

**Racial
Discrimination in
employment?
The Bristol bus
boycott of 1963**

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List of Abbreviations

Transport and General Workers Union

TGWU

Bristol Evening Post

BEP

Western Daily Press

WDP

Introduction

“We want no Little Rock in Bristol”.¹ This appeal for calm by the *Evening Post* came two days after a group of West Indian workers had announced their intention to boycott Bristol Omnibus company services until they agreed to employ black workers. The *Evening Post* was quite rightly concerned about racial tensions escalating out of control. In 1957 the Governor of Arkansas, Orvel E. Faubus, had defied a Supreme Court ruling and sent 200 of the U.S. National Guard to stop 9 black teenagers attending a white school. On their first day attending Little Rock Central High the 9 had to be evacuated because of the threat of riot from the white protestors outside. When Eisenhower ruled the use of the National Guard illegal, Faubus substituted them with the Arkansas State Police; the demonstrators were allowed to continue to attempt to block the students’ entry on a daily basis. The 101st Airborne Division of the US Army had to be brought in to protect the children. The following academic year the Little Rock School Board closed all 3 of its high schools for the entire year rather than submit to desegregation. This kind of discrimination is shocking to the modern mind but not surprising since people expect to come across such episodes in American History. What is not expected is that the British too have a history of discrimination and racial prejudice which has, at times, caused fear and controversy.

The Bristol Bus Boycott of May 1963 is an episode which has been neglected and forgotten by historians, but which raises considerable questions about the integration of post-war colonial immigrants. In late April of 1963 a young West Indian youth worker, Paul Stephenson, challenged the unwritten bar by the Bristol Omnibus Company and the Transport and General Workers Union (hereafter TGWU) against the employment of ‘coloured’ workers in bus crews. The result was a campaign against the Bus Company and the TGWU lasting

¹ *Bristol Evening Post (Hereafter BEP)*, 1 May 1963.

until August 1963 when, after lengthy negotiations, the company submitted to employing coloured workers in its passenger department. This campaign eventually involved a Party leader, a Bishop, High Commissioners, academics and sportsmen, as well as large numbers of both Bristol's ethnic minorities and white population. The form of protests ranged from boycotting buses and picketing churches, to marches and petitions. Despite dominating national and local newspaper articles and local television coverage for over two weeks the boycott has slipped out of well-known history.

The primary sources that formed the evidence base for this thesis were newspaper cuttings, an interview with Paul Stephenson, and Tony Benn's published diaries; all of which present various methodological problems. All newspapers have political leanings and of course every piece written is affected by the bias (whether conscious or otherwise) of the writer. Most of the local newspapers featured were found in two collections of newspaper cuttings. The first is the Stephenson Archive at the Bristol Records Office, created and maintained by Stephenson himself. The second is the 'Coloured Population of Bristol', a collection of press cuttings on ethnic minorities in Bristol in the early 1960s found at the Bristol Reference Library. Collections can also be difficult sources because they contain not only the bias of the newspapers themselves, but also the bias of the person collecting them. Collectors could clearly omit certain cuttings from a collection in order to present a particular viewpoint. However both collections used appear very comprehensive and student, national and international papers which were not included in the collections have been used to supplement the local sources. They will undoubtedly help confront methodological problems.

As far as the bias of the press goes Stephenson has argued that although at times he felt hounded in general he considered that the press were fairly neutral as "they could see what a

stupid and illogical policy it was”.² He felt that the national press was on the whole more impartial than the local press, probably because the local press was torn between the extreme and opposing views expressed in their post bags. There were clear examples of biased and inaccurate reporting during the boycott. For example, Stephenson felt bound to sue Ron Nethercott, The South West Regional Secretary of the TGWU, and the *Daily Herald* over an article they had published in which Nethercott called Stephenson “irresponsible and dishonest”.³ The *Daily Sketch* article in which Bus Company manager, Ian Patey was interviewed was also far from impartial, depicting Patey as a man unfairly scapegoated and pursued by ignorant liberals. Even factual reporting could vary, for example, the descriptions of the student demonstration were wildly different. The *Evening Post* described the event under the title “Busmen heckle marchers”⁴ and quoted a conductress as shouting “they should go back where they came from”.⁵ However the Bristol University student newspaper *Nonesuch News* described it as follows “At the bus station a vigil was maintained, and several lively discussions took place with employees of the company”.⁶ The difference is startling and just one example of how diverse reports on the same event can be. In fact the problems of using newspapers as a source may be increased when the issue being discussed is race. Gordon and Rosenberg have argued that the media has influenced and manipulated the issue of race more than any other domestic issue and that there is a bias in the media against ethnic minorities.⁷

² Paul Stephenson interview, 2 February 2007.

³ *Daily Herald*, 4 May 1963.

⁴ *BEP*, 2 May 1963.

⁵ *BEP*, 2 May 1963.

⁶ *Nonesuch News*, 17 May 1963.

⁷ P. Gordon and D. Rosenberg, *Daily Racism: The press and black people in Britain* (London, 1989), p. 1.

There are also obvious problems with the use of oral history.⁸ Paul Stephenson was interviewed 44 years after the events he was recalling, so false, or incomplete memory was one problem to bear in mind. His recollection of facts seemed to be quite complete and accurate in as much as they matched the events as reported in the papers at the time. However having spent a lifetime working for racial equality is bound to have changed his opinions in some ways. Moreover despite attempts to ask open questions there can be tones in one's voice or aspects of body language which can influence an interviewee to answer one way or another. Finally there is always the underlying problem of building a relaxed and open exchange between the interviewer and the interviewee. Would Stephenson speak differently to me as an undergraduate researcher than to a renowned professor or even a fellow protestor? Despite these problems Stephenson is still of course crucial as a source especially if one bears in mind much of what he says is his point of view and not factual evidence.

Perhaps one of the most enticing aspects of researching race relations is the historiography which is in some aspects very expansive and in others exceedingly constricted. During my research I have found extensive work on race and race relations from the early 1970's and then only a few relevant titles in the intervening years up until the late 1990's when discourses of race relations seem to begin to open up again. This presents a problem as books from the early 1970's seem to often have been written with a certain political viewpoint in mind. For example D. Beetham's *Transport and turbans: a comparative study in local politics* was published directly for the Institute of Race Relations which brings up problems of objectivity and the possible influence of the government's opinions. Another secondary source, P. Gordon's and D. Rosenberg's *Daily Racism; the press and black people in Britain*, was published by the Runnymede Trust, a charity set up to promote multiculturalism and

⁸ P. R. Thompson, *The voice of the past: oral history* (Oxford, 2000).

racial harmony. The trust is funded and supported by various different organisations and has links with the home office. As a result some of its publications may be edited to support the views of its patrons. In addition to these issues, books cross-referencing employment and race are scarce even though books on race in general often dedicate a chapter to employment. In terms of the boycott itself there is only one piece of secondary literature on it (bar short newspaper articles from various anniversaries): *Black and White on the Buses: The 1963 Colour Bar Dispute in Bristol* by Madge Dresser, an historian, at the University of the West of England. Over reliance on this text was carefully avoided objectivity maintained in the reading of it, but, naturally, some sources overlap.

