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The role of politics in shaping the debate on labour migration

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policy network briefing



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Introduction¹

The intellectual and policy issues thrown up by mass immigration are far from new. This is particularly true when looking at the small club of wealthy industrial societies that have experienced mass inward migration waves in the post-war period. Within Europe, practice and experience varies considerably between Britain, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Scandinavia. Much the same is also true when comparing Europe with industrial economies and societies of the new world. Each of these countries and regions offer prime examples of immigration politics in action, and each have used rather different approaches to regulate immigrant flows and promote domestic integration.

The particular challenges and choices thrown up by immigration today, however, do appear to be largely recent in nature and directly linked to accelerating patterns of globalisation. In some respects, they are. The large-scale immigration that preoccupies political life today is global and highly cosmopolitan in character. Recent spates of European enlargement have made way for large movements of mostly temporary migrant workers from eastern Europe. Increasingly, growing numbers of skilled and entrepreneurial individuals from developing societies are seeking to make their mark in developed countries.

The evolving picture of immigration politics across many developed economies also presents new contradictions that political parties must grapple with. For example, when France's new president, Nicolas Sarkozy, was elected, he was popular with the sector of French society adhering to Jean Marie Le Pen's anti-immigrant dogma. Yet in office he has been keen to point out that the country's future development should not be held back by a shortage of personnel in key sectors. In Germany, staunch public opposition to immigration has accompanied government efforts in recent years to recruit global IT and financial workers, often losing out to the pro-immigration reputation of California and London. And in Australia in late 2007, an administration closely associated with scepticism towards immigration, notably from Asian sources, was swept from office.

None the less, it should not be forgotten that the current context and controversies are connected to earlier waves of immigration and, therefore, to long-standing tensions about population movement and national cohesion. Arguments over identifying accurate costs and benefits echo earlier debates. And disputes over immigration's effects on social change and national character have always been present. Apocalyptic predictions of social decay and national crisis are also by no means new.

The UK case is one that especially revolves around a set of familiar concerns. For instance, in the 1960s and 1970s politicians grappled with mass Commonwealth immigration, touching various raw nerves with voters and the press. Political parties were usually as divided among themselves as they were across party lines, and large, imponderable questions hung over the political landscape, centring on a sense of erosion of national identity, racial preferences, and the responsiveness of parliament. In fact, Policy Network's seminar, "Understanding public perceptions of labour migration in Europe", for which this paper has been prepared, takes place shortly after the 40th anniversary of Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, in which he warned that Commonwealth immigration to Britain would spell the end of British nationhood. Unfortunately, echoes of those same concerns are still evident today.

1. This paper was prepared for a Policy Network seminar, "Disentangling the myths from the realities: Building a progressive centre-left narrative on labour migration", on 13 May 2008. Not for citation without permission from the author.

The current context

There are, however, some distinctive aspects of the current climate that ensure immigration continues to be near the top of the list of burning issues for the electorate. These contribute to a sense of immigration as pulling or stretching apart stable societies. Some may even say that “crisis” is not too strong a term in many countries.

The hallmarks of immigration policy today, several of which form the thematic backdrop to Policy Network’s research objectives of “Building a progressive narrative on migration”, can largely be described as follows:

Political parties are deadlocked and leaders susceptible to populist pressures. Mainstream parties, irrespective of local electoral systems, have struggled to maintain voter confidence. Many parties have been captured by soft anti-immigrant sentiment which leaders have sought to manage, often inelegantly. Intra-party divisions are commonplace, partly because immigration sits poorly across existing ideological, regional, class or other fault lines.

Multiculturalism is openly questioned. The general doctrine that was loosely adopted by several immigrant receiving countries—namely to support equal rights for persons of immigrant origin alongside cultural diversity—has been severely tested. This has been most starkly seen in the integration policy U-turns of Dutch governments since 2002, partly fuelled by elites’ doubts about the character and motives of local Islamic communities. A similar reversal has been seen in Denmark where, for instance, immigrants and non-immigrants are now subject to differential laws regarding the legal age to be married. And in Britain, the country’s equalities supremo, Trevor Phillips, has been praised and criticised in equal measure for reading the funeral rites on multiculturalist ideas.

