

Enoch Powell and the Politics of Britain's Imperial Past
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The central argument of this paper revolves around the thought of the right-wing British politician J. Enoch Powell, a man who is best known for his vitriolic speeches against non-white immigration into Britain in the late 1960s and 70s. I hope to show that as well as speaking out against the possibilities of a peaceful, multiracial Britain, Powell linked the acceptance of non-white 'New Commonwealth' immigration to the historical imagination of the British public. Britain was losing itself, Powell insisted, in a "misinterpreted past...and therefore misinterpret[ed] present."¹ Powell, who between 1965 and 1967 served as Shadow Defence Secretary, argued that the British Empire had never really existed in any coherent form—rather, it was a political charade or myth invented by the Conservative government at the end of the last century. The New Commonwealth, the effort to make politically acceptable and economically profitable the legacy of the British Empire, was therefore in Powell's words a "farce."² Britain's immigration policy and the common citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies were, he insisted, the last relics of the myth of Empire.³ Though largely ostracized by the Conservative leadership after his infamous 'Rivers of Blood' speech in April of 1968, still Powell's preoccupation with history, race, and political identity had a lasting influence on the contestation over Britain's imperial past, especially in its relation to immigration law.

¹ Enoch Powell, *Freedom and Reality* (London, 1969), p. 250

² Anon., "A Party in Search of a Pattern: Patriotism Based on Reality Not Dreams," *Times* (April 2 1964). For a discussion of Powell's writing of this series of anonymous articles, see Simon Heffer, *Like the Roman: The Life of Enoch Powell* (London, 1998), p. 351.

³ South European Service Radio Broadcast by Enoch Powell, 15 March 1965 (Churchill Archives Centre, POLL 4.1.27)