A further task before beginning fully to discuss the boycott is establishing how far one can argue, from a study of Bristol, that similar problems may have been occurring across the country. One problem with this is that Bristol was distinct from many bigger British cities. Firstly it was fairly homogenous; its population before colonial immigration was not only purely British but also almost purely West Country.⁹ Unlike other port cities such as Liverpool and London, Bristol had never attracted a wide variety of permanent settlers. Moreover it had never become a cosmopolitan hub of industry drawing workers from across the country unlike places such as Manchester and Birmingham. Dresser has argued that because of its homogeneity Bristol had built up a self-contained image of itself which the newly arriving immigrants did not fit into.¹⁰ Thus perhaps there were more likely to be tensions in Bristol than in other British cities. However no city can be said to be representative of the country, no perfectly average place exists. Thus whilst there are problems in arguing from the specific to the general, we can still perhaps highlight some useful inferences for the country as a whole from the situation in Bristol.

⁹ M. Dresser, *Black and white on the buses: the 1963 colour bar dispute in Bristol* (Bristol, 1986).

¹⁰ Madge Dresser interview, 24 January 2006.

The key issue that will be discussed in this work is the extent of the economic basis to racism in Bristol, and possibly across the country at this time. The new migrants entering Britain from the end of the Second World War all faced problems through the mistaken belief that they were providing competition for scarce resources. As a result migrants of all backgrounds including Polish refugees and European Volunteer Workers all faced heightened discrimination in the field of employment. This view presented by F. R. Timhill in a letter to the *Evening Post* was typical of anti immigrant attitudes. “Colour has nothing whatever to do with the matter. The fact is the government has permitted tens of thousands of people from many other lands to drift into England for an easy living”.¹¹ This thesis will therefore investigate whether the basis of the racism in Bristol was from this fear of competition for resources, of economic meltdown. A further discussion of the events in question will present an answer.

¹¹ *BEP*, 4 May 1963.

The Context

Historical events cannot be understood as snapshots in time. Everything up until an event has an influence on it. Without understanding the context of the boycott we cannot clearly appreciate the pressures and factors acting on the various individuals involved at the time. It is clear an examination of attitudes towards race in Britain at this time, and preceding times is needed. Britain's biggest wave of black immigration was the post war colonial immigration which occurred from the arrival of the Empire Windrush on 22 June 1948 to the mid 1960s, slowing down from 1962 onwards with the introduction of the Commonwealth Immigrants Act. This wave of immigration obviously had direct ramifications for race relations in the early 1960s.¹²

However, British ideas of black people did not begin at this point. Prior to the Second World War the ethnic minority population of Britain was very small, containing handfuls of sailors who had settled here at various points. In addition there were descendents of slaves and black servants who had been bought to British towns and cities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These people were often not conceived of as black as many generations of intermarriage meant they were no longer distinguishable from the native population. Bristol which was the hub of Britain's slave trading. Much of the city's wealth was created by rich slave traders such as Edward Colston.¹³ The slave trade did however leave a notable legacy, that of racial attitudes. Slaves were treated as little different from cattle even being

¹² R. Hansen, *Citizenship and immigration in post-war Britain: the institutional origins of a multicultural nation* (Oxford, 2000).

¹³ K. Morgan, *Edward Colston and Bristol* (Bristol, 1999).

referred to simply as ‘live cargo’. To justify this treatment of fellow human beings slaves were cast in the role of savage heathens who were far less culturally developed than white civilisations. Their slavery was essentially morally justified as they were seen as intellectually inferior or else they would not have let themselves be enslaved. This legacy did not go unnoticed at the time as John Morgan, when writing about the Bristol boycott in the *New Statesman*, commented “without searching I found all the tribal fears about coloured people, the kind of sentiment one mistakenly assumes had vanished”.¹⁴

Morgan may well have assumed such attitudes had vanished because race was seldom discussed in a country that had no ethnic minorities. Superiority complexes can only really come into play when those considered inferior are present. Consequently it was only with the start of post-war immigration that such prejudices began to emerge from the national psyche. Colonial immigration did not just affect racial prejudices, it also caused a reassessment of British nationality. The British Nationality Act of 1948 was the first definition in law of British nationality and it established the category of ‘Citizen of the United Kingdom and its Colonies’. This gave both those born in the United Kingdom and those born in the colonies the same rights, most crucially the right to dwell in the United Kingdom. As colonials began to take advantage of this right a strain began to develop between the legal concept of *Civis Britannicus Sum* (I am a British citizen) and the popular concept of Britishness as white people born and bred in Britain. The government was forced to include colonials in the 1948 Act as it was neither ready nor willing to abandon the already shrinking empire and thus had to include colonials as British citizens. However the white population of Britain did not view the new arrivals as British even though many of the immigrants saw themselves as returning to the motherland. As Joppke argues, they rejected immigrants because the government had

¹⁴ J. Morgan, ‘Colour Bar Bristol Fashion’, *New Statesman* (10 May 1963).

drawn the political boundaries too wide and therefore the immigrants lacked substantive ties to the native population.¹⁵ The problem then was between the government who wished to hold onto imperial ties, the immigrants who considered themselves British citizens, entitled to all the rights that went along with that, and the white British population who held a conception of British nationality entirely different from that of the state and colonial immigrants. Joppke has fiercely argued this point maintaining that the elites of this period were not immigrant-friendly but were tolerating them in an attempt to hang onto an outdated notion of empire.¹⁶

The Second World War had created a sense of war collectivism and unity. The idea that Britain was one nation within which every man could rely on his neighbour faded fast in the post-war world. The wave of immigration threatened this ideal further. It created a fear that Britain would never be a unified nation again because new immigrants would not be able to assimilate into British society. Paul has gone as far as to argue that the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act was the culmination of fears about the cohesiveness of the post war state.¹⁷ Perversely the idea that immigrants would never integrate came to help recreate the concept of British togetherness. Waters has argued one was able to define what it meant to be British by pointing to immigrants as an example of what was unbritish. This helped to create a sense of community and unity in a time of rapid transformation and insecurity.¹⁸ Thus again we can see the pre-existing stigma against black people was only heightened in the years immediately preceding the boycott.

¹⁵ C. Joppke, *Immigration and the nation-state: The United States, Germany and Great Britain* (Oxford, 1999).

¹⁶ Joppke, *Immigration and the nation-state*, p. 101.

¹⁷ K. Paul, *Whitewashing Britain: race and citizenship in the post-war era* (Ithaca, 1997), p. 208.

¹⁸ C. Waters, "'Dark Strangers' in Our Midst: Discourses of Race and Nation in Britain, 1947-1963", *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 36 No. 2 (April 1997).

As colonial immigrants were not regarded by the native population as British they came to be regarded as competition for supposedly limited British resources. Thus resentment grew at the idea of immigrants using resources to which a 'British' person had a prior claim. As 'Driver E. R. Baker' made clear in a letter to the *Evening Post* during the boycott. "It is not their fault they were allowed into the country but the Government should have taken steps to stop it, while employment is such as it is".¹⁹ It was an attitude largely created by post-war immigration. This is because prior to the war the numbers migrating were so minuscule that there were no grounds to view them as a threat. The problem began when the native population could see colonial immigrants moving into their neighbourhoods and sending their children to local schools. It was recognised that immigrants came because of a lack of resources in their own country. However as popular opinion did not view the immigrants as really British it was not perceived that they had any right to British reserves.²⁰ This sort of attitude is of course a clear factor in the boycott. A letter to the *Evening Post* on 4 May 1963 signed 'Johnny Bull' makes this clear: "First see that our own people are fed and housed. They cannot run off to Jamaica and get a job".²¹

One of the main worries about colonial immigrants was that they would not integrate into society, that they would maintain their own beliefs and customs instead of taking on British traditions. Brooks has pointed out that this is why the small numbers of black people in pre-war Britain did not cause many problems. They were in such small numbers that they were forced to fit in with native norms.²² On the other hand there was the worry, discussed above, that immigrants would provide competition for resources such as housing, employment and education. In the years preceding the boycott, a Catch-22 situation was created for the

¹⁹ *BEP*, 6 May 1963.