Patterns of segregation and separateness are actively challenged. In part as a result of the wave of misgivings about past multiculturalist tendencies, many countries today take a sceptical view towards immigrant groups who stick together. Immigrants’ tendency to cluster with their own is criticised even though it may be a short-term pattern giving way to eventual dispersal. The immigrant “ghetto” becomes the object of suspicion and anxiety most of all in relation to those groups that have remained tightly knit even after three or more decades. In Britain, this is largely the case among Pakistani and Bangladeshi descended groups; in France and Belgium, it describes many north African descended communities; in Germany, it is a byword for several million Turks. The push to desegregate and disperse is equally frustrated by the very few levers enjoyed by governments to deliver such outcomes. In Canada, various measures have been tried to bribe, cajole or promote immigrant settlement beyond MTV (Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver); the evidence regarding their impact is unimpressive.

Ethnic diversity and social cohesion are widely thought to be irreconcilable. Fears that modern societies would buckle under the growing ethno-religious diversity brought about by immigration are far from new. A century ago in America these were expressed—loudly and with reverberations—in respect of southern European immigration and also against further Jewish influxes. The capacity for Australia to absorb further non-white and non-European immigration was still widely debated in the two decades following the abolition of the country’s “white Australia” immigration policy in the early 1970s. Enoch Powell’s basic premise in Britain in the 1960s was that ties across ethnic lines were both undesirable and, worse still, unimaginable. This basic theme has been significantly extended in recent years. First, commentators such as David Goodhart have argued that European liberals’

support for welfare values are in tension with mass immigration: the friction stems, it is argued, from a reluctance to reciprocate and share across unfamiliar, ethnic boundaries. Second, Bob Putnam has published empirical evidence which suggests that Americans' levels of inter-personal trust are inversely related to levels of ethnic diversity: growing diversity, he fears, may be rolled up with diminishing social trust and solidarity.

Loss of control over borders looms large in public sentiment. The capacity of governments to make and deliver basic claims about borders is regularly tested in contemporary debates over immigration. Controversies are fuelled by two elements. To begin with, the permeability of borders is easy to see. (The US-Mexican case is particularly noteworthy, despite significant injections of financial and political resources to deliver control.) The second element is more controversial, and holds that immigration policies which aim for permanent immigrant settlement are the true cause of increased "irregular" mobility of workers. This (the argument goes) is because most immigrants do not desire permanent settlement. In fact, many are specifically motivated by short-term advantage factors. The difficulty is that there are comparatively few immigration programmes catering for this appetite. By contrast, the bulk of immigration policies prioritise and value permanency. This is perhaps not so surprising given the apparent need among host communities to explicitly—and culturally—sanction any new membership; a tendency exemplified by the way citizenship policies in particular seek an exclusive bargain and long-term contract. One by-product has been greater numbers attempting to penetrate, through irregular channels, the very border controls that are designed to keep out any "unwanted" migrants. This is ironic since temporary immigrants of various kinds are then also constrained by this citizenship driven filter.

Grave doubts are expressed about security and immigration. Arguably the most dramatic change within the past decade has resulted from the securitisation of immigration debates. This is overwhelmingly the result of the post 9/11 global environment, ratcheted up significantly by the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts and the Madrid and London mass civilian attacks of 2004 and 2005 respectively. The reputation of western Muslim communities is the basic point of contention. The presence of extremists and radicals, some of whom have a keen appetite for violence and confrontation, cannot be denied. However, the link to immigration is somewhat tenuous given that individuals involved in some of the most violent conspiracies are often drawn from settled communities that are unaffected by immigration policies. Nevertheless, there is a growing tendency for governments to view long-term immigration objectives through the lens of security.

Underlying issues

The previous section outlined some of the most apparent features of the environment in which current immigration debates are unfolding. This section will identify five of the most pressing day-to-day political controversies related to immigration. Obviously, when considering their impact, these will need to be examined through a sensible historic lens in order to help determine how far, and why, current immigration political debates are connected with earlier ones.

