

'Go Home?' – five years on

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On bordering, the referendum and Windrush: "It might be a dangerous moment but it is a moment when the old tricks of government cannot be repeated." Chain letter between UK researchers, June – September, 2018.



Theresa May hosts a meeting in relation to the Windrush generation, with Commonwealth leaders, Foreign Ministers and High Commissioners at 10 Downing Street, London in April, 2018. Daniel Leal-Olivas/Press Association. All rights reserved.

It is five years this summer since the Home Office commissioned a poster van reading 'In the country illegally? Go Home or Face arrest' to drive through the streets of diverse areas of London, between 22 July and 22 August 2013. The vans episode was part of a wider campaign Operation Vaken. Responding to this as researchers, we kick-started a group research project that culminated in the publication of the book *Go Home: The Politics of Immigration Controversies*.

As we wrote the final revisions to the 'Go Home?' book manuscript in June 2016, the UK really did seem at 'breaking point', but not in the way that MEP Nigel Farage's Leave poster was intended to suggest. The Brexit referendum campaign still raged, and a remain-campaigning MP was murdered in the street by a man shouting 'Britain First'.

Meeting up in the wake of the Windrush scandal and the ongoing Brexit dramas in June 2018, and looking back on the moment of the vans in 2013, we realised we had more questions than we had answers.

Were we really 'shocked' by the phrasing of the vans at the time, or merely curious and irritated that the longstanding violence of state racism had become so shameless and so crass? Has the Home Office backed off from such theatrical tactics since then? If yes, do we know why? The vans have played an iconic role in discussions of the Windrush scandal. Why? What do we think the overall approach to Home Office communications has been since the vans? What do we think is going on 'on the ground' with immigration raids? If we were doing the project from now, what would be our focus? What, if anything, might we revise in the light of later events?

We decided to carry on our conversation through the medium of a chain letter over the summer to reflect on these questions. The ensuing exchange also reflects the news events of the summer; the ongoing Brexit shambles, the World Cup, Boris Johnson's resignation and Theresa May's dancing.

Letter 1: June 6, 2018

The vans marked a ramping-up of anti-immigration rhetorics; as many noted, 'go home' was a common far-right slogan in the 1970s. The vans also represent a clear example of what Shirin Rai calls 'performance politics': whereby policies are implemented less for their effectiveness (the vans only led 11 people to leave the UK voluntarily according to the official evaluation), than for demonstrating 'toughness' to citizens who are concerned about immigration and wanted to see something being done, and generating splashy media headlines.

MP blames 'go home illegal immigrant' advertising vans for racist attack on mosque

PA/STAFF | Wednesday 4 September 2013 15:28 | 17 comments



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Screenshot: Go home or face arrest vans. Evening Standard, September 4, 2013

In using such theatrical communication tactics, the government is creating a show for narrow audiences. They are thereby defining whose concerns matter, and whose do not, and by extension who is included within or excluded from the body politic. The interviews, focus groups and street survey we carried out revealed widespread concerns within communities about how the Go Home Vans and more generally the 'hostile environment' sowed hatred and division, and made many people, including British citizens, feel they did not have the right to be in the UK.

Five years later, the vans are back in the news again. But this time, they're being mentioned in relation to the ongoing Windrush scandal. The vans have become symbols of the cruelty and the whipping up of anti-immigrant sentiment which mark the hostile environment. The newspapers are filling up with the heart-breaking stories of Paulette Wilson, Anthony Bryan, Michael Braithwaite and others. They came to the UK as British citizens many years ago and have now found themselves on the wrong side of a system in which NHS staff, landlords, teachers and others are acting as proxy border agents. The term 'hostile environment' itself has now become toxic; the newly appointed Home Secretary Sajid Javid has replaced it with the euphemistic 'compliant environment'. So why has it suddenly become unacceptable to treat people in this way, when for a long time it was not only acceptable, but also seen as an easy win.