²⁰ Z. Layton Henry, *The politics of race in Britain* (London, 1984).

²¹ *BEP*, 4 May 1963.

²² D. Brooks, 'Race and labour in London, some conclusions' in P. Braham, M. Pearn and E. Rhodes (eds.), *Discrimination and disadvantage in employment: the experience of black workers: a reader* (London, 1981).

immigrants. The host communities they entered wanted them to assimilate, but were unhappy for them to gain jobs and housing which allowed them to do so. It was a situation in which incoming immigrants would always face hostility. If they worked they were taking white people's jobs; if they did not work they were sponging off the state. This was pointed out at the time by 'Mary Coulton' in the *Evening Post*: "some people have even said they would rather walk than ride on buses with a coloured crew, but these are just the first to complain about them drawing unemployment benefit".²³ These mixed attitudes were perhaps increased by the seemingly changing attitude of the state. Until 1962 immigration between the Commonwealth and Great Britain had been unrestricted. However, in 1962 the British government passed the Commonwealth Immigrants Act. This restricted immigrations to those in possession of vouchers. The vouchers were limited to a certain number distributed each year. They were also classed according to the skills of the immigrant. Class A were issued to those with a definite British job offer, Class B were for those with certain skills or trades and Class C were for unskilled migrants with no job offer. With even the government attitude towards immigration openly cooling it is unsurprising that attitudes among the general public festered. In fact we can understand the boycott more clearly in light of the fact that through this act even the government was linking between immigration and employment. This is not to say that the general population followed the government's lead nevertheless attitudes towards immigrants and the perceived link with employment issues may have been legitimated by the government's actions.

The context of post-war colonial immigration and even the legacy of the slave trade are important in setting the scene for the Bristol boycott. The notion of black people as savages was an attitude that was heavily apparent in the boycott. It emerged clearly in newspaper

²³ *BEP*, 7 May 1963.

mail bags. ‘Ruth Kilburn’, for example, wrote, “I can tell you the black man still has a long way to go before he can claim to be really civilised. Fundamentally they are still children. They panic easily, do not know the true meaning of gratitude and become extremely officious when put in positions of authority”.²⁴ The links between immigration and employment that were consistently established in the post war era undoubtedly had ramifications for events in Bristol in May 1963. With this in mind we turn to a closer examination of exactly what happened and how this fits into the wider context.

²⁴ *BEP*, 9 May 1963.

The Boycott

The refusal of the Bristol Omnibus Company to employ black workers on its bus crews was not first highlighted by the West Indian Association who began the campaign against it. It was rather the result of a vote taken at a union meeting in January 1955.²⁵ The Company was divided into two separate union groups, the garages' division, representing all those concerned with the upkeep and repair of the buses, and the passenger division, representing all those who actually served the public. The garages' group voted against such a bar and subsequently black people were employed in maintenance crews. The passenger division, however, passed a majority vote for the bar. This information became public knowledge when it was discussed in one of a series of articles on discrimination for the *Bristol Evening Post* in October to November 1961. The article highlighting the employment discrimination on the buses was written by Malcolm Smith, a local journalist, and appeared on 1 November 1961. It was titled *No colour bar on our buses - but no jobs either for immigrants* and it directly highlighted the ban: "There is a flat refusal by the undermanned Bristol Omnibus Company to employ coloured people in their crews. However high their skills".²⁶ The article even raised the later much discussed issue of whether such a decision was the result of the workers, the management or union sanctioned as Smith stated "It has been alleged that in Bristol there is a colour bar among local members of the Transport and General Workers Union".²⁷

²⁵ Dresser, *Black and White on the buses*, p. 12.

²⁶ *BEP*, 1 November 1961.

²⁷ *BEP*, 1 November 1961.

However at the time although these articles did highlight the problem, no action was taken to challenge the situation. This was perhaps because this was a white media raising the issue. They had no real reason to become more actively involved, even writing the series on discrimination only bought the *Evening Post* a glut of abusive mail.²⁸ Perhaps even more pertinent was the fact that Paul Stephenson, the young black youth worker who orchestrated the boycott, did not arrive in Bristol until the summer of 1962. It does seem that the black population of Bristol was lacking in strong leadership prior to Stephenson's arrival. Dresser has argued that Stephenson's role was vital: "He was the leader they needed" she concludes.²⁹ Prior to Stephenson's arrival the main group for immigrants in Bristol was the West Indian Association led by Bill Smith. Smith had lived in Bristol for some time and was friends with many members of the City Council most notably Wally Jenkins, Labour Councillor for the St Paul's area. Younger members of the West Indian Association such as Owen Henry and Roy Hackett, who would be highly active during the boycott, had tried to raise matters of discrimination with the council, through Bill Smith, to no avail. It seems Smith's leadership of the black population was compromised by his friendship with city councillors. Yet another explanation is that Smith had stuck to what Learie Constantine, the famous cricketer and at this time High Commissioner for Trinidad and Tobago, famously referred to as "Negroe in England manners".³⁰ This is the idea that to get by one must assimilate, become as invisible as possible within society in order not to create more discrimination and disharmony than is necessary. Smith and Stephenson were of different generations, with different experiences, consequently they both found it difficult to have sympathy with each other's viewpoints. Stephenson did not recognise the validity of Smith's methods as he felt this was ignoring racial problems and was not real leadership. It took the arrival of a young dynamic leader like Stephenson for Bristol to be confronted with her racial problems.

²⁸ See 'No barriers by the sickbeds' in *BEP*, 15 November 1961.

²⁹ Dresser, interview, 24 January 2007.

³⁰ L. Constantine, *Colour Bar* (London, 1954), p. 52.

It was partly because Stephenson was new to the community that he was unconcerned with being seen as “extreme and a firebrand just because I wanted to tackle racism”.³¹ Stephenson’s, Hackett’s and Henry’s dissatisfaction with the lack of progress made by the West Indian Association led them to set up a ginger group called the West Indian Development Council. Stephenson has claimed that his plan from the start was to use the employment issue to draw out a wider discussion of racial discrimination. The *Western Daily Press* when breaking the story quoted Stephenson as saying “There are lots of instances where coloured people are subjected to open racial discrimination – but this Bus Company policy is blatant, and we mean to end it”.³² The policy of the Omnibus Company had directly affected these young men as Ena Hackett, the wife of Roy, had been unable to get a conductress’ job when she applied in 1962. However if a protest were to be started the policy would have to be publicised and brought to the centre of public attention. Accordingly Stephenson encouraged Guy Bailey an eighteen year-old warehouse man to apply for a job on the buses in late April 1963. Stephenson himself phoned to make the appointment stating that Guy was enthusiastic, hard working and attending evening classes. An interview was arranged before which Stephenson phoned back and mentioned Bailey was West Indian. Stephenson was immediately told Bailey could not be interviewed. Stephenson then held a press conference at which he explained the situation and announced that a boycott had been started and that churches in Bristol would be picketed on the following Sunday. The story broke in the *Bristol Evening Post* on 30 April 1963 and in the *Western Daily Press*, the following day, 1 May.

