastic, along with other members of his Shadow Cabinet, some of

whom insisted that they would leave the Cabinet unless Powell was sacked. While Heath did end up relieving Powell from his position—amid marches to Parliament by his supporters, chanting “Keep Britain White” and “Don’t Knock Enoch”—the Tory leadership felt compelled to acknowledge the massive popularity of Powell’s anti-immigrant policies. In 1969 the party came out with a new, far more stringent strategy on immigration control, in time for the upcoming general election (Hansen 2000, 182–190; Layton-Henry 1992, 79–83).¹³

Despite Powell’s demotion from the Shadow Cabinet, the 1970 election was fought in his shadow. Even though Heath disassociated himself from Powell, the electorate identified with the latter’s xenophobic campaign. In fact, it was when Powell and his ideas came to prominence in the late 1960s that the British voter had begun to draw clear lines between the Conservatives and Labour on matters of immigration. In the summers of 1969 and 1970, majorities of 50 and 57 percent, respectively, believed that the Tories would be tougher on immigration than Labour (the corresponding figures for Labour were only 6 and 4 percent) (Butler and Stokes 1974, 306).

Powell’s ascent has widely been credited with bringing about this change in perception, which represented a drastic shift from earlier years, when the majority of the electorate could not distinguish between the two parties’ immigration control, and which also occurred at a time when the two parties’ stated positions on Commonwealth immigration and integration were essentially the same (Studlar 1978, 53). More controversially, some have attributed the Tories’ unexpected victory in the 1970 general election to Powell’s anti-immigrant campaign (Miller 1980; Studlar 1978; Wood and Powell 1970). According to Studlar, “the Conservatives gained an estimated increment of 6.7 percent in votes because many people perceived them to be the party more likely to keep immigrants out and voted in accordance with that prescription” (1978, 46).

While others contest the validity of the “Powell effect” (Hansen 2000, 191–192n), it is hard to dispute that the Conservatives had become the anti-immigration party in the public’s mind. The 1971 Immigration Act solidified this perception. This legislation essentially extended the notion of an ethnic preference, introduced in Labour’s 1968 act, by distinguishing between “patrials,” individuals with a parent or grandparent born in the UK, and “non-patrials,” Commonwealth or other citizens lacking such a connection. Patrials could enter, settle, and work in the UK without restrictions, while non-patrials

were subject to tight immigration controls. The *de facto* intention and consequence of the act was to discriminate against nonwhite immigrants who, by and large, were classified as non-patrials (Coleman 1994, 59–60; Hussain 2001, 24).

5.4.2 Between Integration and Extremism

The 1971 act showed Heath’s restrictionist side; however, the totality of his leadership suggests a more ambiguous record. In what appeared to be a repetition of the Kenyan Asian incident four years earlier, the liberal wing of the Conservative Party scored a rare victory thanks to Heath’s handling of the Ugandan Asian crisis. When President Idi Amin announced in August 1972 that he would expel all Asian CUKCs from Uganda, the British government was faced with the prospect of 50,000 British passport holders immigrating to Britain. The crisis received excessive publicity and imparted further momentum to immigration control pressure groups and anti-immigrant MPs, who relentlessly lobbied the government on behalf of their xenophobic constituents. Under considerable pressure, the Heath government—unlike its Labour predecessor—decided to admit the expellees and established the Ugandan Resettlement Board to facilitate their admission, settlement, and integration. The decision was reviled by the Tories’ right-wing membership, some of whom decided to join forces with the extremist National Front instead (Layton-Henry 1992, 85–87).

The National Front (NF) was founded in 1966 from an amalgam of several right-wing organizations and extremist splinter groups, with the aim of fighting immigration through constitutional, rather than militant, means. Its program sought a complete and immediate halt to immigration together with repatriation of nonwhite immigrants and their dependents. In the early 1970s the NF’s strategy was to appeal to right-wing Conservative voters disgruntled with Heath’s performance on the immigration issue and ready to express their disaffection at the polls.¹⁴ Later on, the party scored important electoral successes in run-down inner-city wards—traditional Labour heartlands (Husbands 1983, 7). The success of the National Front was of increasing concern and interest to the Conservative leadership, who feared that the party could split the right-wing vote at the constituency level, but who also hoped that xenophobic working-class voters would opt for the Tories if the party espoused a harder line on immigration control.

