The March to Mons Sacer: British Immigration Policy, 1951–1979

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Historians and political scientists have researched issues adjacent to the question of how or when governments can pursue policy with which their electorates disagree but, until now, their separate streams of work have rarely been synthesised. This paper seeks to unite these two streams by using a case study of immigration policy in the UK between 1951 and 1979 to establish the conditions under which elite policymaking is possible in democracies. Assuming a Downsian model of party competition, three necessary conditions are proposed: a non-permissive electoral system, an opposition unwilling to oppose, and no threat of rebellion from within the governing party. I use standard qualitative analytical methods, as well as some original quantitative studies of parliamentary debate topics. I argue that all these conditions were met during the 1950s, when successive Conservative governments pursued policy contrary to public opinion. By contrasting this equilibrium with the changes in immigration policy after 1961, I show that the emergence of a powerful right-wing lobby within the Conservative Party was the primary reason that the liberal immigration policy of the 1950s was abandoned.

Introduction

When can leaders, enlightened or otherwise, carry out policy with which the electorate disagree?

This prospect strikes those of us raised on lengthy encomia to 'democracy', 'self-government', and 'people power' as odd. But just such a situation emerged in the 1950s in the United Kingdom under the Conservative governments of Churchill, Eden, Macmillan, and Douglas-Home. These governments have gained a reputation for moderation and restraint and as such have suffered from a lack of scholarly attention to their plodding pragmatism. Instead, historians and political scientists are much more interested in the Attlee and Thatcher governments, which were outstanding for reasons good and bad.

But the governments of the 1950s and 1960s are noteworthy for other reasons. Britain's government during this period, aristocratic in nature and liberal in temperament,[1] pursued two policies which fundamentally altered Britain's domestic and foreign situation. Firstly, they kept the terms of the *British Nationality Act 1948* unchanged until 1962, thereby granting unlimited immigration rights to over 800 million Commonwealth citizens. Secondly, they embarked upon a campaign of decolonisation, dismantling the British Empire they inherited more-or-less intact.[2]

A very specific question which has received little to no attention in the literature remains unanswered. This is not about the rights and wrongs of the policies in question. Nor does it concern the reasons why Conservative politicians *wished* to adopt liberal policies, except where this is directly relevant for its aims.

Instead, this paper seeks to set out the conditions which must be in place to allow elite politicians to pursue their objectives, even in the face of public opposition. It seeks to unite historical and political science research, by conducting a case study of immigration policy in the period between 1951 and 1979. The fifteen years following the fall of the governments in this study are included in order to examine the disestablishment of the liberal policy consensus they established, and to conduct a closest-case study to identify which conditions were relevant in their facilitating policy. These findings are placed in the context of Downsian theory of party competition, in order to propose some conditions for unpopular government policymaking.

There are three necessary conditions for the failure of normal party competition to drag policy back to the median voter:

1. *A non-permissive electoral system;*
2. *An opposition unwilling to oppose;*
3. *No threat of rebellion from within the governing party.*

It can be shown that these conditions were in place for both immigration and colonial policy during the 1950s, but that condition three failed around 1961/1962. The emergence of an organised right-wing faction within the Conservative Party precipitated a shift toward restrictive immigration policies over the next fifteen years.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of political science theory concerning party competition, setting out a basic Downsian model by which we can understand the Conservative Party's manoeuvres during this period. This is followed by a case study of immigration policy between 1951 and 1979, consisting of an historical review and an analytical section. The analytical section of each case study seeks to assess the conditions proposed in the theoretical discussion. These are summarised in the final section.

Theoretical Review

Over the past seventy years, a substantial literature discussing British immigration policy in the post-war period has emerged. As is natural with research areas like this, most published work straddles historical and political analysis, both of which tend to be characterised by different research methods, different areas of focus, and different theoretical debates. It is the intention of this paper to integrate these strands of research in a single account of policy formation between 1950 and 1979.

Two debates emerge. The first is a largely historical debate, which analyses *why* policymakers chose to pursue liberal immigration policy. Archival documents and political speeches are used to assess the relative importance of several factors in creating a consensus in favour of liberal policies. The second is more familiar to scholars of political science and asks a more

comparative question about the sorts of institutional arrangements which shape policymaking. These studies ask questions like whether parties matter, or whether electoral systems determine the policy freedom of political actors (Schmidt 1996).

1. Why did the Conservatives pursue unpopular liberal immigration policies until 1962?

There are two rival accounts of Conservative immigration policy. The first, the *pragmatic* view, argues that immigration policy during this period was formulated with reference only to British national interests. These policies were undoubtedly liberal compared to the post-1979 settlement, but these were not justified with recourse to a belief in cosmopolitanism or internationalism. Instead, the government sought to maintain British influence with the so-called *White Settler Colonies* (e.g. Canada, Australia, South Africa) by offering all 'British subjects' unlimited rights to migrate to the UK. Wendy Webster has written about documentary support for the *pragmatic* view in records of meetings held in the 1950s about the unintended influx of non-white British subjects from across the Commonwealth (Webster 2011). Rab Butler, a senior minister in the Macmillan and Douglas-Home governments, also wrote in 1962 that the introduction of restrictions in that year was 'intended' to reduce Black immigration to Britain (Butler 1961). This, combined with the pressure placed on colonial administrations to limit the issue of passports for African British subjects even in the 1950s, point to a *pragmatic* interpretation of government policy.