³¹ Stephenson interview, (1 February 2007).

³² ‘Colour Bar War’, *Western Daily Press* (hereafter *WDP*), 1 May 1963.

The Bristol Omnibus Company, run by manager Ian Patey, was not really ready to respond to such allegations. They could not comprehend why the bus company had suddenly been singled out when such colour bars were widespread practice. ‘C. J. Reece’ provides an example of this attitude when he wrote that he disliked the “the singling out of my company alone by West Indians, Labour Party Leaders and members of the general public for attack when so many firms in Bristol have exactly the same colour bar as the Bristol Omnibus Company”.³³ This apparent surprise explains the changing attitudes and arguments that appeared in the newspapers of the following few weeks. Moreover it explains the game of political ‘pass-the-parcel’ between the bus company and the TGWU who were even less prepared to react. The TGWU was represented by the Regional Secretary Ron Nethercott and Arthur Coxwell who was an official of the Bristol Branch.

The day following Stephenson’s press conference the boycott was already dominating the *Evening Post’s* letter bag. Opinions tended to be fairly polarised. ‘B. Timmins’ wrote that “His (Patey’s) real reason for not wanting to employ them...(was) they would be too polite and efficient”.³⁴ However on the same page ‘John Fairfax’, for example, wrote “I am sick of the arrogant attitude of coloured people in this country. There is a problem of unemployment at present and if coloured people are employed on public transport I will walk before I will use it”.³⁵ The opinions of the bus crews were similarly extreme- perhaps because they felt they had been aggressively confronted. The *Evening Post* reported on 3 May that the bus crews were ready to strike if the Omnibus Company capitulated and began employing coloured crews. It stated that the Eastville depot had promised a total walk out and that

³³ *BEP*, 8 May 1963.

³⁴ *BEP*, 1 May 1963.

³⁵ *BE P*, 1 May 1963.

“colleagues at Staple Hill depot feel so strongly about keeping the bus service white that they have already promised backing for any strike action”.³⁶

The first of May has long been a day of workers’ protest in Britain and 1 May 1963 was no different. To poke fun at the TGWU’s hypocrisy and to bring attention to the campaign a group of around one hundred Bristol University students marched from the bus station to the Transport House, the union offices. They heard a speech there from Stephenson and delivered a letter expressing their disgust at the bar and petition of 2,114 signatures to Nethercott.³⁷ Nethercott addressed the demonstrators from the steps of Transport House “there is no question of a colour bar as far as we are concerned. Without consulting the Regional Committee, I am prepared to say that if there are coloured workers on the buses, our people will accept them”.³⁸ Despite his address to the demonstrators, Nethercott was still openly critical of them in the press referring to them as “sincere but very misinformed”.³⁹

The actual boycott itself was quite probably having little effect. Unfortunately there are no passenger figures available for examination, but it is likely that those actually boycotting the buses were numerically small. Most West Indians had no means of transportation other than public transport. Moreover the main area in which they lived - the City Road and St Paul’s area - are set back from the centre up a steep hill. Consequently it is likely that those who had to use the buses were still reliant on them. Despite the probably small numerical effect it was having the boycott was big news mainly because of the well-known figures Stephenson had secured to support it. For example Harold Wilson, then leader of the Labour opposition, had commented on the boycott in a speech on South Africa. He stated he was “glad so many

³⁶ *BEP*, 3 May 1963.

³⁷ *Nonesuch News* (Bristol University Student Newspaper), 17th May 1963.

³⁸ *BEP*, 2 May 1963.

³⁹ *WDP*, 2 May 1963.

Bristolians are supporting the campaign to get it abolished. We wish them every success”.⁴⁰ Learie Constantine had been persuaded by Stephenson to act as a mediator between the two sides. In his capacity as High Commissioner he wrote to the company which owned the Bristol Omnibus Company, the Transport Holding Company in London, enquiring about their employment policy. Subsequently he arrived in Bristol on the 5 May to watch the West Indian cricket team play Gloucester. When interviewed by the *Evening Post* on 7 May, Constantine stated the Transport Holding Company had no racist employment policy. It seemed to him “that Mr Patey is carrying out his own personal policy. The simple truth is he has no lead from his superior offices in London to do this”.⁴¹

Around the same time Stephenson had recruited Tony Benn to the campaign. Benn was ex-MP for Bristol South East, being at this time out of the House due to his inheritance of his father’s peerage. He thus had time to become quite heavily involved in the campaign and on 7 May wrote an article for the *Western Daily Press* entitled ‘Four reasons this colour bar is wrong’. In it he made it clear he supported Stephenson’s direct course of action arguing “You can’t sweep unpleasant things under the carpet and hope to forget them”.⁴²

It was symptomatic of Stephenson’s clever and strong leadership that he was able to recruit so many well known names into supporting his cause. In addition to Constantine and Benn, Stephenson had also written to Sir Lawrence Lindo, Jamaican High Commissioner. Lindo was extremely useful in his liaisons with the Transport Holding Company which owned the Omnibus Company and which eventually pushed Patey and the union into negotiations on the matter. Stephenson moreover was excellent at managing publicity. When the visiting West Indian cricket team refused to give support to the boycott on the grounds that sport and

⁴⁰ *WDP*, 3 May 1963.

⁴¹ *BEP*, 7 May 1963.

⁴² *WDP*, 7 May 1963.

politics should be kept separate, Stephenson did not take it quietly. He organised supporters to stand outside the gates to the ground before and after the match to get signatories for a petition which was to be presented to Nethercott the next week. He also managed to get a photograph of himself and Berkley Gaskin the West Indian team manager shaking hands. The photo appeared in the local press the next day, giving the impression that the boycott was supported by the team.

On Sunday, 6 May, the West Indian Association did, as promised, picket a Bristol church. The aim of this was to bring the churches out in support of the boycott. Stephenson, himself a Christian, was disappointed at the Bishop of Bristol's lack of public support for the boycott. Stephenson felt it was one of the key tenets of Christianity to treat everyone equally. However the day before the Bishop of Bristol had released a statement arguing "Moral indignation which rushes into public utterance, without great care to know the facts only inflames passion and makes settlement more difficult".⁴³ In other words he agreed with the views of a significant number of Bristol's residents, both black and white, that the boycott was too confrontational to succeed.

