# AMELIA GENTLEMAN INTERVIEW

Key:
EHdK: Dr Eve Hayes de Kalaf (Interviewer)
AG: Amelia Gentleman (Respondent)

Date/Location:
31st July 2023. Senate House, London, United Kingdom.

**EHdK 00:01 I'm here with Amelia Gentleman, the Guardian journalist who broke the Windrush scandal story. Amelia, thank you so much for agreeing to this interview today.**

AG 00:13 Thank you for asking me.

**EHdK 00:15 I really enjoyed reading your book and learning about your investigative journalism and the work that went into bringing the Windrush scandal to light. I wondered if we could start by learning about you as a journalist and as a person? Could you tell me how you got into journalism and how you became interested in investigating and learning about this particular case?**

AG 00:53 I've been a journalist since I graduated from university. I think I'm quite unusual in that I always knew that's what I really wanted to do. I was a school newspaper editor, and I did a bit of journalism as a student. It was quite clear that was what I wanted to do afterwards. I started working as a trainee with the Press Association which is a news agency based in London. Then, quite quickly, I moved to The Guardian where I've stayed more or less ever since. I did leave for a while and worked for the New York Times and The Herald Tribune in India. But most of the time, since I graduated, I've been working for The Guardian. So, I think it's coming up for 20 years in two batches. I think that's kind of relevant to the work that I did on Windrush because I was already quite an experienced journalist when this fell onto my desk. I think that really helped because it is an incredibly complicated issue. It's not an issue that I was at all an expert in. I was new to the history of immigration to the UK. But I think it helped that I had been working for quite a bit of time. The first bit of my career I spent working abroad. I studied Russian and History at university. I was really keen to work in Moscow. I spent a couple of years working there when Putin came to power and then I spent a couple of years working in France for The Guardian, a couple of years as a deputy foreign editor when 9/11 happened and then some time in India. So, I've worked around the place quite a bit.

**EHdK 03:23 Where did your interest in immigration policy, and particularly looking at the impact of policy, government policy and people, where did that start?**

AG 03:33 When I came back to the UK, after being based in India, I didn't really have a very clear job. In fact, I didn't have a job at all to go to at The Guardian. I had quite a difficult couple of years trying to get a job back. During that period, I was not exactly freelance but on a words contract which meant I only got paid for the words that I wrote. In retrospect, it was quite a good thing, I think, because it meant that I didn't have anybody really telling me what to do. I had to come up with interesting things to write about and persuade editors that they should let me write about them. One of the things I really was interested in doing was writing about government policy of all sorts but looking at the way that it played out on the individuals it was kind of designed for to see whether or not it was working in the way that it was meant to work. I didn't do much political reporting in Westminster. It was much more trying to get out of London and talk to people. I spent a lot of time looking at welfare reform and changes to the benefits system particularly around disability benefits which were a huge part of the reforms that the coalition government brought in after 2010. Then I began to look a bit more at immigration when we saw the crisis in Calais around 2016 when we saw the huge migration across Europe, but I was particularly interested in talking to people who were stuck in Calais at that time when the numbers were soaring to around 10,000 or 12,000 people.

**EHdK 05:45 At that time was the hostile environment on your radar in terms of the work you were doing? Were people aware of it?**

AG 05:55 I wasn't aware of it at all. In retrospect, I find that really amazing but the hostile environment policies were bits of legislation that were introduced in 2014 and 2016 in two separate bits of legislation. I think one of the really positive things that reporting on the Windrush Scandal did, although it was a bit belated, was really educating people in what these bits of legislation were and the really clearly stated hostile intent behind them. Because I think that for everybody, certainly I wasn't as aware of what the implications of these policies were until much later when I was trying to understand why people were being badly affected by the Home Office.

**EHdK 07:11 Were you already hearing stories about people being unable to access their benefits or being mistreated by the welfare system? Were you linking that to immigration issues at the time?**

AG 07:24 Not really. I suppose the kind of relevant link for me was the way that I was trying to do the reporting. Particularly around reforms to disability benefit when a lot of people who were very vulnerable and unable to work were tested for their capacity to work by this newly computerised Work Capability Assessment and we saw a lot of people being classified as fit to work who really were not at all fit to work. The way that we covered that in the Guardian was by highlighting individual case

after individual case…to try and help readers and also policymakers understand the real impact of what had been happening. That was quite a useful prototype for the reporting that I did later around Windrush. Although I wouldn't say that the impact of reporting on the welfare reforms had a huge success in terms of shifting government policy, but it did at least make people very aware of what was happening.