The second interpretation places much more emphasis on the *liberal* policy preferences of Conservative governments. Focusing on statements made by ministers opposing the introduction of overtly racist immigration policies, this account sees ministers as activists in contrast with a largely reactionary public. There is much to support this line of argument in the correspondence of politicians: much of the rhetoric spoke of the need to welcome immigrants from across the Commonwealth, regardless of skin colour. Colonial Secretary Alan Lennox-Boyd set himself firmly against a colour bar of any kind, ultimately carrying the day in Cabinet (Lennox-Boyd 1955). Moreover, writers who favour the *liberal* interpretation often point to the sheer extent of immigration from the Commonwealth during the 1950s, which was permitted to increase substantially until restrictions were imposed in 1962 (Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

The results of this debate are not directly relevant to the question pursued in this paper. They are included here to provide context, and to define more clearly the question which is to be discussed:

2. Why were the Conservatives able to pursue unpopular policies during this period?

The question above is very interesting, of course. But the answers provided over the last seventy years only present a bigger puzzle. Whatever the reasons for unpopular policy—be they *liberal*, *pragmatic*, or otherwise—how were they able to get away with it? The debate around this question more closely resembles those on other topics in political science. It is to this question that this paper attends.
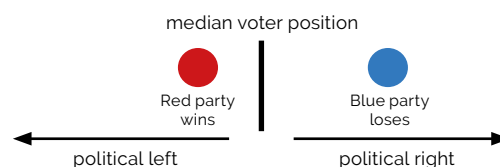

Figure 1 | Basic model of party competition.

Various scholars have sought to provide institutional explanations for policy outcomes. Most of these depart from a basic model of party competition (first formalised by Downs (1957)), in which we imagine two parties on a linear political spectrum. In this model, we assume for simplicity that there is just one salient political issue, and that each voter casts their ballot for the party closest to their own position. The idea is that, under perfect competition, parties will converge on the position of the median voter, indicated in **Figure 1** by the vertical line. Any other policy choice would be sub-optimal.

Of course, the Downsian model contains scope for failures of convergence. Much has been written about the failure of the assumptions which underpin the basic theory, but most of these focus on multi-party competition and abnormal turnout dynamics.[3] In the context of 1950s Britain, however, these do not appear to be relevant. Turnout was high: between 75 and 85 percent in all general elections. Moreover, this high turnout did not systematically differ by age, class, or political affiliation.[4] The 1950s also marks the closest British parliamentary democracy has come to a pure two-party system. Around 95 percent of votes were cast for the two major parties, and the traditional third party, the Liberals, had minimal parliamentary representation.

The purpose of this debate is to explain situations such as that found in **Figure 2**. Here, both parties occupy a policy space away from the median voter. Blue wins the election, of course, but most voters have policy preferences to the right of both major parties. In a fundamental sense, the settlement illustrated by **Figure 2** is inefficient. At the very least, the policy preferences of voters are not being transmitted into policy outcomes. There is consensus in the literature up to this point— but several writers have sought to provide different institutional explanations of situations like that shown in **Figure 2**.

The first rests on the permissiveness of the electoral system. An electoral system which makes it easy for small parties to gain seats in the legislature prevents parties from congregating on one side of the debate. Otherwise, as in **Figure 2**, an upstart political party could emerge which attracted the votes of those to the right of the existing consensus. It is not necessary for these parties to emerge in actual fact—the mere
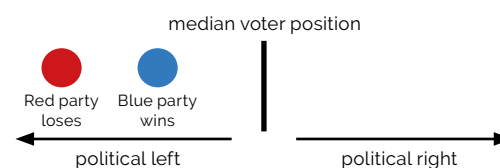

Figure 2 | Basic model of party competition.

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3   For a neat overview, see Grofman (2004). For a sympathetic challenge, see Stokes (1963).

4   See Butler, D. for election studies of the period.

possibility is enough to confine existing parties to the median. But under a majoritarian system (or a proportional system with a sufficiently high entry threshold), established parties feel secure enough to pursue policy away from the centre ground. Moreover, Schmidt (1996) provides an account of why majoritarian systems make the ideological positions of parties more *relevant*, as it is more likely that they will govern alone. In coalitions, parties usually come to policy positions which closely mirror the median position, or the existing policy of governmental institutions.

A non-permissive electoral system is a necessary condition of a situation such as that found in **Figure 2**, or in Britain in the 1950s, but it is quite clearly not a sufficient cause on its own. On many more issues, parties have converged on the centre ground, even under majoritarian electoral systems.[5] The literature on this does not appear to go much further in seeking to provide the conditions under which a **Figure 2**-type situation may emerge. I shall seek therefore, to propose some institutional and policy conditions under which governing parties can pursue unpopular policy.

The first seems to be the relative policy position of opposing parties. In **Figure 2**, it is imperative that the Red party is to the left of the Blue, for Blue to pursue unpopular policy. In other words, all relevant opposing parties must be at least as far from the median voter as the governing party. This can take a number of forms. In the most obvious case, it is because the opposing parties have stronger views on the issue than the governing one (as on the issues discussed in this paper). In the second, it can be because both parties have congruent preferences, for example if a matter is judged to be 'above politics' or of 'national importance'. It has been argued that the seemingly apolitical pursuit of aggressive monetary policy in the UK in the 1980s took this form (Kettell 2008).

A further necessary institutional condition is intra-party cohesion. In other words, the leadership must be satisfied that members of the legislature for the governing party will not threaten the passage of its policy. In the context of this paper, this concerns the rigid discipline exercised over Conservative MPs by party managers. Even though a sizeable group of backbench Conservative MPs were opposed to measures like decolonisation and Commonwealth immigration,[6] party managers were able to use their powers of intimidation, patronage, and persuasion to minimise rebellion. This condition could also be met by a governing party with a highly cohesive ideological profile. Governments with high numbers of newly-elected MPs find it easier to meet this condition. It should also be noted, as an avenue for potential future research, that presidential systems are considerably less likely to meet this condition. Members of the legislature do not depend on the executive for their seats, and legislative parties usually retain much more institutional autonomy.

It is the purpose of this paper to conduct a case study of unpopular liberal policies pursued in the UK, and to assess these against the conditions I have proposed.

Research Methods

My central thesis is this: if a party wishes to pursue policy which is far removed from the preferences of the median voter, a particular set of conditions must be in place. The necessary conditions I have proposed are:

1. *A non-permissive electoral system;*
2. *An opposition unwilling to oppose;*
3. *No threat of defeat by backbenchers.*

To make the case, it must first be established that government policy did diverge significantly from the preferences of the median voter. Then each of the conditions must be tested against available evidence. Naturally, condition one holds trivially in both cases studied here.