However events were gathering speed. The boycott had received local television coverage and appeared in the national press. It was on 8 May that a decisive breakthrough was made. Sir Lawrence Lindo, the Jamaican High Commissioner, announced that the Transport Holding Company had confirmed that the Omnibus Company was acting contrary to its regulations. The *Western Daily Press* reported that "Mr Lindo said Sir Phillip Warter, Chairman, and Sir Reginald Wilson (Managing Director) both gave him 'unqualified assurance' that their policy

⁴³ *BEP*, 6 May 1963.

of no discrimination in subsidiary undertakings would be observed by the Bristol Company”.⁴⁴

A city meeting was then held on 10 May with all major political parties being represented. It was concluded that the Omnibus Company and the unions should settle into some closed negotiations. This was not exactly what the West Indian Development Council would have wished for as it left them locked out of discussions. Patey finally agreed to such negotiations on 13 May. Even though the Transport Holding Company had stressed the colour bar was in breach of its employment policy the negotiations still took until the end of August. On the same day as Martin Luther King made his ‘I Have a Dream’ Speech, the Bristol Omnibus Company released a short statement to the press: “After Negotiations agreement has been reached between Bristol Omnibus Co. Ltd. and the local Branch of the Transport and General Worker’s Union for the employment by the company of suitable coloured workers as bus crews”.⁴⁵ The decision had been ratified with surprisingly little dissension by a union meeting the night before which was attended by 500 of the city’s 1,750 bus crews.⁴⁶

Shortly after this, a Sikh Indian college graduate named Raghbir Singh took a pay cut from his old job, as a semi-skilled machine fitter, to become Bristol’s first ‘coloured’ bus conductor. Stephenson himself has raised the fact that they did not employ a West Indian first: “You would have thought they would have done...since that was the very reason it all started”.⁴⁷ Guy Bailey however had by this time found alternative employment, as had others who had applied in the intervening months. It is probable that the employment of a Sikh over a West Indian was one last dig by Patey and the Bus Company at the West Indians who had

⁴⁴ *WDP*, 8 May 1963.

⁴⁵ *BEP*, 28 August 1963.

⁴⁶ *The Guardian*, 29 August 1963.

⁴⁷ Paul Stephenson Interview, 2 February 2007.

organised the boycott. Ironically, the bus company was making an inadvertent stride forward in race relations by employing a Sikh. In Wolverhampton and Manchester there had been disputes lasting years over whether Sikhs could wear turbans at work, a question never raised in Bristol.⁴⁸

Perhaps the most striking thing about the boycott was that it may not have changed things very substantially. Dresser points out that 2 years after the boycott there were still only four drivers and thirty-nine conductors of an ethnic minority which represented less than 0.5% of Bristol's bus crews.⁴⁹ One question we have to bear in mind is whether the boycott really ended or whether it continued in quota form as happened in other bus firms across the country and in other types of employment too.⁵⁰

Stephenson will not accept arguments about quotas stating "I never heard anything about that...we wouldn't have let that happen".⁵¹ He instead is adamant that the boycott had wider effects than just the employment of black workers on the buses. He has argued that the 1965 Race Relations Act was directly influenced by the boycott: "Would the Act still have happened but in 1965? I don't think so, without us it would have been later".⁵² His claims may seem a little outlandish bearing in mind the boycott has been largely over-looked by the history books. However there is some basis to them. Stephenson was supported by the Liberal MP Tony Lester and Julia Gaitskell the General Secretary of the Campaign Against Racial Discrimination. According to Stephenson, Lester was the architect of the Bill and was heavily influenced by what had happened in Bristol the previous year. However whilst the

⁴⁸ Dresser, *Black and White on the buses*, p. 50.

⁴⁹ Dresser, *Black and White on the buses*, p. 48.

⁵⁰ G. Nichols 'Public transport in Bristol 45-65' in P. Harris and N. Knight (eds.), *Post-war Bristol 1945 – 65: twenty years that changed the city* (Bristol, 2000).

⁵¹ Stephenson Interview, 2 February 2007.

⁵² Stephenson Interview, 2 February 2007.

Act made it unlawful to treat someone less favourably on the grounds of race, ethnic or national origins it did not specifically prohibit discrimination in employment. It was not until the 1968 Act that colour bars in employment were actually made illegal and even then the Act was difficult to enforce. Ultimately it is difficult to say how much credence we can give Stephenson's view. He is perhaps right in his general line of thought in that the build up of racial tension in the late 1950s and early 1960s probably did lead to the 1965 Act. However this would include the race riots in Notting Hill and Nottingham of 1958 and other racial disturbances, not just the bus boycott.

Having examined the events of the boycott, it is now possible to analyse the underlying causes and motives in the bar and the boycott. There are many questions which can be discussed. Was the root of the bar with the workers, the management or the union? Were the unions being overly protective of their workforce at the cost of allowing racism to perpetuate, or was it in fact institutional racism that led them to ignore the bar? Were Stephenson's methods over confrontational and would he have been better off with another approach? These questions will be addressed in the following chapters.

The Union

The TGWU would never accept that the colour bar and resulting bus boycott were an out-and-out case of racial discrimination. Never once did Nethercott, Coxwell, or any other union official accept racism was a predominant factor. Of course racism, as will be discussed below, was evidently important in the events of May 1963. To deny this would be to take a very naïve or, as is likely in the case of the unions, wilfully ignorant view of the situation. Nevertheless one can understand the union's viewpoint as the economics behind discrimination are often forgotten. The white workers were dependent on overtime to make their wages up to an acceptable standard of living. For this reason they were reliant on there being a work force that was under capacity. Thus, if any new worker group arrived and began to fill the empty jobs, the workers would lose their overtime and be forced to live on wages that were only just above subsistence level. Naturally, any new worker group would have been unpopular whether they had been from Cardiff or Kingston. Race certainly brings in an additional dimension to this situation, but without this economic situation it is unlikely that the black population would have faced anywhere near the same amount of hostility.

Beetham has elaborated on this idea in his book *Transport and Turbans*. He argues that the basic wage for bus drivers in the areas he studied (Wolverhampton and Manchester) was around £7 a week. This was not a huge amount on which to support a family and would give no leeway for even minor luxuries. In addition he argued that there were fears that because the new workers were immigrants from less developed countries they would be used to lower standards of living and thus would work for less money giving bosses no reason to increase

wages.⁵³ Put simply, not only would an influx of immigrant labour mean less over time but it would also mean no wage rises and possibly even pay cuts and unemployment for those who refused to accept them.

However these arguments that immigrants would flood the workforce with cheap labour leaving the white population unemployed were of questionable validity. Several studies of post-war colonial immigration have shown that if one allows a time lag of around 3 months then you can perfectly fit the numbers of immigrants to the demands of the labour market. In other words, although very few immigrants organised employment prior to their arrival they only tended to come when employment was plentiful. When the demand for labour dropped off so did the number of immigrants arriving. Layton Henry has concurred with this view, stressing that it was ‘pull’ factors of available jobs, greater opportunities and a higher standard of living that caused migrants to move as opposed to the ‘push’ factors such as lack of employment at home.⁵⁴ Some far-sighted individuals even recognised this at the time. George Gardiner, writing for the *Evening Post’s* 1961 series on discrimination, commented astutely on it: “The evidence is that in times of recession, as in 1957-58, the number of immigrants falls off sharply anyway – enough – at least, to prevent them causing a separate employment problem of their own. And to bar them during times of industrial prosperity indicates a peculiarly static view of the British economy”.⁵⁵

Whatever may have been true behind the scenes or within local branches, on an official level discriminatory policies were widely condemned. The national branch of the TGWU certainly claimed a completely non-discriminatory policy. However Ramdin has argued that this was easy for them in principle but difficult in practice. Ramdin examined the TGWU’s reaction to

⁵³ D. Beetham, *Transport and turbans: a comparative study in local politics* (Oxford, 1970), P. 15.

⁵⁴ Z. Layton Henry, *The politics of race in Britain* (London, 1984), P.17.