**EHdK 08:51 You said to me that the story fell onto your desk. What do you mean by that? I know you go into some detail in your book but how did that start?**

AG 09:05 Like all journalists, I come into the office every morning. I've usually got four or five different things that I'm working on. But I'm also reading all of the emails that come in and because I've done quite a bit of travelling around the country, talking to different charities and individuals around the place. I'm often contacted by people who I've spoken to before who flag up something they think is something the Guardian might be interested in. The flag for this issue was an email from the Refugee and Migrant Centre in Wolverhampton which was a charity I had visited a couple of years earlier. They wanted to bring The Guardian's attention to the case of Paulette Wilson who was at that point being held in Yarl's Wood which is an immigration detention centre that's well known or notorious for its very difficult conditions. It's a place that I had written about previously, so I knew that being held at Yarl's Wood was not great. But what was particularly arresting about the email was the information that this was somebody who had been in the UK for 49 or 50 years and had arrived here as an eight- or nine-year-old child entirely legally to live with her grandparents near/outside Birmingham somewhere.

**EHdK 11:00 And when you say entirely legally what do you mean by that?**

AG 11:04 Well, maybe I'm putting that parenthesis in retrospectively, but the charity made it clear at that point that this was somebody who they believed had not broken any immigration rules. This was somebody who had been living here for 50 years and had the right to live here. It just seemed extremely peculiar that she had been arrested, was being held in this notorious immigration detention centre and that she was booked to be removed to Jamaica which was a country that she hadn't visited since 1968. When I say it fell on my plate, it sort of did because that is such an unusual and disturbing story that I think any reporter who was emailed about it would respond to say that's really disturbing and it's worthy of some attention.

**EHdK 12:15 In your book you refer to this group as "a group of retirement age Commonwealth born long-term UK residents with immigration problems" which I think is a helpful way of detailing the people who were affected by the scandal itself. It highlights that the scandal affected people far beyond the Caribbean. It also highlights it has created problems for people who basically have worked their entire lives in the UK and have spent the bulk of their life here. The term that you come up with…you talk about the Windrush betrayal or the Windrush scandal. How did that come to be?**

AG 13:02 So that encapsulation of what the problem was about is an accurate one. But it was also quite a problematic one from a journalistic perspective because it was complicated. It was the case that the vast majority of people who were being flagged as affected by this issue were at that point people who had come from the Caribbean. A campaigner called Patrick Vernon, who has long been a campaigner for the Windrush generation and has been advocating on their behalf and trying to get the government to recognise what an extraordinary contribution that they've made to this country. He identified from reading the articles in the Guardian that the people who were being affected were a group of people who you could, in shorthand, refer to as the Windrush generation. In a way, it was a very helpful way of getting a wider audience to engage with a story that was otherwise really complicated.

**EHdK 14:29 It was also around the 70th anniversary.**

AG 14:31 Yes, it was coming up to the 70th anniversary and, as a shorthand, it's a potent one because it immediately helps people to understand who we're talking about, who has been affected by these immigration issues. Much later, I question how helpful it's been because it's confusing for a lot of people because it does narrow the scope of the scandal to a fairly small geographical area. It makes people get confused because they think, is this about people who actually arrived on the ship in 1948, or does this issue affect people who come from Nigeria or Ghana. Or Pakistan? Which it can do.

**EHdK 15:28 In the book, you tell the stories of many people: Paulette Wilson, Anthony Bryan, Hubert Howard and a number of others. Was that your decision to focus on the stories you were getting from people who were born to Caribbean parents? Or was it just the way that the story unfolded as you began to dig deeper?**

AG 15:53 I didn't hear from people who came from other countries until much later.

**EHdK 16:00 Why do you think that was?**

AG 16:04 Well, there are lots of competing factors I think about migration patterns. I still feel that I'm not totally expert in it, but I think many of the people who came

from the Caribbean came at a time when they had no need to think about immigration or borders when they arrived in the UK. So, this absolutely wasn't on their radar. Many of them also didn't make regular return journeys to their home country either because the salaries they were earning here didn't allow it or because enough of their families had moved with them that they didn't need to. Whereas in other countries there might already have been enough of a sense of immigrating into the UK, that getting paperwork immediately felt like a really important thing in a way that it didn't for people coming from the Caribbean.

