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## The history of migration to the UK

### Summary

1. There was relatively little migration into Britain (other than from Ireland) until New Commonwealth immigration began in the 1950s. Legislation in the early 1970s was intended to reduce this to a trickle. In practice it continued at the rate of half a million acceptances for settlement every decade [1]. This was counterbalanced by emigration until 1983. The net inflow has grown steadily since then. The total net immigration from outside the E.U. has now reached a rate equivalent to about 1.5 million every decade.

### Detail

2. There has always been some migration to and from Britain. While people from many countries have lived in Britain for centuries, numbers have generally been small. The historical episodes that are well known - the Huguenots of the 16th and 17th century, the Ashkenazi Jews of the late 19th century and others - have been demographically relatively insignificant. Until the 1950s there was no really substantial immigration into Britain, except from Ireland, for nearly 1000 years (see paras 9 - 11 below).

3. Commonwealth immigration effectively began in the 1950s but the effect on total population was counterbalanced until 1983 by the emigration of British citizens.

4. Commonwealth citizens were not subject to immigration control until 1st July, 1962 but the Home Office estimate is that the net intake from January 1955 to June 1962 was about 472,000 [2]. In the 1960s they were being admitted at the rate of about 75,000 per year.

5. Racial tension led to successively tighter restrictions on immigration, beginning in 1962. Controls on Commonwealth citizens were brought into line with those already applying to all foreigners. By 1971 it was believed that primary immigration had been brought to an end. (The ethnic population of Britain at that time was about 1 million) Many argued that immigration policy had (implicitly) been "settled" on the following lines: [3]

- no more primary immigration, but some family reunion
- no major changes or much public discussion of the immigration system
- no encouragement of repatriation of migrants or their descendants
- the promotion of equal opportunities and legislation against discrimination to facilitate integration.

6. However, in practice, there was only a modest reduction in Commonwealth immigration. The average number of acceptances for settlement in the 1970s was 72,000 per year, in the 1980s and early 1990s it was about 54,000 per year. Since 1996 that figure has nearly doubled to 97,000 in 1999 [4]. The total since 1963 is nearly 2.5 million.

7. The New Commonwealth ethnic population (including children) was negligible in 1950. In 1971 it was about 1 million. It is now about 4 million or 7% of the population of England and Wales. It will, at least for a period, grow rapidly as a result of natural increase and continuous immigration. Births to all mothers born outside the UK were 14% of the total in 1999. Government projections suggest that a further 1.5 million immigrants will arrive each decade from outside the EU [5].

8. Accession to the European Union has, to some extent, made Britain part of the European labour market. Migration to or from the E.U. has fluctuated from a net out flow of 11,000 in 1993 to a net inflow of 24,000 in 1998.

Previous history: A nation of immigrants?

9. The former Minister for Immigration recently described Britain as a "nation of immigrants". It is very hard to see what she meant. Since the Norman conquest (1066) there has been relatively little immigration into Britain, perhaps because we are an island nation. English population history is known better than almost any other in the world. And research into surnames and genes confirms that our population has been little affected by immigration for nearly a thousand years. The US State Department website notes that "Contemporary Britons are descended mainly from the varied ethnic stocks that settled there before the 11th century." Instead, Britain has been a country of considerable emigration since the 17th century.

10. Some ebb and flow of migrants is a perfectly normal part of history but, in Britain, major episodes are rare:

- A small number of Flemings came over to work in the textile industry in the middle ages.
- Huguenots emigrated to England in two waves. The first wave was in 1572, following the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris that year. The second, a much larger wave, began in 1685 following the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes in that year. In all, by 1700, approximately 50,000 Huguenots had settled in England. They made up at most, 1% of England's overall population in 1700 of between 5-6 million.[6]
- A similar number of Jews arrived in the late 19th century, joining a population that had then reached about 30 million.
  - In the 1930s about 70,000 refugees from Nazi Germany were admitted to the UK.
- After the second world war a considerable number of East Europeans settled in Britain rather than face Russian occupation. about 80,000 displaced persons were recruited for temporary work.

11. The Irish hardly come into the same category since they were part of Great Britain for centuries. The Irish comprised 3% of the British population in the 1850s, in the aftermath of the potato famine. In the 20th century, the number born in Ireland peaked at 900,000 in the 1970s (2% of the total population). Their number is now falling.

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## NOTES

- [1] Control of Immigration: statistics UK 1999: table 6.6
- [2] Control of immigration: statistics UK 1999: table 6.6 footnote 1
- [3] Home Office RDS Occasional paper No 67 p.7
- [4] as for note 1 table 6.6
- [5] as for note 3: Figure 3.5
- [6] Mayerlene Frow, ***Roots of the Future: Ethnic Diversity in the Making of Britain*** (London: CRE, 1996), p.13