Meanwhile, politics at the national level returned to more conventional issues. Inflation, wage controls, industrial relations, housing problems, and membership in the Common Market topped the list of voter concerns in the 1974 elections (Butler and Kavanagh 1975, 273).¹⁵ Yet Labour's narrow victory brought renewed attention to Britain's ethnic minority population, whose residential concentration could translate into pivotal votes.

The Labour Party thus started courting the minority electorate more actively. On the policy side, the Labour government proposed a third Race Relations Bill. Building on previous acts, the legislation extended existing provisions by including direct as well as indirect discrimination. The latter "referred to cases where unjustifiable practices and procedures which apply to everyone have the effect of putting people of a particular racial group at a disadvantage" (Ben-Tovim 1986, 29).¹⁶ The enforcement mechanisms were strengthened considerably; individuals now had the right to take their cases to the County Court or, in employment-related cases, to the Industrial Tribunal.

The Conservative Party reacted by appealing to upper- and middle-class minorities. In response to their strategists' urging, Conservative Party managers set up an ethnic relations unit in their Central Office to convert rich segments of the minority electorate to the Tories' cause and established the Anglo-West Indian Conservative Society and the more successful Anglo-Asian Conservative Society (later called the One Nation Forum; it appealed mostly to Indian professionals, with most of its support base located in London and the South East) (Charlot 1985, 144; Rich 1998, 97). In opposition, the Conservatives also agreed to support the government-sponsored 1976 Race Relations Bill, which passed without concessions to the immigration control lobby.

Notwithstanding these moves, internal splits once again fractured the Conservatives' position on immigration and race-related matters. The Tories' new leader, Margaret Thatcher, had rejected the party's conciliatory stance toward the Race Relations Act and was only prevented from ordering wholesale opposition to the act by a threatened rebellion of more liberal-minded party members (Layton-Henry 1986, 74). In the coming years, Thatcher's leadership would show less restraint. With the election of Thatcher as their party leader, the Conservatives erased any ambiguity in the party's treatment of immigration and minority politics that may have characterized Heath's leadership.

5.5 The Rise of Thatcher and the Breakdown of the Consensus of Silence

Thatcher's rise in the Conservative Party has generally been credited with the decline of the bipartisan era of consensual politics, not only in the area of race and immigration but in the wider realm of British society, economy, and politics (Sagar 2000, 180). In a related development, the British electorate was considered by scholars and strategists to have loosened its partisan identifications by gradually abandoning class-based, ideological voting in favor of more ad hoc, issue-based voting (Studlar 1978, 47). The prospect of luring working-class voters who felt threatened by the influx of nonwhite immigrants to the Conservative cause turned the issue of immigration control into an important element of the Conservatives' electoral strategy.

5.5.1 A Hostile Climate

While both parties had made inroads in appealing to the ethnic minority electorate, a chain of unrelated events put race and racism back in the tabloid press, which was only too eager to sell more papers by tapping into its readers' xenophobia. Enoch Powell had not toned down his hostile rhetoric and continued giving anti-immigrant speeches whose themes were often taken up by right-wing Conservative MPs. The arrival of two Malawi Asian families in Britain in 1976, who, for lack of a better solution, were temporarily housed in four-star accommodations, caused a media panic, warning of an impending flood of Asian immigrants and reinforcing claims that immigrant families were deliberately abusing the state's welfare system. The same year, a series of racist attacks culminated in the murder of a ten-year-old Sikh boy by gangs of white youths in Southall (London), which caused outrage and further escalated an already tense racial climate. The frictions were only exacerbated by John Kingsley Read (leader of the extremist British National Party), who causally remarked: "One down, a million to go!"¹⁷ (Husbands 1983, 11). Amid a climate of racial strife, fear, and resentment, the National Front scored a number of electoral victories that injected the extremist movement with new lifeblood—not only within the NF but also among the anti-immigrant wing in the Tory Party.