**EHdK 17:34 I think that's a really important point because people came as Citizens of the UK and Colonies (CUKC). Throughout the Caribbean in Jamaica, Barbados, Saint Kitts, Trinidad, they were told they were British. I think the Windrush scandal and understanding it from a Caribbean and a transnational perspective is hugely important because, as you say very clearly in your book, at that time there was really no difference travelling from Kingston to London, or London to Glasgow. The idea was you were part of the [British] Empire, and you were travelling from one part of the [British] Empire to the other.**

AG 18:21 That's right. But it's definitely the case that as this kind of reporting unfolded these were distinctions that weren't immediately clear. In retrospect, I know which immigration historians I would like to have consulted at an earlier stage. Because it was really mysterious for a number of months why it was that with such regularity people from one part of the world were coming forward and saying that they were experiencing these difficulties.

**EHdK 18:57 Also because a lot of people affected were children who came on their parents' passports. These were passports that were either lost or, as you said, people hadn't left the country. So, they physically didn't have anything to show or to prove, as the British state was telling them to prove, that they did have the legitimate right to remain. So how did you start tying those threads together? Did you have a eureka moment? Was there something in your memory that sparked and helped you see this as a bigger story?**

AG 19:44 Even when I spoke to Paulette Wilson in her flat in Wolverhampton - by the time we got to meet her MP had intervened and her removal had been postponed - I was able to see her at home although at a time when she was still waiting for the removal order to be reenacted. Even at that point, the caseworker at the Refugee and Migrant Centre said that he was familiar with other cases of people who were getting frightening letters from the Home Office telling them that they didn't have the right to be here. Or people who were finding that it was very difficult to apply for their pension or to remain in their house. People who were having unexplained bureaucratic problems. He wasn't fully clear about what was causing it but he did make it obvious that this was a wider problem than just one woman who had been treated very badly. When we published that piece, new people came

forward almost immediately and the second person who I interviewed, he's a man called Anthony Bryan…there's a really good film about him called "Sitting in Limbo" that the BBC made. He told me that he knew four or five other people who were having similar difficulties and who had also arrived in the 1960s.

**EHdK 21:29 Who he had been to school with?**

AG 21:31 Yeah, and indeed one of his brothers was also having real difficulties. I'm not sure I'd describe it as a eureka moment but that was very alarming to find out that this wasn't something that was restricted to a small group of people. If both of those people could point to networks of other people also affected.

**EHdK 21:59 Certainly in the interviews that we've conducted so far the theme of fear comes through. People were either removing themselves entirely from the state, for example, for fear of being detected or knowing that if they try to apply for a passport this could actually bring them future problems which is definitely, I think, the case of the people that that you reported on as well. I just wondered how much bigger this issue is that we actually know about. I think the figures from the Oxford Migration Observatory were there are about 57,000 people who are not formally naturalised in the country. Do you think that there's a huge component of people that continue their day-to-day that have either not been picked up by the system or are really living under the radar?**

AG 23:00 I think it's still really hard to put a figure on the scale of the problem and that is partly to do with fear. That question about unease and reluctance to talk about their problems was something that was a real battle from a reporting perspective because a lot of people didn't want to go on the record to say that they had these Home Office problems. They felt ashamed because the time which I was doing this reporting was a time of kind of heightened anti-immigration rhetoric in the newspapers. But there was also a sense of alarm because a lot of the people affected felt wrongly that they were somehow responsible for the difficult situation that they found themselves in. And actually, it was quite interesting when this became a national scandal that all newspapers were reporting on much later. There was some criticism from some quite high-profile people of Caribbean origin who came forward and said, "Well, we sorted out our paperwork. These people are just disorganised people, they should have got their act together." There was that kind of sense of potential judgement and so a lot of people didn't tell their own children.

**EHdK 24:43 That's the response that I got during my visits to the Caribbean. There's certainly in Jamaica the risk that there's not always a lot of sympathy for the Windrush generation. But I also think that's because there's a lack of understanding of what the scandal entailed and the impact that it had. One of the responses I got was, "They've had decades to naturalise. They've had decades to get their house in order and that this was something that people should have expected." I was quite taken aback by those responses. But, again, I thought there's quite a Conservative contingent within the Caribbean that really sees this as an immigration problem.**

AG 25:32 So, you can understand why people didn't want to talk about it because there was this kind of very hostile external atmosphere. They were getting really unpleasant letters from the Home Office. They weren't telling their own children. And there was a sense that maybe this was their fault. I found it incredibly helpful, much later, when Wendy Williams' report came out to find that she had identified some government information leaflets from the early 1980s when there was a person telling people that they could come forward and naturalise or get ILR [indefinite leave to remain]. That paperwork made it really clear that if you didn't want to do that you didn't have to, and your rights would be completely unaffected. So that for me made it really very, very clear that actually, there is no blame to be attributed to the people who are affected because they made a decision and a decision that was approved of by the Home Office at the time.