So why has it suddenly become unacceptable to treat people in this way, when for a long time it was not only acceptable, but also seen as an easy win for governments wanting to demonstrate toughness to voters who felt that something needed to be done?

This shift happened very quickly; even as the news was breaking, PM Theresa May initially refused to discuss the situation of the Windrush generation with Caribbean diplomats. Is it because the hostile environment now touches a generation which was integral to the building of Britain's post-war welfare state (and therefore more difficult to scapegoat as scroungers or job-stealers)? Is it because (to a limited extent) the Windrush has become memorialised as part of Britain's official history – and related to this, Britain's self-perception as fair and decent? Is it because taking away the rights of British citizens is unacceptable but taking away the rights of migrant workers, international students or refugees is perceived as a necessary evil to keep immigration under control? What is crucial is how much the shift in attitudes will be limited to compensation for the Windrush generation, or how much it will involve a wider critique of the hostile environment.

Letter 2: June 19, 2018

Five years ago, we found when surveying attitudes to theatrical performances of immigration control, that attitudes were altered when actions were framed as overtly racist. While bordering, including quite violent forms, could be assessed as tolerable or even desirable, overt racism in the form of 'racial profiling' in immigration spot-checks was not endorsed.

We might read this as indicative of the complex and contradictory processes of bordering, race-making and contested nationalism running through recent British histories. Whereas not so long ago the appeal of authoritarian populism could be bolstered by the racist call for stronger borders, because people 'felt a bit swamped', recent years have seen a concerted campaign to separate discussion of immigration from that of racism. As we found, this could enable racially minoritised groups to echo anti-migrant rhetoric, despite the recent histories of migration among their own communities.

Yet something about the Windrush scandal has upset this demarcation. Everyone can see the racism. The realisation that these particular racist outcomes are a result of the intended and carefully planned impact of immigration policy has unsettled the terms of public debate, something we must see as an opportunity.



Jamaican immigrants welcomed by RAF officials from the Colonial Office after the ex-troopship HMT 'Empire Windrush' landed them at Tilbury, 22/06/48. Press Association filephoto. All rights reserved. In retrospect, the 'Go Home' vans have become a symbol of poor judgement. The revelations of the Windrush case have led to a rapidly increasing awareness of the hostile environment and its workings. Yet it is those vans that are referenced repeatedly, an iconic example of Theresa May's political signature, at once cruel and awkward, miscalculating audience response. So it is the vans that have become, retrospectively, the symbol of the hostile environment and also of its failures. Not indefinite detention, including of pregnant women and children. Not the making destitute of those with irregular status, as a deterrent to other would-be arrivals. Not the barriers to healthcare. Not the imposition of the role of border guarding on hauliers, lecturers, landlords, everyone. Instead it is the crass call to 'go home' that has stuck itself in our collective memories. Post-Windrush, debate has returned to the question of who is and who is not 'illegal'.

In our earlier work we found that participants were eager to demonstrate that they were 'deserving', unlike those undeserving illegals. Post-Windrush, debate has returned to the question of who is and who is not 'illegal' – with disappointing references to the necessity of detaining/dispossessing/deporting 'illegals', while respecting the rights of those who have 'contributed' to this country. However, as we know, the experience of the Windrush generation reveals how easily people can become 'illegal', despite their entitlement to citizenship.

Instead of assuming a stable terrain of status, value, empathy – with clear demarcations between the allegedly deserving and undeserving – it might be helpful to consider the fragility of bordering endeavours. Despite decades of increasingly rabid anti-migrant rhetoric from both mainstream and far-right parties and sections of the popular media, the Windrush scandal reveals the fragility of the consensus around bordering practices.

The failures that led to the abandonment of the children of Windrush link to other narratives underlying popular distrust of public institutions – unwieldy and opaque bureaucracies, unaccountable elites or experts who mess up the lives of ordinary people with their meddling, contradictory or meaningless instructions, impossible and incomprehensible paperwork.