Concerned that her party's neglect of immigration-related issues steered voters to the National Front, Thatcher committed the Tories to a rightward

course in all matters of policy, including immigration and race relations. While the Conservatives' overall program represented a remarkable shift from previous party manifestos, it took only one event to shore up the Tories' restrictionist credentials. Interviewed on national television in January 1978, Thatcher echoed the Front's credo that "people are really rather afraid that [Britain] might be swamped by people with a different culture," and that this fear would only increase hostility to the country's nonwhite population.¹⁸ Thatcher's remark had the intended large and immediate impact: the British media provided ample coverage of the "swamping interview" and the Conservatives shot ahead in the polls in the week following their leader's statements (Miller 1980, 36). Thatcher's instincts also paid off electorally; in a by-election in Ilford North in March, a poll suggested that the issue of immigration had influenced the vote choice among 29 percent of those surveyed. More portentously, of those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives, fully 48 percent stated that this issue had affected their vote.¹⁹ Although pollsters cautioned not to interpret these figures too literally, the Conservatives' victory in the 1979 general election bolstered their belief in the profitability of acknowledging, if not exploiting, the public's fear of further immigration.

The immigration issue certainly did not, however, dominate the general election. According to a Gallup poll, voters were mostly concerned about bread-and-butter issues, such as inflation, unemployment, strikes, and tax policy,²⁰ and television coverage concentrated on similar issues (Butler and Kavanagh 1980, 211). However, the Conservatives' manipulation of the issue had the intended effect of co-opting the principal platform of the National Front. Having mobilized all its resources to maximum capacity, the NF nevertheless lost votes across the board. The Conservatives, in contrast, polled well in previous NF strongholds as large pro-Conservative swings were registered in seats where the National Front's losses were particularly steep (Husbands 1983, 15). The 1979 general election has thus been typically held up as a contest in which Tories were able to achieve victory due to "decisive though subtle surges in Conservative electoral support on the basis of popular attitudes towards immigration" (Saggar 2000, 177). Thatcher understood and played on the public's fears that immigrants would claim state resources and undermine the economic position of the working class in particular. As we will see in the following chapter, in 1979 a large share of voters resented the fact that their taxes would pay for benefits that would be enjoyed by "undeserving" immigrants.

In light of the supposed pivotal function of the immigration issue for the party, Thatcher did not want to disappoint her xenophobic support base. As promised in the ambitious party manifesto, the Conservatives were determined to once and for all end immigration via extensive controls and the redefinition of British citizenship laws that had been in existence since 1948.

5.5.2 Thatcher's First Term: Restrictions and Riots

The constraints of office did hamper Thatcher's ambitious reform program somewhat, as liberals within her own party, together with a hostile opposition, balked at some of the harsher proposals contained in the manifesto.²¹ Branded as racist by the left while at the same time failing to satisfy the right wing, the Thatcher government "could not find a 'non-racist' formula for stopping New Commonwealth immigration" and thus opted for the only viable solution, linking "the right of entry and permanent abode in the United Kingdom to citizenship" (Layton-Henry 1986, 79). According to one Conservative MP, Timothy Raison, legislation was needed that would "finally . . . dispose of the lingering notion that Britain [was] somehow a haven for all those whose countries [it] once ruled" (quoted in Blake 1982, 182). The 1981 British Nationality Act achieved this goal. It created three classes of British citizenship,²² only one of which—British citizenship, covering patrials—granted settlement rights. Moreover, and most controversially, the act abandoned a pure *ius soli* regime, as children born in the UK who did not have at least one parent born or (legally) settled in the country no longer automatically acquired British citizenship.²³ The act thus shed Britain's obligations to its former colonies and brought its citizenship regime more in line with that of its European neighbors. While the act's provisions may not be racially discriminatory when compared with other countries' regimes or even when considered by themselves,²⁴ they did have the desired effect of restricting the entry of nonwhites into Britain and excluded a whole class of nonwhite immigrant children from British citizenship. Opposition politicians and immigrant groups thus denounced the act as the latest manifestation of institutionalized racism and fought for its repeal (Hansen 2000, 207–208). Conservative right-wingers, meanwhile, bemoaned that the new legislation did not sufficiently rein in immigration—belying the party's stated claim that it was the redefinition of citizenship, rather than immigration control, that had motivated the act (Hussain 2001, 31).