**EHdK 26:51 Did the issue of ID cards ever come up? Because the UK doesn't have an ID card system which then makes it very difficult in terms of this scandal for people to actually prove who they are. That's given rise to certain debates over the need to implement an ID or the kind of justifications for it. I wondered if that had come up in discussions.**

AG 27:13 Yeah, it was a discussion that I've had a few times. I thought for a while maybe things would have been much simpler if we'd had an ID card system. But I think if we had an ID card system, we'd still have had to go through the process of getting people into that system. It's very likely that the people who had difficulties proving their status this time could have faced similar difficulties in order to get the ID card. So, I'm not sure that it completely answers that problem. But I am interested, and I keep wishing to find out what the situation in France is and whether they've escaped similar difficulties because they have a much more stringent ID card system.

**EHdK 28:03 I was recently in the Netherlands and I was looking at the Dutch childcare benefits scandal [*toeslagenaffaire*]. That, I think, has got strong parallels with the Windrush case in terms of how it was basically a computer algorithm that started flagging up racialised groups and migrant groups to the Dutch benefits system and basically took away their welfare payments. I think there are parallel cases for the Windrush Scandal itself and I think we could all learn from as well to see where these patterns are emerging. I think it says a lot about modern-day government systems and how people's identity and how their legal status are being inputted into computer databases.**

AG 28:58 That's really interesting, I'd love to know more about it. But there is a kind of ID card system by default. Already in the UK for a lot of new arrivals who have to get biometric passes and who have to be fingerprinted and photographed and are required to show ID.

**EHdK 29:25 But that just shows the divide between who is citizen and who is migrant. I thought it was fascinating when I interviewed Tony Smith, for example, formerly of the Home Office. He said for people working in the Home Office in the 1960s and early 1970s, it was very clear that if you are from the Commonwealth you went into the line with British citizens. I'm quite interested in hearing about your engagement with the Home Office because that lack of institutional memory and the comments that Wendy Williams has made and her observations that that there is an absolute failure on behalf of the British state to understand Britain's colonial history and the impact of that. That resonates with the people who were affected by this who you've worked with very closely. They didn't understand, the immigration officials had no concept of, for example, the 1971 Immigration Act. They have no concept of really quite obvious and basic tenets of British immigration and/or citizenship policy.**

AG 30:48 I mean, fair enough to not know the details of the legislation but to not have an understanding about a whole pattern of migration that really characterised the 20th century and that talked to our role as a colonial empire. That's, I think, the thing that I find really amazing. Although, here I am as somebody who studied history, has been working and writing about Home Office issues. I had to educate myself a lot as I was trying to understand what might be going wrong. I definitely feel very critical of people within the Home Office but I also feel very upbeat, I suppose, about one of the new initiatives that has been introduced in the wake of Windrush which is a module that all civil servants working in Visas and Immigration will have to go through to educate them in the history of empire and Britain's past as a colonial power.

**EHdK 32:08 Although the uptake of that has been incredibly low.**

AG 32:09 It's been low, but they've only just started to roll it out in the last couple of months. We will see.

**EHdK 32:16 As I said, I'm interested in your engagement with the Home Office. Who did you speak to directly? What numbers did you even call when you started investigating the story? Because the Home Office is notoriously impossible to get through and costly as well for people who are within the system to be able to speak to a human being on the other end. I just wondered, did you have any insider contacts or any help or support basically in identifying individuals within the Home Office who were responsive to you to your questions?**

AG 32:51 I went through the system that all journalists have to go through which is a much quicker system in terms of being on hold than the system that people who are trying to regularise their immigration status go through. But nevertheless, it's not straightforward. As a journalist, if you're ever writing about something that touches on or particularly criticises a government department, it's a convention that you'll go to that department, outline what you're planning to write and give them an opportunity to comment.

**EHdK 33:32 Did they respond or comment?**

AG 33:33 Yes. They responded every time. It was largely, to begin with, a kind of exercise in, I think, damage limitation. They would give me a very standard comment for publication, but they would also tip off somebody within the system that we were going to be writing about a particular individual. Then time after time we'd notice that individual's case would suddenly, after years of difficulty, be expedited. Quite often, even before the article was published, they would call me to say that they suddenly had a courier arriving at their door with some documents that they've literally been waiting for years for. So, the Home Office was very keen, it seemed to me, to try to manage this as an issue by dealing one-by-one with all of the cases that we highlighted so that they were able to say there's been an anomaly here. We're dealing with it, but this is not a widely experienced problem. One of the things I found really disturbing about the response was that they would often blame the individual saying it's their fault for not having filled out the correct forms or not having paid a large amount of money to go through the process of applying for ILR [indefinite leave to remain] which they didn't need to apply for because they were people who had citizenship already or who were eligible for citizenship already. But the Home Office told people that was the route that they needed to take.

