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Oxford Research Trip – A report for the Society for the Study of Labour History

The political response towards Commonwealth immigration to Britain has been the subject of considerable historical debate. Initially, when the first Commonwealth Immigrants Act was introduced in 1962 the Labour Party opposed it believing restrictions to be both unnecessary and racially motivated. However, within a short period of time they had conceded the need for controls and went on to increase restrictions twice during their time in government between 1964 and 1970. The aim of my research is to analyse the development of the Labour Party's immigration policy c.1958-c.1968 to establish what led them to move away from opposing restrictions in 1962, to implementing further controls in 1965 and 1968. The bursary provided by the SSLH allowed me to carry out key research at the Bodleian Libraries in Oxford, where I spent time looking at the papers of Harold Wilson and James Callaghan. Consulting the papers of key figures involved in the internal Labour Party and Cabinet policymaking process is a fundamental part of understanding their changing immigration policy.

My research at the Bodleian took place over four full days. Sadly, due to a lack of resources the James Callaghan papers remain un-catalogued. Trying to identify relevant material in un-catalogued collections is a time consuming process, particularly in this case as the archive contained over 350 boxes. Prior to my visit I was sent a basic box list of the collection to try and pick potentially useful boxes. During his time as Home Secretary, Callaghan played a leading role in the introduction of the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act. I had hoped to find information about his reasons for supporting it, as well as any discussions he had with Cabinet members, to try and understand the rationale behind the legislation. Unfortunately, I found very little information of this nature. I did however find a number of interesting documents relating to the aftermath of the legislation. A picture emerged of the continuous pressure put on the Labour Party to reduce immigration further, even after they introduced the 1968 Act. Enoch Powell's anti-immigration rhetoric at this time encouraged public demands for further controls. In a number of speeches I came across during my research Callaghan repeatedly defended Labour's policy and tried to discredit Powell's views in a bid to reassure the public that adequate steps had been taken to reduce immigration levels. These are important contextual documents for my research as they demonstrate that despite the best efforts of the Labour Party to eradicate immigration as an election issue by implementing tougher restrictions, it remained a political issue and cause for public concern.

In comparison, the Wilson papers were easier to navigate and identifying potentially useful material was much quicker. As Prime Minister when both the 1965 White Paper on

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Immigration and the 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act were introduced, Harold Wilson is often viewed as being the architect behind Labour's changing stance on immigration. Consulting his papers to try and establish what influenced this policy change was therefore an essential part of my research. His papers contained a wide range of documents including letters, campaign literature, government memos and policy statements to public opinion surveys. The surveys were particularly helpful allowing me to chart the development of public opinion on immigration during the period 1962-1968 to establish how it changed in this time. My research also revealed a number of interesting documents concerning immigration at the 1964 election. Of particular interest were a number of letters sent to Wilson after the shock result at Smethwick which saw Labour candidate Patrick Gordon Walker defeated by his Conservative opponent, Peter Griffiths, following his strongly anti-immigrant campaign. The letters criticised Wilson and his party for failing to support controls or acknowledge public grievances on immigration. These letters provide additional support for a key element of my research which suggests Labour's changing immigration policy was partly influenced by a fear of losing votes in areas with high immigrant populations if they did not act.

Ultimately, the generous bursary provided by the SSLH has enabled me to undertake invaluable research which will play a central role in the analysis of Labour's changing immigration policies in this period. Both the Callaghan and Wilson papers not only supported and enhanced research I have already carried out but also provided me with new insights into the immigration issue and how it was handled by the Labour Party in this period.

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