The 1981 Nationality Act was not the only event to stir up racial tensions during Thatcher's first term. Large-scale rioting once again upset the British public in the early 1980s. This time, the riots were initiated not by gangs of white youths but by ethnic minorities responding to what they perceived to be discriminatory police action. Relations between the police and Britain's immigrant population had been strained for decades, going back at least to the 1958 riots. In 1981 these tensions exploded into urban riots in Brixton and Liverpool. When the Brixton police force embarked on operation "Swamp 81"—organized stops and searches to detect and arrest delinquents in the black community that lasted for almost a week, resulting in 118 arrests and 75 charges—Brixton's young black residents took to the streets in violent protest. The rioting caused 226 injuries (150 of them among the police), 200 arrests, 26 burnt buildings and 20 destroyed vehicles. Three months later, violent street disturbances in Liverpool (Toxteth), also inspired by tensions between the police and the minority community, took an even larger toll: they resulted in 700 arrests, 718 injured policemen, and property damage amounting to £15 million. For the first time in Britain, tear gas was used to subdue the insurgents. The Conservative government was quick to condemn the rioters and to express sympathy and support for the police force (Hiro 1991, 88–89; Layton-Henry 1992, 129). In the aftermath of the riots, however, responses grew to be more complex and it soon became evident that the Thatcher administration had to commit to policies that would combat the causes of the riots.

Disentangling the origins of the violence proved to be highly political; explanations abounded. Labour politicians were generally of the view that social exclusion, economic deprivation, unemployment, and urban decay were the main culprits and resisted claims made by some Conservatives that the immigrant community itself was to blame. Several politicians, police officers, and a sensationalist tabloid press even presented a conspiracy theory, suggesting that the violence was not spontaneous in nature, but rather the result of a well-orchestrated plot by black insurgents. Compelled to take positive action, the Home Office commissioned an independent inquiry into the riots, carried out under Lord Scarman. The resulting report came to the conclusion that police action represented the immediate factor triggering the disturbances. However, Scarman emphasized the social context—deprivation, disadvantage, and high unemployment—as the underlying reason that allowed discriminatory police behavior to have such a shocking effect in the first place (Benyon 1986, 227–228; Scarman 1982, 36). Lord Scarman exhorted the gov-

ernment that "urgent action [was] needed if [racial disadvantage was] not to become an endemic, ineradicable disease, threatening the very survival of [British] society" (Scarman 1982, 209). While Thatcher was cutting services in almost every other area of social spending, the report's proposals, along with other high-profile findings and recommendations,²⁵ forced her government to increase funding for programs fighting racial disadvantage and to commit to spending in order to combat urban decline (Layton-Henry 1986, 90). At the same time, Thatcher dismissed charges that widespread joblessness—in part caused by her administration's stringent economic policies—could justify the riots and rejected calls by the opposition to commit to expansionary policies to cut the highest unemployment levels Britain had seen since the 1930s.²⁶

