

Europe Solidaire Sans Frontières > English > Europe, Great Britain > Great Britain & Northern Ireland (Europe) > **Guy Hewitt: 'How I forced the UK government to act on the Windrush scandal'**

Guy Hewitt: 'How I forced the UK government to act on the Windrush scandal'

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The Barbados high commissioner on why he had to resort to 'guerrilla diplomacy'



Guy Hewitt, high commissioner for Barbados in London. Photograph: Martin Godwin for the Guardian

At the start of this year, when the Barbados high commissioner, Guy Hewitt, saw the British government failing to react with any urgency to the worsening [Windrush scandal](#), he realised he was going to have to abandon the subtle manoeuvres of traditional diplomacy and adopt a more explosive approach.

For years, Caribbean diplomats had been highlighting to the Foreign Office the difficulties faced by pension-age Caribbean-born British citizens who had been told they were illegal immigrants. The diplomats were repeatedly reassured that there was nothing to worry about and that these were just a few anomalous cases. But with an increasing number of older Caribbean-born people, many of whom had lived in the UK for more than 50 years, recounting how they had been detained, lost their jobs and homes, or been denied benefits after being wrongly classified as illegal immigrants, Hewitt and his colleagues were again attempting to get the government to respond. "They didn't see this as a priority. They were trying to defer it," he says.

Hewitt is not a career diplomat. He was born in Britain and came to his job from a background in development, working on issues of marginalisation, youth and gender, and latterly in Caribbean business development. He became increasingly impatient with the impotence of the diplomatic steps being taken by fellow Caribbean high commissioners.

"They tried to tell me how to deal with this kind of situation - writing letters, communicating formally, going through the normal channels. I said: 'I am not a diplomat'."

Frustrated by their failure to get the British officials to take action, Hewitt decided to turn to the principles of "guerrilla diplomacy" - inspired by a book written by retired Canadian diplomat [Daryl Copeland](#). "I can still see one of my colleagues ... his look of absolute of horror when I said to him, 'I

do not believe that we can use the normal channels to resolve this crisis’,” he says. “We kept trying to get the British government to take it seriously, we kept raising it with them in meetings. They were reassuring us that they were looking into it.”

The UK is not at ease with race. People need to speak truthfully about Britain’s colonial past

But British officials appeared in no hurry to do anything, preferring to kick the issue into the distance, until after April’s [Commonwealth heads of government summit](#), which was seen by the government as a crucial event at a time when Britain was trying to cement relationships for a post-Brexit new order.

Hewitt, along with leading race relation campaigner Sir Herman Ouseley, the race equality thinktank the Runnymede Trust, the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, and Tottenham Labour MP David Lammy, drew up a timetable of events designed to force the issue on to the political agenda. He successfully coordinated the first ever press conference of all Caribbean high commissioners, at which they expressed dismay at the [government’s treatment of people who had lived all their adult lives in the UK](#).

[When Downing Street rejected their request for a meeting with Theresa May](#) and all the Caribbean heads of government to discuss the issue during the Commonwealth summit, Hewitt was furious, and went straight to key television and radio shows to express his anger.

He wanted people to understand the scale of the problem. “I did not want them to have any sense that this was anything other than a catastrophe,” he says. Within 24 hours, the then home secretary Amber Rudd was called to parliament where she [apologised at length for the “appalling” treatment](#) of those citizens. Hewitt’s phone began to “ring off the hook” with approaches from government officials. A meeting was hurriedly set up with the Caribbean heads of government and [the prime minister, at which she also apologised](#).



A march to the Home Office in London in support of the Windrush generation, May 2018.
Photograph: Wiktor Szymanowicz/Barcroft Images

Later that week, when most of his colleagues were at a Buckingham Palace reception celebrating the opening of the Commonwealth heads of government meeting, Hewitt chose not to go to the party. Instead, he seized the moment to visit the Home Office with his colleague Kevin Isaac, high commissioner for Saint Kitts and Nevis, to lobby Rudd. They spent an hour talking about how to resolve the difficulties. He felt that she was committed to addressing the issue, but within 10 days she had resigned.

Hewitt, who was born in London when his Barbadian father studied in the UK and his Indian mother

worked as a nurse, feels Britain still has a problem with institutional racism. He believes the country needs to go through the truth and reconciliation processes undergone in [South Africa](#), and [in Germany after reunification](#), before it can move forward. People need to speak more truthfully about the past, about how “colonisation, slavery and the subcontinent really built up the resources of Britain”, he says. “The UK is still not at ease with race. Colonial history is still not taught here. The modern global Britain, with a multicultural society, is still an aspiration rather than a reality.”

Hewitt’s four-year term as high commissioner ends in September – he will be heading for the beach in Barbados while he decides what to do next. He leaves satisfied that he has achieved something concrete, having forced the government to realise there was a crisis and to take action. But he is undecided about how committed the government is to addressing the ongoing fallout from the Windrush scandal. Hewitt wants to feel positive about the commitment of new home secretary [Sajid Javid to compensating victims](#). But he feels frustrated that so little is still known about the 63 Windrush people wrongly deported by the Home Office to the Caribbean. He suspects that “there is a desire for these cases to be resolved out of the public eye”.

Hewitt is anxious that the scale of the wrongs done to the Windrush generation should not be forgotten. “These people came here after the second world war,” he says. “They faced incredible abuse and racism but they stuck it out. They were conscientious workers and taxpayers, and then this happened. There was such shock and disbelief that a country they gave everything to should question their legitimacy.”

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