Sympathy for children of Windrush could be seen as the human face of Brexit consciousness. Could this become one trigger, among others such as Grenfell, for an alternative progressive populism? Or does the authoritarian under-belly of populism make this too risky?

Letter 3: June 27, 2018

The Windrush scandal is one rooted in decades of the repositioning of this group of people from natural citizens to not only undeserving but deportable. This started shortly after they arrived, with the 1971 Immigration Act stripping away any natural claims as British Commonwealth citizens, redefining the Windrush generation as immigrants with the right to remain indefinitely but with this only officially granted to those who could pay the then high price of completing the application process. In terms of daily life, this was largely unproblematic.



Andria Marsh holding a photo of her parents, who arrived on the Windrush, after the service of thanksgiving at Westminster Abbey, London to mark the 70th anniversary, June 2018. Victoria Jones/Press Association. All rights reserved. However, with the hardening of Home Office policy over the last six years, and legal changes to immigration law that occurred around the same time and since then, all that has changed. The Windrush Generation became subject to the long arm of border control. With bodies such as the Department of Work and Pensions, the NHS, educational institutions, banks as well as employers and landlords now charged with carrying out checks on people's citizenship and right to live in the UK, now aged Caribbean men and women are being repositioned as undeserving of the privileges and opportunities afforded to British citizens – if they cannot provide documentation for every year that they've lived in the UK as proof of their long-

term residency. As invited citizens from the Caribbean, the Windrush scandal revealed the coming to life of the fascist slogan that was a common microaggression many generations of people have faced for decades: 'Go Home. Go back to where you belong'. A common microaggression many generations of people have faced for decades: 'Go Home. Go back to where you belong'.

This raises a number of issues in terms of the study we conducted five years ago.

Did we get it wrong when we said that there had been a notable hardening of Home Office policy? Has not the immigration policy, practice and legal framing in the UK of those from once colonised spaces always been at best tolerant?

Or is it the theatrics, the performance and modes of control that have become more notable, not least in the context of what Imogen Tyler refers to as the 'authoritarian turn' taking place in contemporary Europe? Was the slogan used in the government-sponsored campaign from which the study was based, the rallying cry of this resurgent form of social control?

Tyler's work speaks of deportation as a mode of control that has been increasingly used to remove those deemed deportable. Our study revealed fears among some of the children of those who came from the Caribbean (as well as from Africa and Asia) about how the increasing hostile environment would impact other groups.

This has indeed become the case. What the Windrush scandal reveals is both the normalising of the hostile environment, and the flexibility of its desirability testing and deportation regimes in at once being seen as acceptable (for some groups) and deplorable (for others). The Windrush scandal is one instance when such regimes were deemed deplorable. The inability to separate these regimes from their racialised anchoring was something that – as we saw from the UK Government very fast back-tracking – could not be sustained.

The fact that this was also the year of the seventieth anniversary of both the Empire Windrush arrival and the NHS added to both the need to protest on behalf of, and celebrate the contributions made by this group – which made the UK Government's original tough stance even more untenable. The disquiet also reveals the ways such dominant power regimes constantly work to include and exclude, using those who are included to justify in multiple ways the exclusion of others.



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Bristol Solidarity with the Windrush Generation and families

Public · Hosted by Stand Up To Racism Bristol

Screenshot: Facebook. Finally, the study we conducted revealed re/newed forms of community activism at play. People who had never been political or never marched, took to the streets and protested against the vans, the raids and the profiling being done both in London and throughout the UK. Such community-driven activism was a key element of the action against the Windrush scandal (for example, Wales Solidarity with the Windrush Generation and their Families, Bristol Solidarity with the Windrush Generation and their Families) and a UK Government petition for amnesty for anyone who was a minor that arrived in Britain between 1948 and 1971. The petition garnered 179,952 signatures, and the outcome of the subsequent debate was that “the Government is clear that an amnesty for this group is not required because these people do not require amnesty: they already have the right to remain here”.