5.5.3 Immigration, Race, and the Neoliberal Project

The public discussion of the riots and their underlying causes also served to put an additional spotlight on the effects of the Thatcher government's sweeping economic program. The Conservative government came to power with an election manifesto that can only be described as a radical departure from previous government practice and ideology. In the economic realm, Thatcher committed her government to a neoliberal reform program that affirmed the primacy of market forces, viewed state intervention in the economy with deep suspicion, and, for the first time, traded in the pledge of full employment for the commitment to reduce inflation. In her government's first term in office, Thatcher acted on almost all of her election promises: her government privatized large sections of the British economy, imposed drastic cuts in public expenditures, severely circumscribed the bargaining power of trade unions, and reduced the income tax, to name but a few achievements. The only areas that were marked for budget increases were traditionally Conservative priorities: defense, law and order, and agriculture. Amid recession—unemployment had shot up from 4.9 percent to 11.6 percent after Thatcher's first two years in office—the government opted for a distributional strategy that placed the burden of economic austerity on the disadvantaged, the jobless, and the poor, while the wealthy and employed saw their economic situations improve (Hall 1986, 100–126; King 1985, 1–15).

Some have argued that the government deliberately employed "divide-and-conquer" tactics (Pierson 1994, 8), "dividing the nation into regional, racial, and age-related enclaves" (Hall 1986, 125).²⁷ According to Messina (2001) and

his review of the relevant literature, this strategy also explains the Conservatives' position on race and immigration policies. While Thatcher's neoliberal reform project delivered few tangible goods to the white working class, the Conservatives purportedly rallied the support of this constituency by distracting it from its economic decline:

At its most benign, the politics of friends and enemies, expressed transparently in the contentious politics of immigration in Britain during the 1970s and 1980s, distracted native losers of the conservative project from focusing on the primary source of their difficulties. At its most malignant, the politics of friends and enemies exacerbated latent antagonisms among the various races and social classes in the United Kingdom. At every point between these two poles the eventual success of the neoliberal project was facilitated . . . [it] was rational because at no point during its conception or implementation were the central tenets of the neoliberal project intellectually embraced by a majority of the British public. As a result, populist issues, such as immigration control [and law and order], were deliberately added to the neoliberal project mix in order to make it more palatable to the electorate, and especially to the white working class. (Messina 2001, 276-277)

If Messina's interpretation is correct, the Conservatives exploited working-class fears of a multicultural Britain not only to win elections, although this may have been the short-term objective; the manipulation of these sensitive issues also helped the Tories sell economic policies that adversely affected large segments of its xenophobic supporters. The next chapter will provide further evidence that not only class interests but also voter and party positions on race and immigration helped determine party membership.

Over the next decade, the Conservative government focused its attention on issues having to do more with law and order than with immigration specifically. The reform of the Nationality Act and the widely publicized riots of the early 1980s marked the peak that the issues of immigration and race relations would attain during Thatcher's reign. Indeed, observers agree that by the time of the 1983 general election, these matters had virtually dropped from the national political debate (Rich 1998, 98; Sagar 2000, 181). In 1983 and 1985, party members only submitted five and eleven motions on immigration to the party conferences, as concern over social services preoccupied fifty-nine motions (Coleman 1994, 61). Part of the Tory leadership's decision to refrain from politicizing race and immigration in the general elections of the 1980s was

due to the fact that going beyond existing legislation, in particular the 1981 Nationality Act, would in fact be so harsh as to violate Britain's obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights (Layton-Henry 1986, 96). In addition, thanks to their early stringency, the Conservatives "removed one of their most attractive issues from the agenda of British electoral politics . . . the traditional immigration issue effectively disappear[ed] from the radar of party competition" (Sagar 2000, 181). Rather than playing the race card, the Tories followed Labour (and the newly formed Alliance Party) in wooing the minority vote.²⁸

By the time of the next general election in 1987, only 1 percent of the British electorate thought that race ranked among the most important political issues (Rich 1998, 100). Notwithstanding these developments, observers at the time did not conclude that electorally inspired racism had subsided completely. Large parts of the British population still harbored deep racial prejudices and some thought that "in a political crisis the temptation to exploit them once again might prove irresistible" (Layton-Henry 1986, 97). This crisis would surface in the 1992 election campaign when the Conservatives were in dire need of an electoral lifeline.