**EHdK 35:36 They also had to take a Life in the UK test which meant proving that they had a level of English which is insulting [nb: although this may be the case for some Commonwealth citizens, persons from Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Grenada, Guyana, Jamaica, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Trinidad and Tobago do not need to take a Life in the UK test].**

AG 35:44 Yes. But the Home Office Press Office also said – and this was the moment at which I thought they really had no sense of what was going on – that the individual needs to seek legal advice. That was a particularly disturbing message to hear because you weren't able to get legal advice for this area anymore because of reforms to legal aid. Also, most of the people who I was interviewing were people who had been told by the Home Office that they weren't allowed to work because they were immigration offenders. They were people who often weren't able to apply for benefits, people who were living in the most difficult financial circumstances and so to be told that they needed to hire an immigration lawyer, was just very, very out of touch.

**EHdK 36:38 I remember you saying in your book, I think it was in Jamaica, that somebody was blocked from returning to the UK but then suddenly his passport appeared and he was sent a first class ticket as well, to then return.**

AG 36:54 That was after I called the Home Office Press Office, it's just very cynicism-inducing that as a department rather than responding by stepping back and saying, "Isn't it peculiar that there are these cases coming forward and they all seem to be very similar and the problems appear to have come as a result of the legislation that we passed in the last four or five years?" Rather than taking kind of macro approach to it, the response was to try to deal with each case individually and to downplay any excitement on our part.

**EHdK 37:40 But it's deeper than that, I think, because it also means that you, a white woman of certain privilege and social standing, who's having to intervene in individual cases to resolve something that was their right in the first place. I think it shows just how deeply unjust the system is and just how cruel it's been to individuals.**

AG 38:00 Absolutely. It was very stark to see people like Paulette Wilson who went for two years to the Home Office reporting centre in Solihull. She had to go there. It cost her a lot of money. It was very difficult for her to go there. Every time she went there she said, "This is a mistake, you've made a mistake." She said that for two years. She said that so many times that they got so annoyed with her that they even stopped her daughter from going into the building with her anymore because she'd been saying so consistently and vociferously that they had made a mistake. Certainly, the speed with which media attention got that decision overturned is very stark.

**EHdK 38:55 As part of this project, we recently went to see the wonderful Lenny Henry one-man play at the Bush Theatre in London. I was just really impacted by the play. I thought it was absolutely wonderful. I know that you played a consulting role in advising on that play. Of the many things that really struck me…it was so deeply moving…there's a part in it where he is sat on his sofa and a letter falls from the ceiling and that letter is not from the Home Office, it's from Capita which is a third party, a private company that's been hired by the Home Office to send out these letters to people. As the play continues, more and more of these letters start cascading from the ceiling and it's a very impactful image of bureaucracy, of the violence of bureaucracy and of how overwhelming it can be. And how terribly August Henderson, the main character, was treated. I wanted to thank you for that because I took so much away from that experience.**

AG 40:16 It's an amazing play and I really hope that it gets a transfer so more people can see it.

**EHdK 40:23 Tell me about Capita that really struck me because how the immigration system is managed…it's a bit like a shoot the messenger scenario, right? The Home Office is removing itself from that responsibility and then passing it onto private companies that are basically making a lot of money because the immigration system is very lucrative for certain players who are involved in that.**

AG 41:09 I don't know how much, in the end, Capita made from this contract, because it was a "payment by results" contract. I don't have the figures at the tip of my fingers anymore, but they were given a list of suspected immigration offenders by the Home Office and they were going to be paid for the number of people on that list who they could get to leave the country voluntarily after a series of contacts by phone, by letter and particularly controversially by text. I think in the end the information that the Home Office gave them was so flawed and inaccurate that they didn't actually manage to make a very significant number of people on that list leave the country. I don't know whether the payment model worked in their favour in this case. You're right that it's the case [that] a lot of the harder bits of Home Office work have been subcontracted out to private companies and often subcontracted to other companies by that first layer of organisations. It does make it very hard as a journalist and also I expect for MPs and organisations who are looking into this to work out exactly where responsibility lies. It's very hard to ask questions by FOI [the Freedom of Information Act] or even through the Press Office about contracts to private companies because they're often given a blanket response that they won't be responded to for commercial reasons. So, it's really problematic.

