Chapter 1

Surfing the wave

EVER SINCE I WAS YOUNG, certain phrases have been ringing in my ears, ringing like ritual incantations: 'bloody foreigners'; 'send them back'; and, most common of all, 'the problem with immigration'. It is the nature of these incantations – in fact the very point of them – that they trip off the tongue almost without consciousness; sacred, reassuring truisms rubbed through repetition into the way of the world, day after delusional day.

The perception that I had – that any young black person could have – was that 'we' were a problem. Maybe even *the* problem. It's no wonder that integration came so hard, especially for those arrivals from the New Commonwealth. Britons

talk as if this ancient island has had little or no immigration until relatively recently. This is, of course, untrue.

In this book I will retell the story … many stories, in fact – some anecdotal and many more factual – as a personal survey of Britain's long and almost ancient history of introducing foreigners to our shores.

This is not an autobiography, but a few words of personal introduction are probably in order. I was born of Jamaican and Indian heritage. My father is half-Indian. My parents came to England from Jamaica in 1960 when they were in their early thirties.

In the idyllic rural Jamaican parish of St Catherine's, they had a substantial house in the mountains and were the owners of a thriving family farming business. My father's family were living a comfortable existence. One day, believing what they had heard, they embarked on a world-shattering journey. They precariously boarded a plane for the first time in their lives. What my parents left behind was considerable, but the sense of future 'gains' persuaded them to make the journey. They both came with much trepidation in their hearts and it was said you could hear it in their voices too.

Immaculately dressed and handsome in looks, the newlyweds were horrified by, as well as out of place in, the 'ugly', styleless urban jungle of post-war London. The rural life they had loved – in a village mainly comprising small cottages painted in clashing colours of bright red, yellow and green – was nowhere to be seen on London's Clapham Common. They knew few people here and only one of their relatives followed them.

My uncle was a teacher in Jamaica (his son is now a professor in the United States) and there he stayed, despite temptations from the British government to lure him to their own island life. He held the view then that the education system in the UK would not be as good as the schools in his own country or as beneficial to the immigrant communities. He was a man of extraordinary foresight. Today, more and more Afro-Caribbean children are being sent to Caribbean islands for their education because their parents have completely lost faith in British education – here, they might easily leave school unable to speak English properly, read, write or do simple arithmetic. Many immigrants who came from the New Commonwealth were university-educated and qualified professional people, especially in the field of medicine, although this made no difference to their job prospects in post-war Britain. They found obstacles put in their way when applying for professional posts. They were employed for manual work and mainly in the lower echelons of the health service or nationalised industries. So many more stayed in the Caribbean than left for Britain.

For those who did come, it took them a long while to settle. Life was hard, cold and grey – like someone had switched off all the lights – even at midday. All they ever longed for was to return home to their missing loved ones. As this book will explain, the vast majority of post-war immigrants from the West Indian subcontinent had never intended to stay, but Harold Macmillan, unintentionally, made it difficult for them to return.

My own grandparents I did not know – they never came to

England. I only know them through stories and photographs as I never went to Jamaica in their lifetime. But it was not long before I was to find a new family and one that included a 'Granny'. The greatest influences on my early life came from Anne and Cicely Meehan. I have known them since the age of three years old. They taught me the values of hard work and compassion. Anne is a lifelong socialist and Cicely a liberal intellectual. They boxed my ears when I placed a Conservative poster in the front room window with Margaret Thatcher's face on it. We had achieved a 'balanced' ticket in our house, and one of my childhood memories is learning the fine art of how to disagree without falling out.

These two white sisters never married, and they were pillars of the local community. Church, work and 'Love thy neighbour' is how they led their lives – and still do today. Cicely read Classics at university and Anne was a music scholar, as well as my first teacher. I spent much of my time with them and became an 'adopted' member of the family. I cannot forget Patricia (Pat) – she was the youngest of the three sisters but got married in the 1970s to a leading surgeon, who later became a Professor of Medicine at Cairo University. I loved her letters from Egypt; she had a grand life, moving among the intellectual elite and a house staffed by 'servants'. The sad thing was, back in those days, we didn't see very much of her – although when we did, I was always struck by her natural warmth.

There was Charles and Dorothy too, who were natural siblings born into a Jamaican family like me. When their mother could

not care for them due to illness, Anne and Cicely took the children in when they were just three and five years old.

Dorothy and I were joined at the hip. We did everything together: shopping, swimming, walking and talking. Anne and Cicely's mother was still alive then and we all called her 'Granny'. She had the most trenchant views and was an old-fashioned Tory to the core. She believed more in 'sending them back' than anybody else I have ever encountered, but when Anne and Cicely would retort, 'What about Charles, Dorothy and Derek?', she would always reply, 'Oh, not them – they can stay.' It amused us no end.

