

OPINION

No non-whites please, we are British

Subhash Chopra*



Some years ago, one of London's West End theatres staged a long running play titled "No Sex Please, We Are British." Currently on the much larger political stage a different play of sorts is enjoying a great run with both the major political parties trying to outbid each other by staging their own variations on the same theme. The two variations can be quite confusing as they both seem to be saying : "No Foreigners Please, We Are British." But to most visitors even that can be confusing.

For in reality on a closer view, the new play ought to be titled "No non-whites Please, We Are British."

The underlying theme of this

highly popular nationwide play is immigration and obviously aimed at keepings certain foreigners out. But who are these foreigners? Not the newcomers coming from Poland, Czech republic or Slovakia, or Baltic nations like Latvia or Lithuania, the new member countries of the European Union. Though foreigners in terms of language and custom, they are not classified as such because they belong to the newly expanded European Union club.

Britain and France, who for long have regarded the knowledge of English or French as a special asset or welcome criterion, have waived that requirement for immigration from eastern Europe.

The eastern European migrants have been pouring into Britain at a

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fairly fast pace, with nearly 750,000 arrivals over the past four years, averaging some 180,000 a year. The total inflow of non-EU (coloured) immigrants from India, Pakistan, other Asian and African and Caribbean countries last year stood at a mere 12,000 – one-fifteenth or about 6.5 per cent of those arriving from EU countries. Yet the political debate in the country over the same period and even earlier has been increasingly focused on non-white immigrants, with both Labour and Tory parties studiously avoiding the non-white colour code in the debate.

What a masterful camouflage and obfuscation of the real issue by the entire British establishment!

Both major parties at their annual conferences in the autumn beat about bush by renewing their pledge to root out any vestiges of racial discrimination while simultaneously closing all bolt holes to shut out all “immigrants” who have no specialist skills or assets to benefit the British economy. Facing the barrage of Tory party and press criticism on the issue, Prime Minister Gordon Brown was driven to make the “Jobs for the British” policy announcement.

Echoing, as it were, his master’s

voice, Richard Stagg, the British High Commissioner in India in an article in the *Hindustan Times* sought to portray plans for new visa rules, some of them still in consultation stage, as measures to streamline the immigration system and getting the “balance right.”

After paying the diplomatic lip service to the contribution of the Indian community’s to British life, the envoy trotted out the innovations in the immigration system. Introduction of biometric visas requiring finger printing and digital photographs, simplification of some 80 categories of visas into just five classes under a new points based system are all welcome measures. So is a likely insistence on a reasonable knowledge of English language for intending immigrants as it would make life easier for the newcomers and the host community.

But what is not welcome is the prohibitive 1,000 pound cash bond from sponsors of visitors or guests. Apparently, the cash bond, which would be forfeited if the visitor failed to leave Britain by the visa expiry date, is to deter illegal overstayers. Another move to reduce the period of stay from six months to three months for relatives, tourists and other visitors

is equally unwelcome as it would just convey the message that visitors from Asia, Africa and the Caribbean are not very welcome. One wonders whether such rules could ever apply to visitors from the USA, Canada or Australia. A grandfather clause or reciprocity rules have always been wheeled in to circumvent the so-called non-discriminatory rules.

But the envoy, in line with the media scare stories back home, let the cat out of the bag when he pointed out that “fewer than half the children at school in London speak English at home as their first language.” That is the “imbalance” that is worrying the party leaders and demagogues back home where stories about the changing face of British cities are increasingly hogging the limelight and creating a fear psychosis among the ordinary voter at the next elections whenever they are held.

Yes, the changing composition of some of the schools as well as cities like Leicester, Luton, Slough and parts of London is a reality. The proportion of Leicester’s white population has fallen from 70.1 percent in 1991 to 59.9 per cent today and is projected to fall further to 52.2 per cent by 2016, according to a

Barrow Cadbury Trust study quoted, without any touch of scare, by London’s Guardian newspaper. Similarly the proportion of Greater London’s white population is predicted to fall from the current 67.5 per cent to 60.7 per cent by 2026.

Rather than a cause for worry, it is a tribute to Britain’s “plurality” that so many people from so many climes want to live in the country. London like New York and other world metropolises is a truly international city and proudly so. But bowing to the xenophobic, racial lobby, the two major parties are united in keeping the numbers of black or coloured immigrants down to a bare minimum with their strategy of allowing in only the highly skilled professionals like doctors, engineers or information technologists, besides the richer business men who are always welcome. For the ordinary Asian, Afro-Caribbean Black or coloured folks, there is no more room at the British inn.

So far as institutions like schools are concerned, the issue calls for greater investment and effort to teach English, not whipping up scare stories. Children from Asian or Afro-Caribbean backgrounds will continue to speak in their mother tongue at home for a generation or

two, quite like their Polish, French or other EU counterparts. That is the nature of immigration and settlement where passage of time takes care of the teething troubles.

The debate in Britain, in reality, is focused on the handful of asylum seekers and illegal immigrants, as leaders and media turn a blind eye to the onrush of immigrants from the European Union countries who cannot be turned away because of EU membership right to free travel and work anywhere in the Union territories. The immediate "imbalance" is largely caused by the recent arrivals from the EU and not by Afro-Asian or coloured settlers, asylum seekers and illegal immigrants. British workers are loudly crying over their wages being driven down by "cheap" labour from Poland and elsewhere in the EU. But political leaders and large sections of the press are deflecting the spotlight on to comparatively much smaller numbers of

immigrants, legal and illegal, of a different hue.

Deport the illegal immigrants by all means. It might help on the margins but it will not tackle the major challenge posed by the unrestricted entry of workers from the EU. The EU arrivals may help keep Britain white and even increase attendance in Catholic churches across the country but let there be no hiding the real story. As a sovereign nation Britain has the right to stop black and coloured immigrants, but let it be openly declared so. No amount of casuistry or diplomacy can hide the colour of the real immigration debate.

Ironically a Christmas Eve message from the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowen Williams, published in *The Times* of London said: "The door of Jesus' stable is open and anyone came in and sit down." Not so the stable door of Fortress Britain! ■