**EHdK 43:01 It also highlights the brutality of this target-driven culture to say that Home Office officials or private companies have to achieve a certain number of detainees or deportees is really quite a horrible thing to think about.**

AG 43:21 And that's the issue that caused Amber Rudd, who was then Home Secretary, to leave because she attempted to deny that there were any targets on the removal of people from the UK. It turned out that there were very clear targets by which point she was in an impossible position because either she looked like she'd lied to parliament, or she hadn't really got a grasp of what her own department was doing. So, she resigned.

**EHdK 43:56 There were many British MPs that were already either involved or aware of individual cases around the scandal. Kate Osamor, for example, springs to mind. Then also many people who came out, and were just absolute damning of the UK government, including obviously Diane Abbott, then David Lammy, and countless others. But also, you talked quite a lot about the role of the Barbados High Commissioner Guy Hewitt, and also the role of the Caribbean High Commissioners around the time of the CHOGM [Commonwealth Heads of Government] Meeting. I think they met a week before CHOGM and that's when the real anger around the issue kind of really culminated. I wondered what you can say about some of the individuals who were key to either flagging this issue to the Home Office or to people within the UK government including Theresa May. Also, some of the diplomatic discussions that were going on around that time.**

AG 45:11 When I was sitting at my desk trying to work out how to continue to highlight this was a really problematic issue. One of the things that I tried to do quite early on was to talk to the High Commissioners in London and that's more difficult than it sounds. There was no immediate enthusiasm to confront this issue particularly with the Jamaican High Commissioner. I did go and see him after some time, and it wasn't an issue. He is a very friendly and nice man but it's true to say it wasn't something that he was very engaged with. He told me a story of when I went to see him about him visiting six months earlier a detention centre in the UK and he met somebody there who told him that he was originally from Jamaica but had spent a lifetime in the UK. He told me that as an anecdote that he thought in the moment was quite an interesting anecdote, but I was really upset by it because I said, “What did you do next? What happened to them? Were they taken off the list?” He didn’t really know so it was a slightly unhelpful exchange at that point. Later, Guy Hewitt, who was then Barbados High Commissioner to the UK, did agree to talk to me. And he was very quickly interested in what this issue was about and took it on in a very engaged and kind of activist style. Very unlike most other diplomats he was really ready to talk about it, to gather other diplomats and race relations activists together to try and push it further up the political agenda. But I'm not sure that even he really wanted to go on television to talk about it. He was trying to do something a bit more behind the scenes and tried to get a meeting with Theresa May during this

Commonwealth Heads of Government Summit in April of 2018 and that request was turned down by Theresa May's office.

**EHdK 45:59 So she never met with the High Commissioners?**

AG 48:03 She did in the end because the request was turned down and Guy Hewitt talked about it being turned down. He wasn't cross about it, but I remember thinking that it was really strange. I telephoned him and he, in a very diplomatic way, expressed his disappointment about it. I wrote a piece that went on the Guardian front page. That was a very interesting moment to me because that was the moment at which all of the other media in the UK - which hadn't really been that interested in this as an issue - agreed to also report on it after we had a front-page piece saying that Theresa May had refused to have a meeting with these High Commissioners.

**EHdK 48:59 I know from the oral history interviews that I've already conducted that the Caribbean Caucus of High Commissioners met regularly and they would invite the Home Office, for example, to their meetings to talk about this. There were conversations happening where this issue was being flagged. I know it was flagged to Philip Hammond as well as the UK-Caribbean [Ministerial] Forum in the Bahamas a couple of years earlier. But also really the problem the project is highlighting that this is a decades-long problem. It's certainly not something that began when you started investigating it but it's something that has been part of the history of people from the Caribbean who have come to the UK for a very long time. I'm fascinated by how the scandal erupted in 2018 and obviously CHOGM. Guy Hewitt, who is commonly credited for his "guerilla diplomacy" as he terms it…and the work of Patrick Vernon. Why then? Why do you think that all of this came to erupt at that time? Why didn't it happen before? I ask this because I was recently at the George Padmore Institute looking through copies of The Caribbean Times which was a paper launched in the early 1980s. A lot of those articles were talking about the changes to the British Nationality Act. We know that for decades community actions were happening, campaigns were happening, meetings were happening, passport raids were taking place as well. It's just quite interesting that there's been this abysmal treatment of Black people in Britain, as we know, it's not something that's new. Why did the scandal resonate so much and hit the headlines in this way?**

AG 51:19 I think there are two different things that were going on. There was a problem with travel from the UK back to the Caribbean and with people getting stuck in the Caribbean and not being able to return. This something that had been happening for decades which was unresolved and didn't particularly make newspaper headlines. I can't explain why British High Commissioners in the Caribbean at that stage were not more willing to be helpful. I find that very disturbing.

