BENJAMIN ZEPHANIA

ANDREW MARR SHOW
BENJAMIN ZEPHANIA

NR: Really good to see you here.

BZ: Good morning.

NR: We’ve heard this phrase again and again ‘the Windrush generation,’ this week. It means a lot more to someone like you, someone whose family were part of that generation, and to many others. What, when you hear that phrase ‘Windrush generation’ what do you think of?

BZ: Pioneers in a way, people who had really big dreams. My mother didn’t come on the Windrush itself, she came just after it. But recently I’ve had to interview my own mother because of my autobiography, and it’s really interesting listening to her talking about how what she felt Britain would be like. I mean, a lot of these people came from the Caribbean thinking that people were walking around the streets of Brixton reciting Shakespeare. They couldn’t understand why every family in Britain didn’t have a picture of the Queen because they did in Jamaica. I mean, their dream of Britain was so kind of big.

NR: Partly promoted by the posters which were in the Caribbean encouraging people to come.

BZ: ‘Come to Britain, the streets are paved with gold.’

NR: ‘You’re welcome,’ I think one of them said didn’t it?

BZ: Well, the National Health Service kind of promoting themselves over there. So, you know, these are people that came with really big dreams.
NR: So when you think of your mum as the nurse from Jamaica, your dad a postman from Barbados and you see what’s happened to people of their age, of their background, how does it make you feel?

BZ: Look, sometimes, I remember he talked about the black community. It’s a bit fake, because you have, you know, your Black Muslims, you’ve got Christians, you’ve got people from Barbados and different islands. But now, at this moment, I think we are united, and we are all angry. And even people who are not part of the Commonwealth are looking at the way that we are being treated, and you know, even my driver here this morning was really angry.

NR: But is everybody equally angry? The government has said compensation, they’ve apologised, they’ve said it was appalling. Do you take that at face value? Are they not sincere, they made a mistake, they’ve learnt from it. Who are you angry with then?

BZ: The government promised compensation after Grenfell Tower, it hasn’t been forthcoming. It’s kind of very good words but the deeds, I mean, something has to be done immediately.

NR: What do you want to see, do you want to see somebody resign? Do you want to see more money?

BZ: I want to see a head roll. But how do you compensate somebody like the mother of Dexter Bristol? This is a man who died. The doctors looked at him and said the cause of death is unknown. We know he died of a broken heart. He lost his job, he lost his benefits, he lost his dignity and he literally just shut down and died.
NR: To a lot of people watching this story seemed to come from nowhere, but a lot of people have known for a very long time, haven't they, Benjamin?

BZ: I'm not plugging newspapers now, but the Voice newspaper has been writing about this for years. The Guardian's picked it up recently. There's a journalist called Simon Israel who's been doing a lot on it. I really felt let down by a lot of the mainstream media, and I have to say the BBC to a certain extent.

NR: You think it was there to be told?

BZ: This has been going on for such a long time, this has just been building up and building up. On Monday 12 Commonwealth heads of state asked Theresa May to debate this and she said no. This is why it's come out now and people are so upset about it.

NR: It is a story now – I know I joked at the top that you'd said, 'when I'm 60 I can relax a bit.' I don't think you're relaxing.

BZ: Oh now, I'm fired up. I'm really fired up. I thought by the time I got to 60 I'd be like – I wanted to be like a Rastafarian comedian, like a dread Lenny Henry or something like that. But now, I mean, the way things are people are really, really upset, and I am one of those people. I mean, if you look at organisations like the Black Cultural Archives, I don't know if you know of them, they document our history. These are people that document the history of the Windrush people for the next generation. They're losing all their funding. So we're being attacked at so many levels.

NR: If you could speak directly to the Prime Minister on this story, what would say to her?

BZ: We need justice, we need equality and you need to, as we say in the streets, fix up and put it right now.
(ends)