Conducting high-quality research into historical cases such as these is difficult. Opinion polling from the time was limited (particularly at the beginning of the period), and very rarely policy-specific. There are, however, qualitative means at our disposal which can grant a glimpse into public opinion. This is done largely by reference to qualitative analysis of events: diary entries of leading politicians, attempts by party members to unseat sitting MPs, and limited opinion poll evidence.

It is my intention to use modest quantitative data, sourced from the written record of proceedings in the UK Parliament, Hansard. Every word, debate, and vote is recorded there, and this data is in the public domain. Whether by ignorance or design, this source is relatively rarely utilised by those conducting political research in the UK. I believe there is considerable potential here for large-*n* textual analysis of rhetoric over time, as well as the salience of issues.

Here I use this rich source sparingly, only to chart the willingness of MPs to discuss government policy in areas relating to immigration policy. I use a basic dataset, included in the appendix, which details the frequency with which a certain topic or subject has been raised in Parliament. This includes private members' bills, debates, and questions to ministers. We must be careful to avoid drawing the inference from parliamentary salience to salience in wider society, particularly given that part of my thesis is that parliamentary proceedings *do not* replicate public opinion. However, these data can safely be regarded as good ways to code the willingness of opposition parties to oppose and the propensity for backbenchers to rebel.

Beyond this, the rest of this paper relies heavily on traditional qualitative case-study research. The changing willingness of governments over the period 1950–1979 to ignore public opinion provides good opportunity for a most-similar style research design. I shall seek to look at what changed between the periods where governments seemed happy to ignore the public, and those periods just a few years later when policy shifted dramatically. I shall draw on the speeches and diaries of politicians from the time, the election results in 1955, 1959, 1964, 1966, 1970, and 1974, and the available opinion polling data.

Immigration Policy, 1951–1979: The March to Mons Sacer

British immigration policy between 1950 and 1979 underwent perhaps the most drastic transformation of the post-war era. A settlement which was one of Europe's most liberal had, by 1979, morphed into one of its most restrictive. This change was driven, in large part, by the gradual shift in Conservative policy on this issue. As this paper explores, there is little evidence

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5   The 1950s have indeed become a watchword for party convergence. On economic and social policy, there was little disagreement between the parties, to the extent that pundits coined a portmanteau term for the new settlement: 'Butskellism' (after Rab Butler and Hugh Gaitskell).

6   For a typical speech on the matter by Cyril Osborne, the informal leader of this group, see *Hansard* HC vol. 542 c. 1143, 21 June 1955. It is difficult to assess the size of this faction, but when the Monday Club was eventually formed, it quickly counted 11 MPs as members. We may assume that several more harboured sympathies with the Club.

to suggest that popular attitudes toward immigration changed at all over this time, so this case study provides an excellent opportunity to assess the conditions necessary for governments to execute policy against the wishes of their constituents. The Churchill, Eden, and Macmillan governments were able to maintain open immigration policies, but not under Edward Heath or later Margaret Thatcher. This study examines the relevant conditions which were present in the 1950s but not in the later 1960s and 1970s, and which facilitated unpopular policy. In Section I, it provides an account of the changing policy of the period, and dismissing the notion that public opinion was in favour of this liberal approach. In Section II, it shall then assess the importance of various institutional and circumstantial factors in allowing policy to deviate from party and public opinion in the 1950s. It shall analyse, in order: *the electoral system*; the *position of the opposition Labour Party*; and *internal Conservative Party discipline*. Section III discusses the illiberal immigration regime which succeeded that discussed here.

Section I: The Liberal Equipoise, 1951–c. 1958

The Conservatives were returned to power in the 1951 general election, under the command of their ageing wartime leader, Sir Winston Churchill.

The 1951 Conservative election campaign focused on allaying concerns amongst working-class voters that a return to the Conservatives would mean a return to the high levels of unemployment experienced between the wars. Their manifesto, *Britain Strong and Free*, promised to safeguard the National Health Service and welfare state (Conservative Central Office 1951). Indeed, comparing *Britain Strong and Free* to the Labour document, *Forward with Labour or Backward under the Conservatives*, it strikes the reader that very little separated the parties (Labour Party 1951). The main areas of disagreement concerned the pace of 'decontrol' (the removal of food rationing), and the prospect of further nationalisation.

There is evidence to suggest that the public largely supported the Conservatives' commitment to end rationing and other wartime controls faster than Labour intended to (Zweiniger-Bargielowska 2000). Even so, the victory for Churchill and the Conservatives was modest. They won a slim majority of 16 seats, and polled over 200,000 fewer votes than Labour (Butler 1952).

Perhaps chastened by this, Churchill's government pursued moderate, pragmatic policies across all major issues.[7] They maintained the welfare state and universal healthcare launched by the Attlee governments, and Labour's house-building programmes were accelerated. Likewise, the Churchill government sought to make no changes to the immigration policy it inherited. This policy was defined by the *British Nationality Act 1948*. This legislation gave citizens of all Commonwealth countries the status of 'British subjects' and unlimited rights to live and work in the UK.

There is disagreement in the literature about the intentions behind the *Act*. Some (e.g. Roberts 1994) have sought to cast it as a poorly drafted law which did not say what Parliament wished it to. But, as Randall Hansen (2000) argues in his impressive history of immigration in the UK, this interpretation is unfounded. The low level of immigration from colonial countries up until 1948 lends support to the argument that politicians were not expecting large numbers of people from Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean to immigrate to Britain. But, nonetheless, the *Act* was certainly passed in the knowledge that it liberalised immigration controls. By the time the Conservatives came to power, roughly 4,000–5,000 non-white immigrants from the Commonwealth had arrived in Britain.