⁵⁵ *BEP*, 31 October 1961.

two local disputes involving black employment in 1955, one in West Bromwich and one in Wolverhampton. In both disputes he found the union supporting, or at least not opposing, discrimination in order to protect the jobs of their members.⁵⁶ Certainly there is no evidence of racism on the basis of pure prejudice from Ron Nethercott, more that he was interested in protecting his workers and their pay. It appears, then, that the central union whilst painting itself as supporting complete equality was happy to turn a blind eye to the actions of local branches. Even on an official level the policy of protecting workers pay always took precedent over half hearted notions against discrimination. The union newspaper, the *Transport and General Workers' Record* for May 1963 provides an astounding example of this. Whilst it completely ignores the boycott which was by this stage making national news, it contained an editorial condemning the apartheid in South Africa. Moreover it has a special report entitled 'civil liberties and you' which states "Intolerance is contagious, one day it may be directed against coloured people, and against the Irish the next, and then Catholics, then Jews, the trade unionists. That is why all of us have an equal stake in fighting it – just as we have injustice".⁵⁷ In addition to ignoring the actions of its local branches, it seems that even the national branch behind closed doors had issues with the influx of migrant workers. At the 1957 TGWU conference a motion was passed, with executive support, which called for the government to pass strict controls over the migration of immigrants. Clearly asking for controls over migration is not the same as wilfully ignoring discrimination but it does show the attitude of the national branch may not have been as wholesome as they would have use believe.

The Bristol branch of the TGWU's first move in the boycott was to argue that it was nothing to do with them. Anxious to avoid getting itself into a situation in which there really could be

⁵⁶ R. Ramdin, *The Making of the black working class in Britain* (Aldershot, 1987), p. 201.

⁵⁷ *Transport and General Workers' Record*, May 1963.

no winning outcome for the union, they argued that it was not a union policy and that the matter was between the boycotters and the Omnibus Company. For example on the 2 May, when Bristol University Students began questioning the union's lack of action against the boycott a union official was quoted in the press as saying it was "unfair and annoying that they should be dragged into the colour bar".⁵⁸ The union used the argument that it was not as if they personally operated a colour bar. As the *Western Mail* quoted Arthur Coxwell "The decision not to employ West Indians has been made by the bus company alone. We have no colour bar in our union, in fact we have over 7,000 West Indian members in the South West alone".⁵⁹ However, most of these were workers at the large Fry's Chocolate factory which had never really experienced much in the way of industrial conflict, let alone racially motivated industrial conflict.

However as the union vote of 1955 (in which the passenger department passed the colour bar) became fairly widespread knowledge, the union had to change tack. Nethercott began to argue that Stephenson was entirely unrepresentative of the West Indians in Bristol and thus the union had no reason to pay any attention or support to his cause. As the *Western Daily Press* stated, "the busmen's union rejected him as the West Indians leader and said he had jeopardised the welfare of the city's coloured people".⁶⁰ The *Daily Herald* interviewed Nethercott for an article which appeared on 4 May. He was quoted as calling Stephenson "irresponsible and dishonest...we deplore Mr Stephenson's actions and are sure he is not representing the views of the majority of West Indians in Bristol".⁶¹ It was this article which prompted Stephenson to sue Nethercott and the Herald for libel, a battle he won being awarded some damages. However the unions continued to argue that it was Bill Smith who

⁵⁸ *BEP*, 2 May 1963.

⁵⁹ *Western Mail*, 2 May 1963.

⁶⁰ *WD P*, 3 May 1963.

⁶¹ *The Herald*, 4 May 1963.

really represented the West Indians and it was with Smith only whom they would liaise. This was despite a statement signed by 14 officers of the West Indian Development Council stating that they considered “Mr Stephenson to be their leader and added that if Mr Smith had displayed the same amount of courage in drawing the public’s attention to the ugly situation 14 years ago the coloured citizens of Bristol would be willing to recognise his leadership”.⁶² They added that “the sooner the union leaders enter into negotiations with the Development Council the sooner coloured commonwealth citizens will be given a fair and equal chance instead of lip service”.⁶³

This idea of ‘lip service’ was in reference to the union’s evident hypocrisy. For an organisation that preached the idea of brotherhood of man to allow its workers to bar certain people from employment simply because of the colour of their skin was deeply troubling for many sections of the community. Nethercott, however, never made any racist comments and it appears that his main concern was simply with protecting the interests of the union. His main problem with the boycott, aside from the threat to his workers’ overtime, was that Stephenson had never approached the union and asked for help. In fact he had directly confronted them and blamed them for the perpetuation of the worker’s racist opinions. Stephenson was perfectly right to do this but one can appreciate how threatened Nethercott felt. Beetham has raised this point in his earlier mentioned study. He found that “the union leaders for their part regarded it as a challenge to their authority; it was their job to initiate changes in the rules, and they could not allow a question concerning conditions to pass out of their hands, particularly to an immigrant or immigrant groups”.⁶⁴

⁶² *BEP*, 6 May 1963.

⁶³ *BEP*, 6 May 1963.

⁶⁴ Beetham, *Transport and Turbans*, p. 4.

The union's inaction and hypocrisy was still unacceptable to many sections of the community. Even those who appreciated that the local TGWU may not itself have been racist still saw them as allowing racist views to be perpetuated when they should have been educating against them. The *Evening Post* in its first editorial on the boycott asked "What are trade union leaders doing to get the race virus out of the systems of the rank and file? There is an urgent job of education here. The unions have plenty to say about South Africa. They should look nearer to home".⁶⁵ Those who wrote in to the newspapers seemed to concur. 'P A Worthington' went straight to the heart of the matter, arguing the unions should "Educate those who hold these prejudices rather than condone or encourage them".⁶⁶ Moreover the University students also held the unions at least partly responsible. In the autumn edition of their termly *Nonesuch Magazine* (a subsidiary of their weekly *Nonesuch News*) the central article was a piece investigating discrimination. In the discussion of the boycott they stressed that "At the height of the controversy it was repeatedly made clear that the people were protesting at the unions as well as the company".⁶⁷

Even Tony Benn, the socialist ex-MP, laid some blame at the union's door. Benn commented that on 2 May Desmond Brown of the Bristol TGWU had phoned him to criticise him for jumping on the band wagon and supporting the boycott. Moreover, Brown told Benn that Stephenson was a 'commie' who had ruined an issue the unions had been quietly negotiating on for years. Benn's response was unequivocal "I told them I did not contact them because they had issued a statement saying it had nothing to do with them".⁶⁸ By 5 May Benn's discussions with Nethercott and other union members had soured his views even further as he

⁶⁵ *BEP*, 30 April 1963.

⁶⁶ *BEP*, 4 May 1963.

⁶⁷ *Nonesuch Magazine*, Autumn 1963 edition.

⁶⁸ T. Benn, *Out of the Wilderness: Diaries 1963 – 7* (London, 1988), p. 14.

diarised “I can’t stand the equivocation and hypocrisy of pretending this is caused by trouble makers”, as of course the union was maintaining.⁶⁹

In fact the unions did deserve a proportion of the blame that was thrown at them. One would not begin to argue that society in 1963 was without racial discrimination. Of this there is no doubt. However it does seem a little simplistic automatically to place all discrimination at the door of racism. Clearly part of the explanation for the situation in Bristol was the protection of trade union members against outside forces that could have a negative effect on their employment. We can establish the non-racial basis of such protectionism because in the post-war period Polish refugees and European Volunteer Workers were far less accepted by trade unionists than colonial migrants. Tannahill made this point abundantly clear in his 1958 study of European Volunteer Workers.⁷⁰ This hierarchal discrimination was because colonial immigrants were British and thus had far more of a claim to British jobs than the other two groups. If the TGWU’s policy had been based on pure racism, then surely those of the same or more similar race and culture would have been more accepted than colonial migrants.⁷¹

The TGWU were perhaps most openly protective of busmen’s jobs because it was an industry in which both pay and status had long been on the slide. Since the Second World War pay had relatively declined with the growth of private industry. The increase in private motor vehicle ownership meant that many lines often made a loss, decreasing job security and causing a reduction in benefits such as pensions. Thus the threat of a new influx of labour would further undermine what remaining benefits there were, the obvious example being overtime pay. Of course the fact that the new influx of labour was black did add another dimension to the situation. There was a conception amongst workers of a ‘black man’s job’,

⁶⁹ Benn, *Out of the Wilderness*, p. 14.