Letter 4: July 12, 2018

Last night the English football team lost a semi-final game in the World Cup. Apparently, this was the most-watched television event in the UK since the Opening Ceremony of the London Olympic Games in 2012. In the days preceding the game, national media seemed to be entirely taken over by it – almost every guest on Radio 4’s Today programme was asked about the game, from the Colombian ambassador to (many) childhood friends of Gareth Southgate, the team’s manager. Three times in just over a week, I heard the BBC’s lead political journalists interviewing English guests with partners from other countries about which team they or their children would support in the World Cup as they watched it at home (‘will you need to be in separate rooms?’). Each time it was treated jovially and amicably but why was this reminder of the Tebbit Test even relevant in what Southgate himself described as a diverse ‘modern England’ represented by his team?



Gareth Southgate and Ashley Young after the FIFA World Cup semi-final, July 12, 2018. Elmar Kremser/ Press Association. All rights reserved. Stuart Hall wrote of a 'multicultural drift' in Britain. Rather than a deliberate policy of 'multiculturalism' (such policies incidentally never having existed in the UK at a national level, despite the frequent announcement of their failure), multicultural drift describes how it simply became normal, boring even, to live with people who looked different or came from different parts of the world. And this was represented nowhere more prominently than in the London 2012 Olympics Opening Ceremony, that televisual event even bigger than the World Cup semi-final, which featured, among other things, workers' political resistance, suffragettes, the NHS – and Empire Windrush representing the arrival of Commonwealth citizens from the Caribbean as central to British history and identity.

This triumph of spectacular conviviality and an alternative set of 'British values' (of struggle, change, and interconnection) to those announced by government as under threat, was followed only a year later by the wake-up call of the Go Home van.

Outside the level of spectacular communications, entrenchment of immigration controls in law and institutional practice and indefinite detention for administrative infractions continued. While Britain had become increasingly cosmopolitan – in its dictionary definition of 'familiar with and at ease in many different countries and cultures', it had simultaneously become more fearful, and this was embodied nowhere more clearly than in the performance of Home Secretary/Prime Minister Theresa May.

This July 2018 week's news seems emblematic of where we are, five years on from the Go Home van, two years from the Brexit vote. In Westminster and in the media establishment there is a consensus that 'the people' voted for Brexit – and in doing so, rejected both internationalism and migrants – though the result was in fact a very slender majority of what was basically a 50/50 split, and was followed by the 2017 general election which resulted in a minority government, now dependent on Northern Irish DUP votes while the Northern Irish border has emerged as one of the most intractable – and for some reason, completely unanticipated – questions about how Brexit could work.

Scotland did not vote in a majority for Brexit, and the First Minister continues to press for a further independence referendum in the light of Brexit negotiations. There is less than a year until the UK leaves the EU and apparent constitutional chaos, as only this week did 'a plan' emerge, immediately followed by the resignation of both the Brexit Secretary and the Foreign Secretary. But never mind, perhaps football would be 'coming home' (to England, whose media often forgets it is only part of the Britain being riven by Brexit). What seems to be 'coming home,' aside from the defeated team, are the reverberations of Britain's colonial history.

What seems to be 'coming home,' aside from the defeated team, are the reverberations of Britain's colonial history. This can be understood as what Paul Gilroy has termed 'postcolonial melancholia,' the failure to properly contemplate the real history of empire's cruelties and loss. The result is a persistent illusion that 'greatness' is a birthright of 'the British' – and when this greatness is not delivered for the majority of the population, a feeling of being cheated which tends to be directed at the 'un-British'. In recent politics, this has been channelled into the problems of capitalist scarcity and competition, re-enforced by austerity policies, being blamed on the shadowy figure of 'immigration'. This is also a gendered melancholia, one expression of it exploding after World Cup defeats in increased domestic violence.