Imposing control on this unexpected immigration had already been considered by Labour. A Cabinet report from 1951 examines the case for control, based on the social problems which might be caused by permanent immigration from the Commonwealth. It recommends against restricting the terms of the *British Nationality Act*, however, stating:

> [t]he United Kingdom has a special status as the mother country, and freedom to enter and remain in the United Kingdom at will is one of the main practical benefits enjoyed by British subjects. (cited in Hansen 2000, p. 90)

The Churchill government maintained this uneasy position of elite concern for the consequences of migration, but mixed with the firm conviction that it was Britain's responsibility and in Britain's interests, to be seen as the metropole of the newly enlarged Commonwealth. Immigration from the Caribbean increased after 1952, as Congress passed legislation restricting the rights of Caribbean people to land in the USA. In response, the Churchill Cabinet commissioned another inquiry into the possibility of imposing controls on Commonwealth immigration (Cabinet 1953). It stopped short of making recommendations but advised that restricting the migratory rights of the newly-minted 'British subjects' abroad would be possible.

Study of the records of the period show that much of the Churchill and Eden Governments' time was spent discussing possible controls on immigration. The first Home Secretary under Churchill, Sir David Maxwell-Fyfe, was a right-leaning figure. There is evidence, discussed by Hansen, that he had been persuaded—by the Marquess of Salisbury and others—of the case for immigration control towards the end of his tenure (Hansen 2000). He was replaced in Churchill's 1954 reshuffle by the much more liberal Gwilym Lloyd George. Son of the radical Liberal Prime Minister David Lloyd George and originally a member of the Liberal Party, Lloyd George remained at the Home Office until the fall of the Eden government. He ruled out discrimination on the basis of colour. Confronted with the choice between allowing all Commonwealth immigration or none, the rest of the Eden Cabinet fell in line behind his liberal policy.

There is lively debate in the literature about the reasons for this liberalism. Conservative historians have often attempted to portray the 1951–1957 Cabinets as weak-willed elitists, unable to seize the initiative and exercise the popular will. Revisionists have instead emphasised the foreign policy imperative, and the influence of individual figures, like Lloyd George. It is to some extent irrelevant to the purpose of this paper to adjudicate on this matter, but it seems that the documentary evidence available supports the revisionist account. Liberals and pragmatists together agreed not to limit immigration from the Commonwealth, partly out of a desire to be seen as a 'welcoming' mother

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7   See Pelling (1997). For a more critical account which still acknowledges the basic pragmatism of the 1950s ministries, see Jeffreys (1997).

country and partly out of aversion to an explicit colour bar (R. A. Butler, quoted in Roth 1970, p. 206).

It is important for the purposes of this paper to establish that public opinion was indeed against the liberal policies maintained throughout the period. If, on the contrary, policy drifted toward control because the public became less liberal, then there is no problem to solve: democracy would be functioning precisely as Downs plots.

Importantly, for this paper's thesis to be undermined does not require that public opinion changed suddenly (in 1962, for instance), but rather that the position of the median voter moved toward restriction, and that the parties moved with them. Very few analysts of the time have given much credence to this argument. Admittedly, polling evidence on the views of the public about immigration in the 1950s is scant. But we can piece together a picture from what we know about events. First, the outbreak of riots in 1958. Riots do not spring up because of new-found policies or beliefs. They often reflect simmering resentment and long-standing grievance. Even if we do not accept this rebuttal, the attitude of newspaper editorials toward the white rioters at the time hints at the persistent opposition of native Britons to the arrival of Commonwealth immigrants (The Times 1958). The readiness with which Conservative strategists (in Smethwick and elsewhere—see below) turned to racial campaigning suggests that they knew that anti-immigrant feeling was pervasive. Moreover, sociological research has found plenty of evidence that racial prejudice was endemic in Britain in the post-war period, independent of the presence of Commonwealth immigrants (Hirsch 2019). In sum, it is a reasonable assumption that public opinion was solidly against immigration from the outset.

A second challenge argues that the policy changed in 1962 and 1968 as politicians and civil servants recognised the genuine need for immigration control. This thesis is popular among conservative historians, who tend to rue the slow revelation of their truth amongst the Conservative politicians of the late 1950s.[8] But this, too, lacks credibility. If the argument is that Conservative leadership became more restrictionist over time, then this is demonstrably false: Edward Heath and the Earl of Home were no more right-leaning than their predecessors. Edward Heath, in fact, was a prominent and dogged supporter of European integration. If, on the other hand, the argument is that these liberals were genuinely persuaded that immigration needed to be restricted (and ultimately halted), it is similarly flawed. The timing of the legislation does not fit where we might expect it to, were this argument to hold. We would expect restrictive legislation to be passed when immigration levels were rising.

This holds true for the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*, but not for the *Immigration Act 1971*. Net migration had been steadily negative throughout the 1960s, when the 1971 *Act* was conceived. Moreover, it did nothing to halt the true cause of immigration in the 1960s and 1970s: family reunification. Indeed, it came into force at the same time as Britain's European Economic Community (EEC) membership, which offered immigration rights to all EEC member states. This would be a very odd policy combination for a government truly convinced of the need to halt

immigration. And, in order to dismiss the possible objection that this elite persuasion argument applies in the 1950s but not the 1970s, it should be noted that nearly all of the policymakers in the Macmillan government went on to support European freedom of movement strongly. Evangelical Powellites these were not.

SECTION II: WHY DID THE EQUIPOSE BREAK DOWN? (C. 1958–C. 1962)

The fine balance was not to last. Shortly after Harold Macmillan succeeded Eden as Prime Minister, popular discontent amongst both immigrant and native populations spilled over into rioting. In August and September 1958, gangs of young white men roamed areas of Nottingham and London with large Commonwealth migrant populations, intimidating their new neighbours. Randall Hansen studied newspaper clippings from the period and describes scenes with as many as 4,000 white men participating in these so-called 'race riots' (Hansen 2000, p. 81). Notting Hill, in West London, experienced similar disturbance, as young Caribbean men formed rival gangs in order to counter the threat to their safety (Hansen 2000).

Immigration from the Commonwealth continued to rise, from around 5,000 per year at the beginning of the decade, to around 100,000 at the end (Turner 2003).