5.6 Immigration in the 1990s and Beyond

The 1990s witnessed a transformation of the immigration issue in Britain. Primary mass immigration from the New Commonwealth countries had declined considerably under Thatcher's reign (see Table 5.3c and Figure 5.1), and the British population gradually accepted those immigrants already present, now settled as second- and even third-generation Britons (Sagar 2004, 18). By the late 1980s, however, a new type of immigrant started entering Britain: refugees began applying for asylum in rapidly increasing numbers. While applicants numbered 5,000 in 1988, this number had tripled a year later to 15,000 and to 30,000 in 1990.²⁹ The following decade saw applications multiply even further (see Table 5.1). The new asylum wave had at least three distinct characteristics: refugees came predominantly from developing countries in Africa and Asia; they did not resemble, in culture or color, previous asylum movements from Soviet-dominated countries and thus also had less in common with British traditions; and their arrival was often facilitated through illegal use of traffickers and false documentation (Hansen and King 2000, 400). The public's suspicion of this new stream of immigrants inspired Conservative Party strategists to play a new type of race card, branding all

asylum seekers as illegitimate and "bogus" and exacerbating public hostility further.

5.6.1 The 1992 General Election

The Conservatives' decision to make asylum a campaign theme has to be considered in the wider electoral context. The electoral outlook for the Conservatives in the early 1990s was extremely bleak. Throughout the 1980s, Tories had been successful in labeling Labour as disunited, irresponsible left-wingers who were unfit to govern. However, by the early 1990s, Conservatives had lost their edge on most issues of national concern, and under Neil Kinnock, the Labour Party suddenly appeared to be a true, electable alternative, favored by most voters to tackle the nation's problems.³⁰ Despite the party's restored credibility, when it came to immigration Labour was still considered by most voters to be "soft" on controls and too minority-friendly for its own good. The 1980s had only reinforced these perceptions as Thatcher's harder line, widespread discrimination, and racism, as well as a more assertive minority electorate, had drawn a clear line between the two major parties, with Labour activists moving the party in a more liberal direction on race issues than perhaps the leadership had desired. As Fitzgerald and Layton-Henry put it bluntly, Labour had "few further racist votes to lose and an increasingly articulate black electorate to satisfy" (1986, 102). While the new Conservative leadership of John Major represented a shift to a more modern and moderate position on issues of race and immigration, the impending defeat at the polls convinced party strategists to exploit this source of Labour's vulnerability.

Less than a year prior to the 1992 general election, Home Secretary Kenneth Baker (dubbed the "Minister for Xenophobia" by *The Independent*)³¹ embarked on a campaign to reduce drastically the number of asylum applications—which had increased almost tenfold in three years—in what was to become the most controversial legislative item before the election.³² The draconian proposals were accompanied by aggressive language by a virulent tabloid press that peaked in the final week of the campaign.³³ They provoked strong criticism from human rights organizations, clergy, the United Nations, and not least Labour, who accused Baker of playing the race card and fear-mongering for electoral purposes. John Major, while disassociating himself from extreme right-wing Tory MPs, nevertheless backed Baker's bill, insisting that good race relations required tough immigration controls. Just weeks before the election, Baker continued to stoke the public's fears in a well-

publicized speech and accused the opposition parties of "preparing a deadly political cocktail" by relaxing immigration restrictions.³⁴ Some have suggested that the Conservative political machine had carefully timed Baker's speech to sway a high number of voters who were still undecided shortly before polling day and thus attribute the Tories' unexpected victory "to a concerted appeal to the lowest political denominator" (Billig and Golding 1992, 163). Others emphasize that the Tories were only able to successfully deploy the race card by linking Labour's opposition to the asylum bill to its perceived lack of credibility and trustworthiness of years past, but still concede the possibility that the row over the asylum bill did play a significant role in the ultimate election outcome (Saggar 1993, 697). Either way, Conservatives drew their own lessons; they figured that the party's manipulation of the asylum issue was a crucial variable in their unlikely election victory and were intent on using it again (Saggar 2001, 762).