It is notable that in his resignation letter, the Foreign Secretary claimed that the current Brexit 'plan' means the UK is 'truly headed for the status of colony – and many will struggle to see the economic or political advantages of that particular arrangement'. No irony was signalled from this man whose own plans for post-Brexit Britain apparently included an 'Empire 2.0' in which Britain would be 're-entering the Commonwealth'. There is no recognition from this self-styled 'historian' that Britain's prosperity has been entwined with that of Commonwealth countries and their populations since British forces invaded and colonised swathes of the world. Britain (not just the English football team) would not exist in its current form without the violent histories of colonisation and resistance to it. But the British Empire is no more – and it is not for the former Foreign Secretary to grant permission to 'enter' or 'leave' those territories; Britain has to get used to asking for permission to enter others' homes, rather than simply taking away others' permission to enter Britain.

The failure to re-imagine the various meanings of 'home' and how home might be shared rather than owned or controlled, lie at the heart of the politics of contradictory nationalism which are now playing out.

Today, the ubiquitous white flag crossed with blood-red is being forlornly removed from cars, shops, houses and bodies; the over-excited news anchors might remember that there is more to Britain than England (never mind football); the replacement Brexit and Foreign Secretaries will have to resume negotiating a reality in which 'the public' apparently want to control where non-Brits call home but maintain their own rights to free movement and trade. The World Cup will remain out in The World. And the idea of Britain as home seems increasingly narrow for all of us who live here and make it home, including those many of us who thought that being part of the world was a good thing, that it was possible to make a home without bricking up all the doors, and that part of doing so might lie in recognising and understanding both the mistakes and triumphs of the past.

Letter 5: September 5, 2018

Picking up this chain letter at the end of the summer, the World Cup feels like a long time ago. A brief moment of national euphoria (for some) before a return to the realities of pre-Brexit Britain.

I am struck by the comment at the end of the last entry that 'the idea of Britain as home seems increasingly narrow for all of us who live here and make it home'. The Go Home vans were both a symbol and a mechanism of this contraction. This has made me think about the question, if we were doing the project now, what would be our focus? 'The idea of Britain as home seems increasingly narrow for all of us who live here and make it home'

It does seem that there has been a move away from the spectacular performance politics of the vans and the #immigrationoffender Home Office tweets, but the heightened visibility of everyday bordering continues.

I have seen signs in hospital waiting rooms this summer about NHS treatment not being available for everyone. The creeping normality of these kinds of signs in public and the interactions that go with them between doctor and patient, landlord and potential tenant, university administrator and student continue to unfold. The hostile environment becoming everyday is different to the jolt produced by the vans. As an earlier post on this chain letter pointed out, in our research we found that people were largely accepting of these everyday forms of bordering (as opposed to those they saw as being based on racial profiling). Given the shift in the centre ground of politics highlighted in the last entry on this letter, perhaps the Home Office are just running with this seemingly more palatable bordering and the theatrics encapsulated by the vans are no longer necessary or useful for them?

Whether the Windrush scandal and the exposure of the violence of this more 'quiet' bordering means a rupture in public consent remains to be seen, but public anger certainly seems to have lessened over the summer since we began this exchange. It would be interesting to repeat our survey and find out how people feel about these various forms of bordering, five years on, after the referendum and Windrush. Meanwhile, the language of 'go home' continues to feature in many reports of racist and xenophobic abuse, post-referendum. And, Theresa May, who was the face of the hostile environment for so long, now appears to be trying to soften her image through displays of awkward dancing on overseas visits. Where to even start?

If we were to pick up the project, reviving the local approach that we used would be vital. One of the strengths of our research was the ability to move from the national scale, through the survey, to close-up local case studies, through the interviews and focus groups that we conducted. So many pronouncements have been made on the level of the nation about living in these anti-immigration and post-referendum times, but to know how this impacts on people living in particular places, their sense of who belongs, their stability or precarity, taking a finely grained qualitative approach would be valuable. We formed partnerships with organisations working with those most impacted by the hostile

environment. How have five more years of anti-immigration messaging impacted on the people they work with and indeed how are those groups faring after five more years of austerity? What do the policy makers that we spoke to think about the changing tactics of the Home Office over this five-year period?