A consensus did emerge in favour of informal restrictions on immigration, including halting the distribution of passports in South Asia and the Caribbean. This remained the only policy on which Cabinet agreed on until 1961. Partly fuelled by concern that controls would be forthcoming, immigration peaked in 1961 at 136,000. At this point, the Home Office began drafting what later became the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*.

The bill repealed unlimited migration rights, and imposed controls on all Commonwealth citizens who were born outside the British Isles. All migrants already in Britain—and, importantly, their dependents—were granted permanent leave to remain. Other prospective immigrants would be assessed regarding qualifications and work potential (*Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*). The exclusion of Irish citizens from the Bill was attacked by Labour as evidence of its racist character. It remained a point of pride for Labour politicians of the period that they had opposed this bill in Parliament (Labour Party 1964).

The effect of the bill was limited. The exceptions granted for those with useful skills and qualifications allowed for annual immigration of around 40,000. In fact, immigration remained static throughout the 1960s.

Taking on the task of explaining the decision to reimpose control, I have proposed three necessary conditions which must be in place for governments to pursue unpopular policy. In order to work out which are relevant here, we should look for changes over 1958–1962, when the important shift in policy took place.

SECTION IIA: A NON-PERMISSIVE ELECTORAL SYSTEM

This condition held throughout. Britain's electoral system during the 1950s was as close to the pure two-party paradigm as it has been at any time since mass enfranchisement in 1918. In 1951, the Liberal Party were reduced to just six seats and 2.5% of the popular

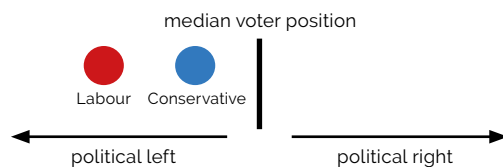[8]   For discussion, see Horowitz (1970).

Figure 3 | Schematic of the political situation, 1951–1962.

vote. Even in February 1974, when the party system was at its most fragmented, 75% of votes were cast for the two main parties, which between them won 96% of the seats.[9] In any case, none of the minor parties stood on an anti-immigration platform before or after 1962.

Section IIb: An Opposition Unwilling to Oppose

Throughout the period between 1951 and 1957, Labour had not publicly criticised the government's immigration policy, nor had they called for the imposition of controls on migration. The government's only electoral test during this period came shortly after the accession of Anthony Eden in 1955. Largely as a result of depressed turnout amongst working-class voters, Labour (still led by Clement Attlee) lost ground. The Conservatives were returned to office with a comfortable majority of sixty (Butler 1955). Immigration was not mentioned in either party's manifesto.[10]

In the period between 1958 and 1962, Labour was divided internally on immigration. The Shadow Cabinet, under moderate leader Hugh Gaitskell, was unanimously in favour of a liberal policy. They believed that a racial bar was simply unconscionable. However, before the emergence in the 1960s of the New Left, many backbench Labour MPs considered themselves to be the representatives of the sectional interest of the British (white) working class. Throughout the period, however, these voices were marginalised by the leadership, at least as far as the voting lobbies. The Labour Party remained quiet on the topic of immigration in the 1950s. It did not feature in their manifesto in 1955 or 1959 (Labour Party 1955; 1959). No criticism was made of the government's policy, perhaps because it was itself inherited from the Attlee Administration. In other words, the Conservatives faced a situation like that in **Figure 3**.

Because the opposition (red) were further from the median voter than the government (blue), they had no incentive to raise the profile of immigration as an electoral issue. Moreover, this constraint on the behaviour of the opposition did not change during 1958–1962, or after this. Labour remained at least as far from the median as the Conservative Party throughout the period. As such, we can draw two conclusions. First, that this condition held during the period of liberal policy. Second, that it is not the relevant change in circumstances which brought about the introduction of restrictions.

Section IIc: No Threat of Defeat by Backbenchers

This condition held during most of the 1950s. But it was worn down by the growing importance of the right-wing backbenchers, culminating in the establishment of the Monday Club in 1962. Around the time of the 1958 riots, speeches were made in parliament which explicitly

called for an end to free movement within the Commonwealth, including by both MPs whose constituencies were affected by the riots. The right-wing factions of the Parliamentary Conservative Party began to speak openly against government policy. Figures such as Cyril Osborne and Enoch Powell had long spoken out on matters of colonial policy: the 1958 situation emboldened them to presume to speak for the entire white British population on Commonwealth immigration (Roth 1970).

Importantly, this rebellion did not extend to the Cabinet. Indeed, Cabinet debates about the imposition of control continued without resolution for four years. Iain Macleod, the Colonial Secretary from 1959 to 1961, emerged as a tireless Cabinet advocate for free movement. Very little of the pressure to impose controls came from within the Cabinet—instead an increasingly noisy group of backbenchers and Peers were the key right-wing constituency. In 1961, Iain Macleod was replaced by Reginald Maudling, a similarly disposed, left-leaning politician of the Conservative Party. Also significant is that, throughout this period, the Home Office was occupied by Rab Butler, who was likewise a keen advocate for continued free movement. With the Marquess of Salisbury, the last real right-wing force in Cabinet, having left frontline politics in 1957 over a relatively insignificant issue, the baton of restrictionism was taken up by John Hare, the Minister for Labour.

Throughout this period, a growing number of Conservative MPs were becoming dissatisfied with government policy on immigration and colonial matters. They grew in numbers and prominence throughout the late 1950s, under the informal leadership of Cyril Osborne in the Commons and the Marquess of Salisbury in the Lords. The coherence and strategy of this group became more unified over time, until they were officially formed in 1962 as the 'Monday Club'.

The Monday Club was an internal Conservative faction, which welcomed MPs as well as ordinary party members. It was initially formed in 1962 to oppose the government's policy of rapid decolonisation. Led in the early 1960s by the Marquess of Salisbury (see above), it quickly shifted its focus to the aim of promoting more restrictive immigration policies.