⁷⁰ J. A. Tannahill, *European volunteer workers in Britain* (Manchester, 1958).

⁷¹ Layton Henry, *The politics of race in Britain*, pgs. 28 – 30.

something that was the lowest grade of demeaning employment to which white workers should not stoop. Workers in Bristol clearly worried about their job being turned into one of these lowest status jobs. However there is no evidence to suggest that the TGWU leaders considered this view point. It seems we must consider the question of racism further before making any conclusions as to the primary motivation of different factions in the dispute.

Racism

Goulborne has argued that race relations are a matter of consciousness. In other words there is only a difference if people notice and act upon the difference. He gives the example of Brazil where several races co-exist perfectly harmoniously because there is no societal awareness of the racial differences.⁷² In Bristol, of course, there was an awareness of racial difference. As previously explained Bristol was a very homogenous city. For this reason Bristol's racial awareness was also likely to be more intense than in other parts of the country. However it can still be argued in spite of this that racism cannot fully account for the attitudes displayed in the boycott. If this is true of Bristol, a city one would expect to be amongst the most racist, then perhaps we should change our underlying assumptions about racism.

Evidence that racism was widespread across England in the late 1950s and early 1960s is plentiful. A glaring example of overt racism came just a year after the boycott, in 1964, in Smethwick. The 1964 general election saw the Labour MP Patrick Gordon Walker fighting to hold onto a seat he had held since 1945. Despite having held the seat for twenty years, a national swing of 3.2 per cent to Labour, and the fact that he had been quietly appointed Foreign Secretary designate, the seat went to his Conservative opponent, Peter Griffiths, with a swing of 7.5 per cent. The reason for this was that Griffiths had based his campaign on exploiting the racial tensions in the area which had experienced a large amount of Commonwealth immigration. It is almost certain that he and his campaigners were behind the

⁷² H. Goulbourne, *Race Relations in Britain since 1945* (Basingstoke, 1998).

slogan which bands of neighbourhood children ran around loudly chanting 'If you want a nigger neighbour, vote Liberal or Labour'.⁷³

There are many examples that show racial discrimination in employment was also countrywide. As late as 1967 the Political and Economic Planning Report interviewed 1000 immigrants from different areas and nearly 72 per cent said they had been discriminated against in employment.⁷⁴ Earlier examples abound such as those detailed by Randim in his study *The Making of the Black Working Class*. In West Bromwich in February 1955 the workforce conducted a series of token Saturday strikes in protest at the employment of a single Indian trainee conductor. In Wolverhampton in August of the same year the TGWU argued for a 5 per cent maximum quota of immigrants or no more than 52 of the 900 busmen employed. When this was rejected by the management the union banned overtime from 1 September to prove its point. Moreover a Manchester bus company was reported to be operating a successful colour bar having examined the problems with coloured employment which had occurred elsewhere. In the Wolverhampton case the union argued it was not a racist policy, merely a wish for the staff not to be taken to full capacity purely by coloured workers.⁷⁵ However, when even such a tiny number of staff were objected to, one must see it as being on a mainly racial basis. It is evident that many Commonwealth migrants were not blind to this discrimination. In October 1962 the London busmen and railway men, who, by this stage, consisted of more ethnic minority employees than white, considered strike action in protest at the fact that there was still no coloured porters at Paddington station despite their widespread employment elsewhere in the transport industry.⁷⁶

⁷³ Layton Henry, *The politics of race in Britain*, p. 43.

⁷⁴ Political and Economic Planning: *Racial Discrimination* (London, 1967).

⁷⁵ R. Ramdin, *The making of the black working class in Britain* (Aldershot, 1987), pgs. 189-201.

⁷⁶ R. B. Davison, *Commonwealth immigrants* (London, 1964), p. 43.

Of course racism was not confined to particular events or times, it was always present in British society although not always visible or known to the general public. One in the series of articles highlighting discrimination in Bristol by the *Evening Post* explained the problems of healthcare workers. The article titled *No Barriers by the Sick Beds* emphasised the fact that hundreds of young women of colonial origin had come to Britain to train or work as nurses. Whilst they faced little or no discrimination professionally, as soon as they left the hospital they were confronted with racism. Taxis and buses would not stop for them and they were forced to stay in the restrictive nurses' homes because landlords would not take them. This, the article argued, was going on across the country and not just in Bristol.⁷⁷ In other public service sectors there were taboo problems with Commonwealth immigrants. For example, despite black American GI's and, indeed, the British Gurkha regiments being of invaluable service during the Second World War, the British army still proposed and passed a 5 per cent quota of ethnic minorities in the forces. This quota was never reached up until its removal by the 1968 Race Relations Act which outlawed racial discrimination in employment.⁷⁸

Such discriminatory policies have often been blamed on an illiberal public pressurising an otherwise liberal government. However more recent race relations writers and historians have begun to challenge this thesis. Layton Henry has argued that in fact the elite would very much have liked to have limited immigration earlier than 1961 but was bound by the conundrum of defining British citizenship. He further argued that the British elite allowed racism and racist attitudes to perpetuate in order to be able to clamp down on immigration and dissuade possible migrants from coming. They did this by only focusing on the negatives of migration such as housing shortages and short term strains on the welfare system. Other European countries such as France stressed the positives such as the benefits to the economy

⁷⁷ *BEP*, 15 November 1961.

⁷⁸ *The Observer*, 25 November 2001.

and the fact that immigrants filled positions that were too low paid and low status for many native workers. By focusing only on the negatives the British establishment was letting racism perpetuate and seep further into British society.⁷⁹

What was the significance of this racial discrimination when it occurred in Bristol? To what extent can it be factored in to explain the colour bar and boycott? At around the same time as the wave of post-war colonial immigration occurred, somewhere in the region of 100,000 Irish emigrated to England and did not experience anywhere near the level of discrimination that black immigrants did. However Irish immigrants still had problems finding housing and employment.⁸⁰ This again harks back to the old problem of competition for resources which many white people felt should be kept for people who had been born in England and shows that racism was not the sole reason for the colour bar. This is clear from some of the letters that were sent to the local news papers during the boycott. Perhaps the clearest example of this fear of competition for resources is provided by a letter which barely refers to race. The anonymous letter stated that “re the controversy about the question of employing coloured labour on Bristol’s buses I am a neutral. What I do object to is that while there is so much unemployment in general the bus company still employ many married women...by employing married women, many young men and even widows are unable to obtain a job on our buses”.⁸¹ This is clear evidence of the prevalent idea that jobs should be reserved for those with the most rights to them. In this case he is arguing that a man has more rights to a job than a woman because a woman should be at home being provided for by her husband. The logic of course extends to a white worker having more rights to a job than a black worker because a black worker supposedly has the option of working in his own country. As a letter from 1 May signed ‘Bias’ proves. “It has always been a source of amazement to me that all

⁷⁹ Layton Henry, *The politics of race in Britain*, pgs.18-20.