Letter 6: September 7, 2018

The film that we commissioned for our project in March 2015 opens with a group of energetic and noisy women with megaphones. The women, facilitated by Southall Black Sisters (one of our civil society partners in the research), are disrupting an immigration raid in Southall in August 2013. What has always struck us about this clip is the chant, 'Here to stay. Here to fight'. The same chant was used in pro-migrant campaigns in the 1970s and 80s and its use to challenge an Operation Vaken raid condenses over four decades of anti-racist feminist activism. Something about the recursive nature of racism, as well as anti-racist activism, is uncanny about this part of the film. Are we stuck in a political groundhog day? Have things got any better? Well, yes and no.

In the beginning of 2018, we have started to see a more clandestine leaching of the hostile environment culture that we began to track five years ago, this time, through the illegalising of Britain's cohort of post-war Caribbean labour migrants. An insidious feature of the diffuse violence of contemporary border regimes is that border strategies, tactics and devices are not simply anticipatory and proactive. As the public are now seeing, borders can also unfurl backwards in time. To put it another way, you can stay in place and through the on-going recalibration and whittling away of citizenship and residency rights, the border can move underneath you. In this case, through what Will Davies has called the 'weaponising of paperwork'. As we saw in 2013, some of complex border affects of hostile environment policies manifest in a creeping domesticated securitisation that can affect different minoritised groups. In an interview that Hannah Jones did with a community worker in Bradford, she was told that third generation citizens of migrant heritage were asking 'Are we going to be allowed to stay here?'

Although it is relatively easy to feel pessimistic about the normalisation of hostile environment policies, the recent Windrush cases have made visible the debilitating and slow-moving effects of British border regimes and their entanglement with racism. Dexter Bristol, who came to the UK aged eight in 1968 to join his mother, collapsed and died in the street from heart failure in March 2018. His mother believed his death was caused by the extreme stress he had been under for more than a year in trying to prove his immigration status. Bristol was sacked from his cleaning job in 2017 because he did not have a passport. He was not able to claim the benefits that he was entitled to because officials did not believe he was in the UK legally. He did not go to the NHS when his health started to deteriorate because he believed he had no right to health care. He did not go to the NHS when his health started to deteriorate because he believed he had no right to health care.

The coroner's inquest into Bristol's death in August 2018 refused to make the Home Office an 'interested party' in the hearing, recording a verdict of death by natural causes. 'He was prepared to fight but as the months went on and he was required to find more

evidence it became very difficult' immigration lawyer Jacqueline McKenzie said, 'and we saw him just decline into a shadow of himself.' For Sentina Bristol, Dexter's mother, there was little doubt about the causes of her son's death, 'This is racism. He was the victim of their policies, and it is a tragedy. I'm hoping no one will go through what I'm going through now'.

As we have pointed out, a key tenet of the political debate surrounding Operation Vaken included attempts by the government to separate out its hostile environment approach from racism. 'It is not racist to ask people who are here illegally to leave Britain. It is merely telling them to comply with the law.' [Mark Harper](#), then immigration minister wrote in the Daily Mail, in reference to Vaken. 'By no stretch of the rational imagination can it be described as "racist".' As [Bella Sankey](#) has countered, 'When today's Government barks "go home", the phrase is not an abstract one... it's rooted in the popular fascism of a darker period we hoped was behind us.'

The legacy of this 'darker period' of British history has become more visible with the increase in anti-migrant feelings and racism following the June 2016 Brexit vote. In the month after Brexit, there was [sharp rise](#) in 'racially or religiously aggravated' hate crime. As events have unfolded in the past five years there has been more dialogue about the relationships between xenophobia and racism and longer histories of British colonialism, English nationalism and the racialisation of distinctions between the 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor.