The literature on the theory of intra-party disputes is extensive and lies outside the scope of this paper.[11] It is sufficient for our purposes to note that the emergence of such groups changes the nature of a government's policy decisions. They face an immediate threat to their agenda, as groups come to possess vetoes over policies.

The key decision-makers were aware that the anti-immigration faction of the Conservative Party was becoming bolder, as the perceived threat of Commonwealth immigration increased. **Figure 4** (next page) illustrates the frequency with which questions, bills or debates featuring the word 'immigrants' were discussed in the House of Commons.

The largest spike is around the time the 1962 *Act* was under discussion. But what is striking is the degree of willingness of backbench MPs to table questions about immigration. If 1959 (an election year) is removed as an anomaly, the growing noise in the Commons presents itself in **Table 1**.

Careful study of the debates and questions contained within this data yields a finding in line with my theoretical expectations: most of the noise comes not from the

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[9] Northern Ireland excluded.

[10] **See the Conservative Party's** *United for Peace and Progress* (Conservative Central Office 1955) **or the Labour Party's** *Forward with Labour* (Labour Party 1955).

[11] For an historically grounded thesis, see Krauss and Pekkanen (2011).

Year	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1960	1961	1962
References to 'immigration', 'immigrants', or 'race'	3	1	3	12	17	9	10	24	14	40	35

Table 1 | Frequency of references to 'immigration', 'immigrants', or 'race' yearly, between 1951 and 1962. Data from the Hansard archives, UK Parliament (n.d.).

opposition, but from government backbenchers. This is in line, firstly, with stated Labour policy from the period, which was firmly in favour of a liberal migration system. Secondly, this chimes with the account of Andrew Roth, biographer of Enoch Powell, who recalls increasingly bold challenges to government policy over the course of the 1958–1962 period (Roth 1970). While Rab Butler was calling for Britain to show 'hospitality' to immigrants, Cyril Osborne was introducing an explicitly racist private member's bill in the Commons (Roth 1970).

What changed, then? The control, or 'catholicity' as Harold Macmillan put it (1972, p. 37), which Conservative leaders must exercise over their MPs was eroded over the late 1950s. By 1961, the problem had become such that it posed a dual threat: firstly, to the passage of government legislation, and secondly to the public perception of the government. Macmillan, Macleod, and Butler were forced to move toward the position of the median voter.

SECTION III: THE POLITICS OF IMMIGRATION AFTER 1962

The 1962–1979 period was characterised by progressive shifts to the right by both major parties. After 1962, the Conservatives adopted an unambiguously pro-restriction policy, forcing the Labour governments of the period to respond by conceding ground.

SECTION IIIA: THE DRIFT RIGHT, 1962–1979

Macmillan left office in 1963 due to ill health, and was replaced by the Foreign Secretary, Alec Douglas-Home. This government was short-lived and did little in the way of major policy. The election of 1964 was fought primarily over perceived economic sluggishness. The Labour campaign focused not on any specific Conservative policy, but on 'thirteen wasted years' and their alleged outdated thinking. However, this was the first election in which both parties laid out policies on immigration. Labour's manifesto, *The New Britain*, said the following:

[A] Labour Government will legislate against racial discrimination and incitement in public places and give special help to local authorities in areas where immigrants have settled. Labour accepts that the number of immigrants entering the United Kingdom must be limited. Until a satisfactory agreement covering this can be negotiated with the Commonwealth a Labour Government will retain immigration control. (quoted in Roth 1970)

The Conservatives' defence of their record, *Prosperity with a Purpose*, said the following:

A Conservative Government will continue to control immigration from overseas according to the numbers which our crowded country and its industrial regions can absorb. We shall ensure that the working of the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act*, which we passed in 1962 against bitter Labour Party opposition, is fair and effective. (Conservative Central Office 1964)

What is most striking here is that Labour have performed a complete volte-face on the issue of immigration control within two years (after opposing controls in 1962). Moreover, the Conservatives were aware that both parties were more liberal than the median voter—they attempt here to portray themselves as the less out-of-touch of the two.

The Wilson governments did not seek to amend the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962*. It is difficult to speculate on the precise motivations, but it is plausible that they reasoned that there was nothing to be gained by being further from the median voter than the Conservatives, and so moved to the right.

Labour politicians made much of the laws passed by the Wilson governments banning racial discrimination within Britain. Despite this, their commitment to anti-discrimination is somewhat belied by the passage of the *Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968*. A group of people living in Kenya, Asian by descent, were facing persecution by the newly installed nationalist
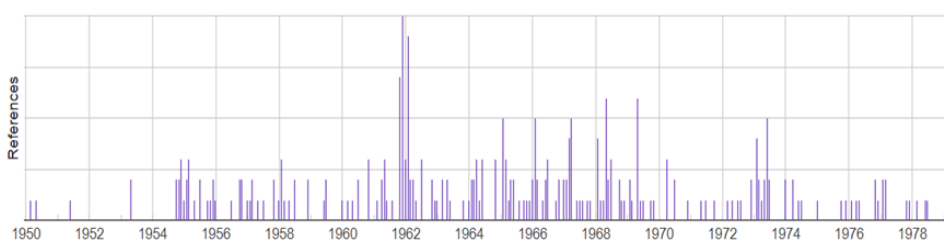

Figure 4 | Bar plot showing the monthly frequency of the word 'immigrants' in questions, bills or debates in the House of Commons between 1950 and 1979. Data from the Hansard archives, UK Parliament (n.d.).

government there. As most had only British passports, they faced barriers to employment in Kenya, but enjoyed an unlimited right to enter the UK. Home Secretary Jim Callaghan proposed the 1968 *Act*, which created two-tiers of British citizenship. The first, those who had been born, naturalised, or adopted in the UK, enjoyed unlimited migration rights. The second, including nearly all the Kenyan Asians, would be subject to the same controls as all other Commonwealth migrants (*Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1968*). This bill was passed with the support of most Labour and Conservative MPs. In just six years, both parties had shifted so far that they now accepted an effective colour bar on immigration to the UK.