5.6.2 The 1990s: More of the Same

The politicization of the asylum question did not abate, but continued throughout the 1990s in ever shriller language. By the mid-1990s, Conservatives were again confronted with prospects of looming electoral downfall. At the same time, at least two developments spurred their anti-immigrant instincts. First, the extremist British National Party had made considerable headway at the local level; second, a strategy paper published in mid-1994 strongly suggested that Conservatives should appear tough on immigration and crime, market research having found that swing voters tended to have very right-wing attitudes on these issues (Kaye 1999, 27). As a result, Conservatives did not refrain from resorting to race-card politics in attempts to siphon votes from the BNP at the local level. The Conservative Party's Central Office, while committed to "good race relations," did not intervene in these local contests (Rich 1998, 110). At the national level, senior politicians devised a strategy on asylum that would even make the National Front proud.

The new anti-asylum campaign, backed by a ferocious tabloid press, focused on refugees' alleged abuse of Britain's welfare benefits. Home Secretary Michael Howard condemned most genuine refugees as "bogus [asylum seekers who in] most cases [were] really economic migrants seeking a better life,"³⁵ and Social Security Secretary Peter Lilley launched what the *Evening Standard* called "a blitz on benefit fraud" by depriving asylum seekers of their previously held entitlements to public housing and welfare benefits—a "fraud

industry [that cost] the taxpayer £10 billion a year.³⁶ In one of his most aggressive reforms, Lilley offered a £10 reward for post officers "every time they nab[bed] a welfare cheat."³⁷ Fearful of losing votes on the asylum issue, Tony Blair, Labour's new leader, did not want to oppose the proposals outright and thus tried to return to traditional bipartisan politics by calling for a consensus-building special Commons committee to tackle the contentious issue. Conservative hardliners rejected such a move, for their strategy counted on Blair's opposition to the bill—a strategy that the major papers recognized as a well-orchestrated exercise of agenda setting that aimed to undermine Labour's popularity with the public by exploiting its vulnerability on immigration (Kaye 1999, 30).

In the end, the asylum regulations as well as the wider electoral strategy failed to deliver the desired effect. Lilley's stringent benefits regulations and the contentious restrictions of the 1996 Asylum and Immigration Act were so severe that they encountered several judicial setbacks as attempts to deter asylum seekers by depriving them of welfare entitlements collided with the country's tradition as a modern welfare state. In several court rulings, judges concluded that the harsh measures violated national social welfare legislation, harking back to the two-hundred-year-old Poor Laws and the 1948 National Assistance Act. These defeats were only a prelude to the colossal failure of the Conservative Party at the polls in the 1997 general election. The Conservatives had miscalculated. According to Sagar, "The race card, in essence, was widely thought to amount to a crucial part of a strategy by which electoral survival, possibly victory, might be pulled from the jaws of inevitable electoral defeat" (2000, 175). However, the mainstream media did not take up the asylum issue and instead concentrated on more conventional matters, such as the health system, public expenditure, education, the constitution (that is, devolution), corruption in the Conservative government, and Britain's relationship with the European Union (Butler and Kavanagh 1997, 140). The lack of salience of the immigration and asylum issues corresponded with the public's disengagement. In 1996, these issues did not even make it on the top ten list of the public's main concerns (MORI 2001).

5.6.3 Immigration, Asylum, Race, and New Labour

New Labour's approach to immigration, asylum and race relations has been three-pronged. Prime Minister Blair has made the economic case for managed migration, adopting initiatives to recruit skilled labor to the UK. Addition-