It is significant that much of the hostility whipped up by Vaken and Brexit has been on the terrain of health and welfare, with migrants being seen as a drain on national resources and a particular threat to the white working class. [Robbie Shilliam](#) has named these discursive associations as a 'nationalisation of entitlement sentiment', connected to 'the historic dissolution, via the 1948 National Assistance Act, of the formal distinction between the deserving and underserving poor.' He goes on to suggest that, 'at the same time this distinction was informally racialized so as to place the homogenised deserving "[white working class](#)" in opposition to undeserving "immigrants" from the "new" (i.e. majority coloured) Commonwealth countries.' 'We are here because you were there.... We are the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea.'

As well as challenging longstanding omissions in thinking race and class together, these types of analysis are reinvigorating discussions of migration. And in a variety of settings. Labour MP David Lammy's fiery speeches on the devastating impact of the hostile environment on Windrush residents, mobilised Stuart Hall's wide-ranging contributions on the connections between Caribbean migration and colonialism. 'We are here because you were there.... We are the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea', Lammy [tweeted](#).

Perhaps the recursive is a vital and necessary part of political process of moving forward.

Letter 7: September 11, 2018

One rarely discussed aspect of response to the vans is the suggestion that they aped emotions and experiences unknown to the poster's authors. Everything we learned about the escapade seems to confirm this view – it was most of all an attempt to both anticipate

and echo a particular popular racist voice. To speak as if the elite is one with a racist populace. And in this, it was as convincing as Dick Van Dyke's Disney cockneyisms and read as such, a mockingly disrespectful ventriloquism.

Many British people may have wished that their neighbours would 'go home' and the aftermath of the EU referendum confirms this, including in the various attacks on Britons of colour. But that is another thing from having the rich and powerful put on their common voice to affirm 'we 'ate jonny foreigner, just like you oiks'.



Theresa May dances as she arrives on stage to make her keynote speech at the Conservative Party annual conference, October, 2018. Stefan Rousseau/Press Association. All rights reserved. Farage might have got away with this, just, as a marginal figure able to laugh at his own gaffes in the pub, but the instruments of the state cannot. If we accept that Brexit reveals not only the entrenched xenophobia of half of the electorate but also the exasperation with and distrust of big government, bureaucratic mechanisms and the accountability of supposedly democratic institutions, then the vans carry out their ill-fated local tours in the moment just before this and the response to them anticipates popular distrust in all and any pronouncements of the state.

We might consider the vans as one of the last moments when centrists believed that the rhetoric of the far right could be tamed and repurposed for their own electoral advantage. What has come since then is undoubtedly uncertain and potentially dangerous – giving greater space and attention to 'real' fascists – but it is also a crumbling of the practices and habits of violent and violating state racism that were shared by centre-left and centre-right. Since the Windrush scandal, this has not been sustainable. Tory ministers have appeared on television to decry the terrible tragedy of these events, as if their government played no role in manufacturing these outcomes. Former ministers from the Blair era have become scathing critics of indefinite detention, as if such practices were not introduced under their watch. Suddenly, everyone wants to say how much they value Britain's black communities and their contribution, much to the amusement of older members of the black community. Former ministers from the Blair era have become scathing critics of indefinite detention, as if such practices were not introduced under their watch. The events of the last five years have whipped back the curtain, revealing the mechanisms and

impacts of state racism for all to see. The consequence is to open political opportunities for both racists and anti-racists and to make the disguised racisms of the time just past appear opportunistic or inauthentic or just plain racist or, equally, perhaps not racist enough. It might be a dangerous moment but it is a moment when the old tricks of government cannot be repeated. And the undecidedness and uncertainty of now this minute demands that we adjust our responses and stretch to see the opportunities and also the extent of the new dangers.

Letter 8: September 11, 2018

With the clock ticking on Britain's membership of the European Union, Boris Johnson hurling out Islamophobic metaphors on a weekly basis in pursuit of Theresa May's job, Tommy Robinson's profile resurgent and constant news of nationalist successes from the continent, there are plenty of reasons to fear that the 'Go Home' vans of summer 2013 presaged a darker political future.