In the 1970 general election, which pundits expected Labour to win comfortably based on improved economic conditions, Labour sought to present the matter as settled in *Now Britain's Strong*:

> With the rate of immigration under firm control and much lower than in past years, we shall be able still more to concentrate our resources in the major task of securing good race relations. (Labour Party 1970)

The Conservatives, however, devoted a much more pungent passage in *A Better Tomorrow* to plans to limit immigration:

> [Our] policies mean that future immigration will be allowed only in strictly defined special cases. There will be no further large scale permanent immigration. (Conservative Central Office 1970)

Even under a liberal-minded leader, the Conservatives had moved toward a much more restrictive position over the course of a few years. The Conservatives secured a working majority of thirty.

Back in government, the Conservatives further tightened the conditions laid down in the 1968 *Act*. The notion of naturalisation was replaced with one of 'patriality'. Only British subjects abroad who had a grandparent born or naturalised in Britain could claim unlimited immigration rights. In practice, this was confined to the white settler colonies (e.g. Canada, Australia). This settlement remained in place until Margaret Thatcher overhauled the system in 1981.

Labour once again replaced the Conservatives in office in February 1974. They proposed and carried out no further amendments to the restrictive immigration policy they inherited.

Section IIIb: What Caused the Drift?

As much of the Downsian analysis above makes clear, in the context of a two-party system in which both parties are to the left of the median voter, the party closest to the median is able to change policy consensus unilaterally. Therefore, in seeking to explain the rightward drift by both parties in the latter years of the period under study, we must focus on the Conservative Party. As I outlined above, there is no reason to believe that the leadership was any more pro-restriction after 1962 than before. Indeed, the mainstream of the Conservative Party were passionately in favour of granting unlimited rights to work to all citizens of the European community. Instead, the key change came

again from the new anti-immigration faction.

During this period of opposition, the 'Monday Club' bloc on the Conservative Right grew in number and prominence. By 1970, the Club had thirty-five members, six of whom were in Heath's Cabinet (Copping 1972). They were set on weaponising immigration as a political issue. The success of a racially-charged election campaign in Smethwick in 1964 seemed to show the potential profitability of exploiting latent tensions. The lobbying power of this group, which alone had the power to deprive the government of its legislative majority, was considerable. After each piece of legislation concerning immigration, the group renewed its calls for further restriction and, indeed, repatriation.

But it would be remiss to analyse the politics of immigration in this period without noting the exceptional impact of one man, the MP for Southwest Wolverhampton, Enoch Powell.

As detailed above, Powell had been a minor irritant for Conservative leaders since resigning from the government in the mid-1950s. He had come to advocate for monetarist economics and restrictive immigration policy. He came to national prominence in 1968, shortly after the pas-sage of the bill excluding the Kenyan Asians from British citizenship rights. Powell delivered a speech on immigration after which, Harold Wilson said that British politics would 'never be quite the same again' (Wilson 1971).

Reacting to an incident of excrement being pushed through the letterbox of an embattled white resident in an area with a large immigrant population (the details of which have never been verified), Powell's words have become infamous:

> [We must proceed by] stopping, or virtually stopping, further inflow, and by promoting the maximum outflow. Both answers are part of the official policy of the Conservative Party. It almost passes belief that at this moment twenty or thirty additional immigrant children are arriving from overseas in Wolverhampton alone every week—and that means fifteen or twenty additional families a decade or two hence. Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad. We must be mad, literally mad, as a nation to be permitting the annual inflow of some 50,000 dependants, who are for the most part the material of the future growth of the immigrant-descended population. It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. (Powell 1968)

After this speech, immigration rapidly became one of the foremost issues in British politics. Polling found large majorities in favour of the sentiment expressed in his speech. A Gallup poll, conducted shortly after the speech, found that 74% of respondents agreed with Powell, with 15% disagreeing, and 11% unsure (Schoen 1977). Moreover, the media attention given to Powell's words seems to have turned public opinion against the government's second Race Relations Bill which was in the process of going through Parliament (and eventually passed as the *Race Relations Act 1968*). Before the speech, Gallup found that 42% approved and 29% disapproved. Afterwards, just 30% approved and 46% disapproved (Schoen 1977).

The internationalist leader of the Conservative Party from 1965, Edward Heath, disapproved of Powell. He

sacked him from his post as Shadow Secretary of State for Defence. But Heath struggled to contain Powell's effect. Polling throughout the period showed higher approval ratings for Powell than for Heath (Schoen 1977). Powell sought to undermine Heath's position by remaining loyal to the Conservative Party while opposing Heath's internationalist policies.

It is worth pointing out, however, that Powell—having left the Conservatives to stand as an Ulster Unionist—endorsed Labour in 1974 and directed his supporters to do likewise.

The impact of Powell's endorsements on electoral politics is a matter of historiographical debate.[12] It may be argued that his endorsement dissuaded liberal voters from backing whichever party he happened to be hitched to at any given time. But, as Schoen observes, there were notably higher swings to Labour in 1974 among constituencies in the West Midlands, where his influence was strongest (Schoen 1977).

I wish to reject thoroughly the notion that Enoch Powell is crucial to this research question. It is not the case that without Enoch, liberal policy was popular, but after him, it was not. Experience of popular and effective extra-parliamentary leaders of campaigns has shown us that effective leadership is perfectly compatible with continued anti-populist policymaking, if the other three conditions are met: consider the immigration policy pursued by Tony Blair's governments, for instance (Consterdine 2018).

That said, it would be churlish not to acknowledge his importance in shaping the debate around immigration once the control exercised by liberal elites in the Conservative party had been broken. The polling evidence is quite clear: Powell enjoyed the support of large majorities throughout the late 1960s and early 1970s (Schoen 1977). Through his campaigning he was able to place even greater pressure on Edward Heath to adopt restrictive immigration policies. In 1964 and 1966 most people did not know which of the two parties was 'tougher' on immigration, whereas in 1970 a large majority identified the Conservatives. This is despite Edward Heath leading the party in both the 1966 and 1970 general elections.