Cicely loved the English countryside and that is where my love of it came from too. We went for hearty walks in 'sensible' shoes with our much-loved dogs. She fell in love with Norfolk and bought a house there, and we spent our weekends and holidays weeding the garden, visiting nearby stately homes and fine-dining on special occasions. We never saw another black face in Norfolk. I can vividly remember the stares when we went to the market town of Fakenham to do our shopping. I knew something wasn't right.

I also remember an early biking holiday in Suffolk. I was staying with the splendidly grand and very clever James Pilkington, from the Pilkington Glass family, and I peeled off from the others to explore more adventurously. Local walkers were amazed to see me: 'How did you get here? We don't see many of your type around here.' Thus I grew up confronted daily by race as seen through the eyes of others.

With that background, I could not help but be interested in

this subject. More than most, I understood what it was to be different – and I always understood, too, that the contribution immigrant communities have made to Britain has been immense.

However, I never would have thought that David Cameron would give me cause to write this book. I have known him for twenty-eight years. I know, perhaps even better, the family he married into, and I introduced the younger David to a good number of political players who would later dominate party and government thinking.

When the time came he lobbied hard for my support in his bid to become party leader. Surprisingly, that was not an easy decision for me as I also had a lot of time for both David Davis, and the popular, but less likely leader, David Willetts. The former was conspicuously consistent on civil and human rights, and, I must say, has continued to be since. The latter has a beautiful soul and is one of the most civilised people I have known; it was a pleasure to properly work with him later. Of course, they all wanted to appear the moderniser, for which my endorsement – fresh from success on *Big Brother* – meant a good deal. Eventually it was to be Cameron whom I supported, publicly and in the numerous private conversations that are at the heart of such campaigns. I believed his promises, although it is a fairly settled question now who was the more authentic moderniser.

It matters no longer. Not since the 'Go Home' ads. I was appalled, truly appalled, by this cynical campaign, designed entirely to stir up controversy in order to maximise free publicity in newspapers. In more than thirty years of active participation

in politics, I have never used the 'racist' charge against anyone. I do now. David Cameron's intention in approving that ad was essentially racist. He knows it. We all know it. Few in his own party will say it, but the Conservatives have clearly decided that to win another election they must revert to type. To win, they need to outdo others on immigration and Europe. Out again comes the dog-whistle politics, forgetting again how much good it *didn't* do Michael Howard. And booted out the door of No. 10 went Afro-Caribbean politician Shaun Bailey. He served a purpose – it was crude and it was nasty – but that is how the Tories have always been. They like keeping black people in one place – or in *their* place, as the Tories see it. My history with that party is littered with countless examples of this, and, one day, I shall tell you about those too.

The Prime Minister's modernisation agenda did not last that long, though: what doesn't come from the heart never does. It's no good using words like 'kids', or appearing without a tie in public, and expecting everyone to believe that makes you modern. New suits, or no suits, but the same old mind. That is what we have today and it will not do.

Now, both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party ('British jobs for British workers') are fighting over the same turf. Labour are gently knocking at the same door, as if to say, 'let me in'. They are losing support from their traditional working-class base, and the party advisors attribute this to immigration. I beg to differ. They just don't like *you*, Mr Miliband. It's the oldest trick in the book: blame someone else for your own problems.

Immigration is always getting the blame. The language is always negative. It's all about the problems, the controls, the swamping… The exception to this patter has usually been the Liberal Democrat Party. Impressively, they have resisted the pressure to join in the bashing spree. Indeed, they can be heard reminding people about the benefits to Britain that cultural diversity has brought and how it has enriched our island. They have stood their ground on what is right, which is not always popular, and that is the truer leadership.

And right it is, because the language of demonisation doesn't come anywhere close to the real heart of this matter. The reasons people migrate are many and come from the very roots of the human condition. It's a last option – desperation. It's for refuge – hope, aspiration, inspiration, admiration. It's for protection of family – opportunity, acceptance, recognition, tolerance. They come from fear of torture, in flight from religious fanaticism, in despair of secular despotism; seeking respite from an illiberal world, they just want what others have. They gratefully accept what has usually been freely offered to them. As our emigrant and more successful American cousins know better, migrants migrate for 'life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness'. They are seldom in it for the laughs. Did anyone ever seriously make this leap in order to claim social security benefits? For that is lately the kernel of the Tory narrative. True, not every dream works out. Not every enterprise succeeds. Things don't go to plan. People need help sometimes, even the best of us. But uprooting everything in order to claim benefits? That phenomenon exists only in the small minds of small men – and the greasy pole-climbing of Theresa May.

No. Migration is driven by freedom from persecution, opportunity and love.