The letters above make for largely sombre reading, eloquently articulating the fears and anxieties of the present juncture. But there remains Raymond Williams's famous question of how we 'make hope possible, rather than despair convincing.' The answer may lie largely in the activism that the previous letters describe, and with which our project engaged. But what about the public and political mood more broadly? What signs are there that the fixation on immigration and 'illegals' is waning?

While none of this is cause for complacency or rejoicing, there are glimmering signs that the explosive force of the Brexit referendum (which might yet result in economic depression and the break-up of the United Kingdom) represented a peak of nationalist resentment, rather than an accelerator of it.

As Rob Ford has explored in [numerous blogposts](#), there is evidence in the British Social Attitudes surveys and elsewhere that the British public has become more sympathetic to immigration since June 2016, and that this isn't simply because they believe there will be less of it or more control over it. The demographic trends are also pointing in this direction in the long-term, as younger generations favour a more open and tolerant society, not to mention a far more left-wing political economy.

While Leave's referendum victory may be the most decisive event of Britain's post-war history, it was not (at least in terms of probability) the most surprising one of the past five years. Between March and June 2017, the Labour Party rose from around 28% in the opinion polls to achieve 40% - an unprecedented turn around, that [may well have been facilitated by](#) regulations on broadcasting impartiality during election seasons. Crucially, this involved turning around strongly pro-Leave regions (such as the Welsh Valleys), who had been drifting towards Tories, but without having to 'talk tough' on immigration in the process. Astonishingly, Corbyn publicly linked the two terror attacks during the election campaign season to Britain's foreign policy (a kind of truth that was presumed politically suicidal), only for polls to show considerable public support for his analysis.

The second letter in this chain asks if the Windrush scandal, combined with the Grenfell Tower tragedy, might become 'one trigger... for an alternative progressive populism'. Certainly, these harrowing news stories have created the personalised biographies, family stories and affective communities that are so powerful in shaping public sympathies. The risk remains that by particularising 'immigration' as an issue, the division between the 'deserving' and the 'undeserving' immigrant becomes entrenched, as if Windrush families and recent Syrian refugees are completely different political issues.

But I think we can at least say that if some equivalent to the 'Go Home' vans was being discussed in a Home Office communications meeting tomorrow, that the risk of offending public sensibilities would now be too great for the idea to go any further. I agree with the diagnosis above that the vans have become a 'symbol of poor judgement'. This is marginal progress, but we should appreciate the fact that the state has lost confidence in a resolutely anti-immigration rhetoric. Meanwhile, Paul Dacre will step down as editor of *The Daily Mail* in November, and who knows what political and cultural possibilities might be opened up as a result? Paul Dacre will step down as editor of *The Daily Mail* in November, and who knows what political and cultural possibilities might be opened up as a result?

When we began the project five years ago, we did so out of horror that a Whitehall department had signed off on an experiment that repeated the rhetoric of the far right. As we looked more closely at that department, signs emerged of a bureaucratic culture that was more concerned with fire-fighting, reputation management and tracking public attitudes than it was in dealing in facts. In that sense, we caught a glimmer of a style of politics that has spread rapidly in the years since.

But to some extent, the upheavals of Brexit and Windrush serve as a reality check, and the quest to *appear* tough, *perform* toughness cannot carry on being ratcheted up indefinitely, especially as the real injuries of the 'hostile environment' become plain.

The anxiety is that, *beyond* the limits of the state and newspapers, via online communication channels that have been too often overlooked, the actual far right has been thriving these past five years. Hope may lie in a nation that comes to terms with itself at long last – the 'coming home' of Britain's colonial history that is mentioned in the fourth letter. The threat will then lie with those who are enraged by that home-coming, and insist that others should sooner 'go home' before *Britain* accepts any guilt. The slogan 'go home!' will have migrated back to its original context of brick walls, toilet doors and bus-shelters.

About the authors

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Subjects



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