Over a period of 25 years, British immigration policy had been transformed from a system with unlimited rights for 800 million people around the world to one which almost explicitly screened migrants based on race. Instrumental at every point was the pressure placed on the moderate Conservative leadership throughout this period by right-wing backbenchers.

The popular sentiment against immigration has remained a potent issue in British politics ever since it was unleashed in 1968 by Enoch Powell's openly anti-immigration campaigning. Even liberalising governments have sought to downplay the importance of their liberal policies—the 1997 Labour manifesto did not mention the removal of restrictions later carried out. 'Immigration' and 'asylum' regularly topped voters' list of policy priorities in the 2010s and played a key role in the campaign to leave the European Union in 2016.

Enoch Powell was a classical scholar, so perhaps it is fitting to end by expositing the classical analogy referenced in the subtitle of this chapter. Mons Sacer was the site of one of the first instances of an elite's agenda power being ended by the emergence of effective demagogic leadership. In the early years of the Roman Republic, dissatisfaction brewed amongst plebeian citizens, whose views were not considered by the Senate. Mons Sacer was the site of a mass secession in 494 BC, when the plebeians appointed tribunes to speak on their behalf. After this, the Senate were forced to concede the permanent position in government of the tribune of the plebeians.

The period between 1951 and 1979 can be considered as the prelude, process, and aftermath of a march to Mons Sacer on the British right. Control over policy, previously held solely by liberal figures at the top of the Conservative Party, was seized on behalf of a disenfranchised public by figures who presumed to be their tribunes.

They never had a more effective tribune than Enoch Powell, whose visceral, unashamed exploitation of racial division has continued to shape British policy well into the modern era.

CONCLUSION

In immigration policy, the 1950s saw a liberal consensus amongst senior politicians and civil servants imposed on an unwilling public. This study has taken no position on the debate about immigration and colonial policy, nor has it sought to rule on whether it is legitimate for public opinion to be ignored in this way. However, such a situation is certainly not the norm, at least in modern democracies. It is incumbent on those who take sides in these debates to understand what happened and what allowed it to happen.

Previous scholarship on this issue has tended to settle into two silos. Historians tend to concern themselves with why Churchill, Eden, and Macmillan made the policy decisions they did. They try to settle what *persuaded* these leaders to pursue certain policies. Political scientists tend to formulate theories of what drives party competition in the abstract—no case study I have encountered has analysed an apparent failure of party competition in depth.

The aim of this study has been to synthesise these approaches. The important question here is not why Macmillan and the others wanted to keep borders open and to decolonise, but *how* they were able to have their way in spite of public opposition.

I have proposed here three necessary conditions which govern the potential for government policy making unconstrained by the median voter. The first borrows directly from the existing political science literature on Downsian party competition: a non-permissive electoral system. This must be in place to prevent an upstart political party taking advantage of the 'gap in the market'.

The second necessary condition is that the opposition parties must not be in a position to oppose the relevant policy. Either because of tactics or ideology, a constrained opposition allows the governing party not to fear that the primary opposition will exploit the 'gap in the market'.

The third necessary condition is that the government must not fear disruptive backbench rebellion. A backbench faction which threatens to organise and withhold support because it wishes to see policy closer to the median voter's preferences can force the government to shift its position. Whether such a faction emerges will be shaped by numerous factors, like party

12 cf. Schoen (1977) and Hansen (2020).

institutions and the strength of voter feeling on the matter, but the presence of the factor remains the correct independent variable, as it is the stage of the process at which the relationship becomes strong enough that it becomes a necessary condition.

I have found that comparative study of immigration and colonial policy in the 1951–1979 period shows the importance of these conditions. Unpopular immigration policy was possible until 1962, and then quickly drifted toward the anti-immigration views of the median voter. Colonial policy remained 'liberal' throughout. The only difference between the two was that the right wing factions of the Parliamentary Conservative Party became organised and relentlessly offered a competing narrative on immigration policy, without criticising colonial policy as firmly. By 1961, when the group became formally constituted, they understood that decolonisation was too far underway to reverse or halt. They instead focused their efforts on restricting nationality and immigration law.

In the immediate aftermath of the bitter debates of the 'Brexit years' (2016–2020), during which the legitimacy of elite policymaking was called into question, it is crucial that we understand the theory and practice of policy formulation in the UK. The 'will of the people' was the clarion call during that period. Perhaps the application of the necessary conditions proposed in this paper to the Brexit negotiations will shed light upon why the Parliamentary consensus in favour of close UK–EU relations was unsuccessful. At the very least, with the rise of right-wing anti-immigration movements in most Western countries, it is imperative to understand the conditions which have facilitated the suppression and subsequent rise of this movement in the UK.

Further research may seek to develop a sophisticated institutional history of the Conservative Right, who have played such a crucial role in the formation of policy since 1961, but on whom the scholarship is remarkably light. Comparative study of unpopular policymaking, including countries with coalition governments, may shed further light on the wider applicability (or lack thereof) of the principles I have outlined here.

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Appendix 1 | Frequency at which the words 'immigration', 'immigrants', 'race' or 'colonial' was mentioned in debates in the House of Commons from 1951 to 1979. Data from the Hansard archives, UK Parliament (n.d.).

Year/Reference	'immigration'	'immigrants'	'race'	'colonial'
1951	2	1	0	38
1952	1	0	0	31
1953	1	2	0	22
1954	5	7	0	18
1955	4	13	0	30
1956	3	6	0	20
1957	1	8	1	24
1958	8	10	6	19
1959	2	3	1	28
1960	2	8	4	27
1961	15	25	0	32
1962	11	23	1	35
1963	0	7	0	3
1964	5	15	0	4
1965	21	17	9	11
1966	5	20	4	4
1967	8	18	5	0
1968	14	21	8	1
1969	8	13	8	1
1970	6	6	12	3
1971	19	3	4	0
1972	8	6	1	0
1973	13	16	2	1
1974	3	6	1	0
1975	9	3	2	0
1976	13	6	10	0
1977	6	6	1	0
1978	8	3	2	0
1979	3	0	0	0