Persecution was the case for the 3,000 Chilean asylum seekers who fled General Pinochet's oppressive regime and arrived in Britain between 1974 and 1979. It was also the case for the influx of people from Eritrea and Somalia in the 1990s. Does everybody know this? Perhaps not, but everyone knows that Somalia is where Olympic gold medallist Mo Farah came from. How many people proud of his elevation of British sport on the international stage can locate Farah's country of origin on a map? When the stadium crowd roared him round the final lap on the final day of the 2012 London Olympics, it was 'Go Mo' not 'Go Home'. When the nation rose to its feet and took to social media, it was not to tweet at Gabby Logan to demand the runner's immediate repatriation. The waving in the streets was not, I think, to helpfully point him to London City airport. He was the best of us then – the positive face of the open and inclusive society that we were so proud to present to the world. Mo Farah's face was a great, British face.

How quickly we forget.

Economic opportunity is another immigrant motivation. The ambition to realise a better standard of living for the immigrant and their family has led Britons to seek warmer economic shores, Australia being an inviting opportunity for many. In the year ending June 2013, 320,000 emigrants departed the UK for greener pastures. So why wouldn't people from other countries seek to take their place? One man's trash is another man's treasure, after all. While some Britons feel they are escaping a sinking ship

due to tax hikes and declining services, many from the developing world and poorer EU states view the UK as a land of great opportunity. Kaushik Basu, the World Bank's Chief Economist, observed correctly that migration and remittances offer a vital lifeline for millions and play a major role in an economy's take-off. They enable people to partake in the global economy and create resources for overseas development and growth. Many Middle Eastern, central African and Indian employees remit money home to ensure that relatives in politically unstable territories and impoverished communities are able to meet their basic human needs. It helps them transcend their disadvantaged lives in the longer term.

Strange then that when we speak of our pride in maintaining our overseas aid programme it is usually a reference to spending abroad, despite the fact that inward migration via remittance of earnings is probably our main development aid – and one of the most effective. Mandarins and the quasi-mandarins of the mega NGOs routinely struggle with development aid programmes – how to ensure the money avoids capture by corruption while reaching the people who need it on the ground. Meanwhile, migrant families have long solved that one – they call it Western Union Money Transfer.

Immigration is also about people in love, and we know what happens to them: they get married, poor devils, and, shockingly, seek to live together. Fat chance of anyone stopping that.

The immigration story runs deep through all of our histories, but politicians are weak and have vested interests in a

'them and us' narrative. They like to speak as if immigration is a new thing. It isn't. They encourage people to wish it would go away. It won't.

Many people, oh-so British people, think it is nothing to do with them, but – when they properly trace their own roots – it usually does have a lot to do with them too. In more cases than people care to admit, it's not *whether* they came here, but *when*. In truth, there is no 'them' and there is no 'us'. In truth, we are all in the same boat, and we all eat the same bananas.

It is this one journey, and the history of that journey, that I set out to recount in this book. In reality, the countless individual journeys, from all places, in all centuries, have contributed in many, many ways to making our country great. It is one of the wonderful things about being British that, because we have been immigrants ourselves in so many other places abroad and have enjoyed the unending fruits of trade and empire, we can now tap into the whole world, even while staying at home.

We owe a lot to the empire, which I notice is merely the first of many ideas that we stole from immigrants. We got that idea from the Romans so, before getting to the serious stuff, like most good stories it's best to start with the Romans…

I would have liked the Romans. They came; they saw; they took one look and said: 'Oh no, no, my dears – you're doing it all wrong.' Roman immigration, as I shall call it, changed everything. They sent centurions and stayed for centuries. They profoundly reformed our language. They married. They had ideas and founded institutions. They made the rules (some of

them are still our rules). They left us with law. They brought art, architecture, wine, literature, theatre. They dabbled with disruptive and controversial new technology: roads that go somewhere, bridges that connect things, water supplies piped out of the sky … that sort of thing. They thought outside the box. To be fair, they smashed a few boxes and local politicians regarded them as dangerous reformists. But they led the way. Most important of all, they taught the woad-wearing classes a thing or two about looking good – and they liked a nice Bath.

My kind of immigrant, the Romans. And, on that evidence, I am convinced that long before I was Anglo-Indo-Caribbean, I must have been Romano-Nubian also.

They caused much change, those Roman immigrants, but most of it was for the better. It was hugely beneficial, which is why, of course, we still remember it – all of it. But so it has been with a lot of immigration since then, which we don't always remember entirely – and sometimes not at all. Or maybe we choose not to.

That's the story of this book – some counting, but mainly recounting. Of course, the story of immigration is one of chaos. Immigration is not always planned. It's often relentless. It can be appalling – sometimes shocking for all concerned. It has unintended consequences. It's trouble – for those who look for it.

But it's also glorious. It's liberating – for us as well as them. It's been necessary. It's the too-well-hidden secret of a lot of our success. It's the creative fusion within which innovation thrives. It's diversity itself – the guarantee of our future success. Quite frankly, it's amazing. And it's us.