ally, he has followed practices of previous decades, by enacting immigration controls that rival Conservative toughness,³⁸ while at the same time passing extensive legislation to combat racial discrimination.³⁹ The appointment of David Blunkett as home secretary in Labour's second term has shifted the balance somewhat. Since Blunkett's arrival, riots involving Asian youths (generally dubbed "race riots") in three northern towns in the summer of 2001, the electoral advances of the extremist BNP in Labour strongholds, as well as the attacks of September 11, 2001, have led the Home Office to replace its emphasis on tolerant multiculturalism with a focus on "core British values" (Randall 2003, 189–190). This emphasis on Britishness may be a poor interpretation of the concept of "community cohesion" developed by a Home Office research report. Following the riots in Bradford, Burnley, and Oldham, these researchers concluded that the pervasive segregation and deep polarization that divided these towns along racial lines had "ensured divisiveness and a perception of unfairness" (Home Office 2001, 11). Government funding programs, for example, fueled "resentment . . . by suggestions that one particular sector of the community was getting a disproportionate share of available monies or . . . that funding was being provided to minority ethnic groups for what some white political leaders saw as being unnecessary or trivial purposes" (Home Office 2001, 18). The report thus called for initiatives that would create more cohesive communities by fostering communication, cooperation, and respect across ethnic lines. The report's recommendations, however, fit uneasily with the public's mood and with Blunkett's leadership.⁴⁰

The Blair government's management of immigration and race relations has occurred in the context of another challenging development: the hardening of public opinion against the country's asylum regime and the incoming refugees. In contrast to its Conservative predecessors, Labour has faced an electorate that has become increasingly aware of—and hostile to—issues surrounding the immigration and settlement of asylum seekers. By the time of the 2001 general election, 19 percent of those surveyed considered race relations and immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country, putting it in fourth place, after law and order (33 percent), health (26 percent), and unemployment (23 percent) (MORI 2001). Moreover, the Conservatives and the tabloids' repeated mantra that most asylum seekers were bogus started to stick; while in 1997 only 11 percent of Britons thought that economic reasons motivated refugees to seek asylum in another country, this figure had climbed to almost a third by 1999 and to one half by 2002.⁴¹ Despite the Blair

government's various measures to curb asylum applications, by 2003, 85 percent of Britons did not think that the government "had immigration under control," 67 percent wanted laws on immigration to be tougher, and 13 percent preferred a complete ban on immigration.⁴² Race relations and immigration now competed with the National Health Service and education as the top concern of Britons in 2003 and 2004, with up to 36 percent citing it as one of the most important issues confronting the nation.⁴³

The reasons for the return of the immigration issue, now framed in terms of asylum, may be varied, but the MORI polling institute suggests that the negative media coverage has greatly contributed to the public's increased hostility toward immigration and considers the Conservatives' politicization of the issue in the 2001 election a minor factor.⁴⁴ Indeed, the Conservatives' stance was ambiguous, reflecting the party's deep divisions. While the party leadership and most MPs signed a pledge months before the election, committing themselves to refrain from exploiting racial prejudices during the campaign, some Tories still hung on to the logic of 1992, stoking anti-immigrant sentiment as an electoral strategy (Saggar 2001, 764–767). As the shadow leader of the House of Commons, Eric Forth, put it bluntly: "All this sucking up to minorities is ridiculous. There are millions of people in this country who are white, Anglo-Saxon and bigoted, and they need to be represented."⁴⁵ This view may not represent mainstream Conservatives—but it ensures that, at least in the foreseeable future, the politicization of immigration, asylum, and race will remain in the party's electoral repertoire.

5.7 Conclusion

The political treatment of immigration has taken on many guises since the process of large-scale migration started in Great Britain in the late 1940s. An attitude of *laissez-faire* and benign neglect characteristic of the early years was soon superseded by consensual appeasement politics. Deep-seated prejudices against ethnically distinct newcomers and rejection of future immigrant inflows led both Labour and Conservative governments to enact successive immigration restrictions in an effort to assuage xenophobic alarmism. At the same time, Labour governments hoped to promote tolerance and integration with the help of several Race Relations acts. Finally, since the 1960s, politicians have discovered that, under the right circumstances, fomenting anti-immigrant sentiment can yield attractive electoral rewards. The most

prominent politician associated with playing the race card was Margaret Thatcher. The xenophobic voters who feared that immigrants would usurp public resources and who helped Thatcher gain successive victories also tended to be the losers by virtue of her drastic cuts in public expenditures and overall onslaught on the welfare state.