**EHdK 52:01 I suppose that's when people in Jamaica really started hearing more about the Windrush scandal as well was the case of a gentleman, whose name escapes me right now, who couldn't return to the UK.**

AG 52:18 There were so many of these cases, right back to the 1980s, of people who got stuck in the wrong place and who became destitute. Who had really, really horrific experiences. So that was happening. Then the situation in the UK really intensified as a result of the hostile environment legislation in the 2010s. So those two things were happening. And it's a side point but the Conservative government and successive Home Office ministers whenever they apologise for this scandal they have a formulation of apologising for it which I find very vexing where they say that this was an issue that had not been picked up by successive governments as a way of kind of spreading the blame between themselves and by previous Labour governments. And there's an element of truth in that. But I think it is really disingenuous because internally within the UK, the vast majority of people who were affected by the scandal were affected as a direct result of this hostile environment legislation that made life impossible for people. It had nothing to do with travelling around the world, going back to the Caribbean, but made life impossible for people internally with employment, housing, NHS treatment, benefits, driving licence, mobile phone contracts, the works. And so, to try to kind of shift the blame equally between this administration and previous administrations is disingenuous. But nevertheless, it's true that this was something causing problems for people for decades earlier. And the question of why it only hit the headlines in April 2018 is kind of a mystifying one.

**EHdK 54:20 What about Brexit? Because of the conversations and all the debates around Brexit that were happening. It's come up a lot in this project, a lot more than I had initially anticipated. [In terms of] the negativity and hostility towards othering people but also the lack of necessity for EU citizens again in terms of people who have been there for many years who haven't registered and may find it difficult to actually prove their residency. I wondered how prominent that was.**

AG 55:07 I think it wasn't something that people who were affected were talking about because it was something else going on. But it's certainly created that general environment whereby stories about immigration were not positive stories and I think that contributed to it being a hidden problem for such a long time because the people who were affected were not people who wanted to talk about it to anyone, even within their own households. They weren't people who, on the whole, making an enormous amount of noise about. The few people who did want to make a noise about it, who went to see their MP, who tried to go to their law centres, found it really hard to get any attention to be paid to it.

**EHdK 56:08 As part of kind of your investigative journalism you travelled to the Caribbean. I believe it was just Jamaica that you went to. When was that and what the motivation was for going there?**

AG 56:26 It was a few weeks after the government apologised and promised to put things right. By that point it was clear that there were a large number of people who'd been entirely wrongly deported, and I was keen to try to find some of those people who had been wrongly deported. And I have to say that I still haven't really succeeded in that and that's a bit of reporting that, you know, I'd like to try and do again. Because we don't know exactly how many people were wrongly removed or deported. We know that 180 or 190 people were either detained or deported. And the Home Office, for whatever reason, won't break that down into the people number of people who were wrongly removed. And in any case, we think that's likely to be a huge underestimate of the figures because they are only being counted to people wrongly removed in the Caribbean. And the Home Office says it will be too expensive to widen the search to look at people who have been wrongly removed to other countries. Although I didn't find on that trip people who had been wrongly deported, I did find a lot of people who've been unable to travel back to the UK. And, yeah, I hadn't been to Jamaica before. It was a very sad trip. I, you know, I'd love to go to Jamaica at some point on holiday, but I definitely didn't see that side of the country.

**EHdK 58:18 You were in Kingston?**

AG 58:21 We went to Kingston and then we drove with a photographer from The Guardian, David Levine, and a really helpful local driver. We drove all the way to the west coast to Savanna-la-Mar where we met somebody called Vernon Vanriel who's a former professional boxer who grew up mostly in Tottenham and had arrived in Tottenham from Jamaica at around the age of eight. He had been to primary school and secondary school and had had a very successful boxing career. He set up his own business as an electrician but had got stuck in Jamaica in the early 2000s when he travelled out there and stayed longer for two years and hadn't realised that the immigration legislation in the UK had changed. And by the time we met him, he was living in an abandoned roadside shack with no electricity, no running water. And he really didn't have any money to speak of and he was very unwell. It was one of the most disturbing bits of reporting I've ever had to do. But again, I phoned the Home Office to say that I was talking to Vernon Vanriel. I gave them his date of birth his - I don't know if he had a home office reference number - but they were able quite quickly to identify his case. And by that point, he had himself applied to return under the new Windrush scheme. But the phone call that I had with the Home Office Press Office really expedited things, I assume, because two days later he had a first-class ticket on British Airways couriered to him from Kingston, you know, at vast expense. He rang me and said that the price on the ticket was something like £1,400. I mean, it was amazing. And also insane.