⁸⁰ J. Solomos, *Race and racism in Britain* (Basingstoke, 2003).

⁸¹ *BEP*, 3 May 1963.

these thousands of coloured people have been allowed to come and settle in England, this land of housing problems and unemployment”.⁸²

One of the bus company’s main arguments against the boycott was that there was a colour bar everywhere and it was unfair that they were being singled out as a company. As one letter writer, ‘Busman’, put it “Why choose the buses to try out these high minded principles? When large organisations like the Fire Service, Post Office, even the Police Forces, open their doors to coloured labour and set an example, then shall we be educated”.⁸³ Dresser concurs that in fact there was discrimination in almost every form of employment, she describes it a “virtually universal practice”.⁸⁴ The dubious national newspaper the *Daily Sketch* interviewed Patey on 8 May who argued such colour bars were exceedingly common. The article asserted “Mr Patey avoids no responsibility while other bus companies all over the country refuse to allow coloured men to work their buses and keep quiet about it...other companies simply invite the man to an interview and pretend to fail him giving a spurious reason”.⁸⁵ Patey went on to ask his interviewer “Have you ever seen a coloured policeman in Britain? The answer is NO but, of course, there is no colour bar. The only thing is that coloured people ALWAYS fail the police interview”.⁸⁶ This was not an argument acceptable to everyone as demonstrated by ‘Roger Franklin’ in a letter to the *Evening Post*. He wrote that bus crews argue “that there are other jobs where a colour bar operates, and consider this a reason for being equally stupid themselves”.⁸⁷

⁸² *BEP*, 1 May 1963.

⁸³ *BEP*, 3 May 1963.

⁸⁴ Dresser, *Black and White on the buses*, p. 44.

⁸⁵ *Daily Sketch*, 8 May 1963.

⁸⁶ *Daily Sketch*, 8 May 1963.

⁸⁷ *BEP*, 7 May 1963.

If such discrimination was so widespread it begs the question why were there so few incidences of racial unrest? Surely if such discrimination occurred every day then it would cause friction on a far more regular basis than had so far been the case. The key was that discrimination in British society was kept quiet, only publicly expressed by a minority. This led to those who did express such sentiments arguing that the majority sentiment was on their side but people were too scared to express what they really felt. This view was expressed in the already mentioned letter from 'Bias'. He asked "Do you honestly think the Bristol public want Pakistanis and Jamaicans serving public transport? ... I am quite sure the average person, if he had the courage to give an honest opinion would give a negative answer to the question".⁸⁸ 'A. Nelmes' was less explicit but clearly hinting at the same thing: "The opinions of well known sportsmen, noisy students and minority church goers are no true guide".⁸⁹ Moreover because racist views were, on the whole, not publicly expressed it meant that those who were not racist could ignore the problem. As Patey suggested, people ignored the fact there were no black policemen; if they could not see the discrimination in day to day life they tended to overlook it and were very surprised to see black action against it. As *The Times* editorial of 7 May argued, "this dispute is symptomatic of the ostrich like bewilderment with which so many people in Britain contemplate the colour problem in their midst".⁹⁰ John Morgan of the *New Statesman* is a classic example of such bewilderment "it is still a little disconcerting to hear a young west Indian in Bristol's city road echo almost word for word complaints about discrimination I've been offered by negroes in the U.S. in the last month".⁹¹

Racism in Britain was, at least in part, hidden. Perhaps, then, part of the poor reaction from some of the population towards the bus dispute was that they could not see what the problem

⁸⁸ *BEP*, 1 May 1963.

⁸⁹ *WDP*, 8 May 1963.

⁹⁰ *The Times*, 7 May 1963.

⁹¹ *New Statesman*, 10 May 1963.

was. Moreover Stephenson's confrontational methods seemed even more aggressive in light of this under awareness of racism. Black people in Britain were fully expected to assimilate into British society. Boycotts, without even attempting negotiation, were not the norm. However we can see that as far as racism goes Stephenson was in a no-win situation. In Manchester disputes over whether Sikhs should be allowed to wear turbans on the buses took seven years of careful negotiation to solve. Stephenson was thus faced with the choice of long drawn-out negotiation which may not get anywhere and would allow racism to continue unchallenged, or he could directly address the problem and face a barrage of disapproval and racism as a result. An *Independent* article celebrating 40 years since the first Race Relations Act stated the boycott was "the defining moment in Britain's black civil rights movement that finally forced the government to tackle racism in society".⁹² This may be exaggerating somewhat but it is true that by tackling the problem head on Stephenson began discussion on a problem which had previously been ignored.

⁹² *The Independent*, 8th November 2005.

Conclusion

The evidence strongly supports the argument that there was widespread and ingrained racial prejudice in Bristol. There is no basis from which to argue that an influx of migrant workers from, for example, Cardiff would have experienced anywhere near as much antagonism and hostility as the West Indians attempting to work on the buses did. However the evidence additionally suggests that any migrant worker would have experienced a certain amount of problems, because the issues causing resentment were not solely racial. The problems that arose were, in part, due to the low wages and status of the job which, it was feared, would be reduced further under a workforce at full capacity. The TGWU played a clear role here being protective of their workers rights, the local branch was effectively endorsing the racism of its members. It must, of course, be taken into account that the TGWU's first loyalty was to its paid subscribers; it had only a limited duty towards the unemployed immigrants in Bristol. Racial attitudes and discrimination are complex and often, as we have seen, based on multifaceted and interlocking causes. For this reason it is clear that attitudes would not and could not have been reversed overnight.

The idea which has constantly occurred is that of competition for resources. For this reason it is crucial that when analysing racial disturbances that economic factors are not over looked. It would be a fallacy to examine the problems of black migrant workers only through their race and not through the fact they were also migrant workers. The fact that they were migrant workers had a significant effect on the attitudes of those discriminating against them, as W. J. Gordon writing in the *Evening Post* demonstrated: "I have no colour bar but a foreign bar. That is European, including Southern Irish, all crowding into this country either claiming our jobs or our National Insurance and enjoying the labour conditions other people born in this

country have fought for”.⁹³ Those who had been migrant workers saw that the colour bar on the buses was not just about race but also about safeguarding employment for local people. ‘F. James’ had come to Bristol in the 1930s from Wales in search of work. He argued that “personally I am convinced that colour has very little bearing on the case as far as the Bristolian is concerned. It is simply the fact that these coloured people are “outsiders”. Whereas in the 30’s, the excuse was accent, today it is colour”.⁹⁴

As this thesis has demonstrated, racial tensions were prevalent across Britain in the late fifties and early sixties. To build firm arguments about them far more detailed research must be carried out. The history of racial integration in Britain needs a closer examination. The illegal barring of 9 teenagers from a white school in Little Rock has become one of the most well known events in twentieth century American history. It is still the centre of many historical and cultural debates. Americans are still discussing and dealing with their moral culpability and the relevance of it to modern society. The legal barring of hundreds of men from an all white bus service in Bristol remains largely unacknowledged. A full discourse and dissection of the causes of racism and the interlocking economics cannot begin until British history begins to acknowledge its concealed past.

⁹³ *BEP*, 9 May 1963.

⁹⁴ *BEP*, 14 May 1963.

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