**EHdK 1:00:46 Did you have any contact with the High Commission when you were in Jamaica? Were there any observations or anything of interest?**

AG 1:00:55 I did have a conversation with the High Commissioner. From memory, it was an off the record conversation, so he was pretty anxious about…

**EHdK 1:00:58 …Asif Ahmad?**

AG 1:01:02 Yeah…he was quite anxious about being quoted on the record. It was frustrating from a journalistic perspective because on the one hand he was there giving access and giving some background information but he wasn't ready to go on the record to say anything. And I do think it's a really remarkable failure by the Foreign Office in Jamaica, and I assume elsewhere, that they were so unwilling to engage with the large numbers of people who got stuck in Jamaica and so unwilling to assist them as you would expect to be assisted as a UK citizen in having a difficult time abroad.

**EHdK 1:02:07 Even as early as the 1960s there's evidence that the High Commissions were being used as strategic outposts to ensure that people didn't even leave Jamaica. I think it's quite fascinating if we think of it on those terms…about the role of what British High Commissions are and their level of engagement with people who have a legal and existing right to either enter or settle in the UK. And a lot of that is not clear to people who are in the Caribbean. It's not clear what their rights are, what they can apply for, how they can travel to see family. And I think we've created that…the UK certainly has created that system. You know, that kind of closed door policy. We see it with the Home Office, we see it with how people engage with different…trying to get their paperwork or their visas.**

AG 1:03:13 In terms stark examples of racism within all of this. I think it's the clearest example that you have people who are British - I don't even quite know what to say in terms of the word - but people who believe that they are British citizens, seeking help in the way that British citizens seek help when they're abroad and in trouble and finding that they are unable to even get a hearing of any sort.

**EHdK 1:03:48 Even get through the door because everything is now it's on a computer database, people are told to go away and apply online, so people don't even have that kind of human interaction anymore with any kind of government official that can help them. We're about to wrap up the interview now. Thank you so much for your time. Is there anything else that you'd like to say?**

AG 1:04:09 Oh, yeah, there was one. There was one thing that we began to talk about. It's about the scale of the problem and whether or not we really know how many people have been affected and why it is that we don't really have an idea. I

really struggle with this. We know that 15,000 people, more or less, have applied for documentation under the Windrush scheme although that isn't as simple a number as it might be in terms of a guide to how many people have been affected because there are some EU citizens who have applied under that scheme as well. We know that around 4,000 people have applied for compensation. That feels like a huge underestimate for the wider number of people affected because we know that many people are just not coming forward to claim compensation because the process is so difficult. And because people are aware that the payouts are not always very generous…It's a very painful experience to have to go through, again, trying to document exactly how you were affected and the difficulty of finding the documentary evidence to prove it is such a precise echo of the difficulties that people had previously in terms of trying to prove that they were British. And then there is the figure that you mentioned from the Oxford Migration Observatory of a possible upper limit of 57,000. So, we don't know. And I hope at some point that those figures will become clearer. I don't know if there's somewhere within the Home Office, where there's that knowledge that will emerge at some point later on.

**EHdK 1:06:24 But where do you see the future heading? And in terms of this issue?**

AG 1:06:30 I'm really worried by the current Home Secretary's determination to say this is an issue that we've apologised for and that we've dealt with and that we are now drawing a line under. Three of the recommendations from the Wendy Williams report have been formally withdrawn and there's a wider winding down of the team responsible. I think it's really important that we continue to highlight that there was this issue. And I think the one bit of reporting I'd really like to do, and I don't know if it's possible, would somehow be to get all of the accounts of the people who have applied for compensation somehow in a redacted form into the public domain as a way of showing exactly how badly people were affected and how many people were really badly affected. There's no more potent database for that. Even if it's something that somebody has to do in a generation's time when those files come to be accessed. It would be a worthwhile exercise.

**EHdK 1:07:56 Thank you very much for your time today.**

[END OF AUDIOFILE].