1. Political disputes mostly centre on the scale or quantum of fresh immigration. Migration is only very rarely viewed in net terms, even though many wealthy, high-inflow countries also report high outflows. This tendency is driven by a sense that the human-capital-rich “leavers” are somehow giving up on their home society, whilst, strangely, the “arrivers” are only driven by self-gain. Regardless, there is plenty of pressure on politicians to declare a simple numeric target, and usually a lower-one-than-before at that. It was for this simple reason that the Tories in Britain staked their electoral campaign in 2005 on a policy to allow an annual net immigration target to be implemented. Although it was rejected electorally at the time, that does not mean that such an approach has no future prospects.

2. The composition of immigration also matters. This may or may not be spelt out politically but it nevertheless features tacitly in public debate. However, the composition question can vary: it might involve the mix between skilled and unskilled migrants (a familiar and comfortable distinction); or it may be between migrants who are ethnically and culturally different to host populations as compared with those who seem more “like us” (something that is much more vexed and volatile emotionally). The latter is, of course, a regular source of controversy not just in immigration matters but also in foreign affairs. For instance, in the post-war period Britain, France and Germany all became receiving societies for large numbers of immigrants and settlers who were seen as ethnically distinct from their host communities. In all three cases, south Asians, north Africans and Turks respectively have been linked with major debates about the absorptive capacity of host communities. It is hard to imagine similar debates occurring had these countries experienced large-scale influxes of other European immigrants. A further illustration is reflected in current attitudes and policies towards possible Turkish accession to the EU. Whilst EU eastern enlargement (and, more tentatively, free movement of labour) has tended to be supported by governments across Europe, the case of Turkey has created a political storm. France’s government, for instance, has openly argued that it is neither possible nor desirable to let a country with such a large ethnically and religiously “different” population into the EU club. If that argument held, it would be equally implausible (and thus undesirable) to seek to open up EU labour markets to tens of millions of Turks who “cannot” be successfully integrated.

3. The capacity to manage migration is probed constantly. The clearest effects of the pressures created by globalisation are seen in the determination of governments to control their borders and the scepticism of the local populations about government capacity to do so. This applies equally to traditional immigration—“open” countries as it does to “closed” ones. In some cases the immediate driver tends to be lax controls and the mis-implementation of extant immigration policies. For example, many have lost count of the number of UK immigration ministers who have been put on the back foot—and in many cases, lost their jobs—as a result of a political row over the efficacy of existing controls. In other cases, the drivers have more to do with diminishing public confidence in the government’s ability to choose the best available talent when seeking to replenish the population through immigration. For example, Canada has a long-standing commitment to annual inward immigration of 1% of its population. However, recently this policy has been called into question by

a multitude of concerns about the processes of selecting immigrants and the speed of converting applicants into landed migrants. The control of borders needs to be demonstrated by all governments but often for significantly different reasons.

4. Planning population equilibriums lies behind questions of immigration, often uncomfortably. With border control also comes the broader task of planning, or at least influencing, population dynamics over the medium to long term. Few governments are entirely relaxed about this task and indeed many have no appetite to shape outcomes in excess of their capacity to do so. That said, the pressure to control such demographic trends stems from two longer term objectives:

- Delivering sustainable equilibrium in labour markets, so as to allow fresh immigration to fill unmet demand whilst also ensuring that the human capital profile of the existing population keeps pace with labour market needs. This is a balancing act that many governments struggle with. For instance, by allowing in significant numbers of immigrant plumbers, it is possible to argue that training and development for domestic plumbers will be neglected.
- Ensuring that the healthiest—and wealthiest—mix between working and dependent populations is created and remains in line with public expectations about welfare entitlement and public services. The worker/dependent ratio has deteriorated across many developed economies and it is clear that injections of younger immigrant talent can only provide short-term fixes to this challenge. Other complementary strategies include boosting the productivity of the labour force (whether boosted by immigrants or not), greater investment in education and training, structural initiatives to move towards high value-added economies, and, most difficult of all, downward revision of public expectation about public spending.

5. Congestion effects (in schools, housing, healthcare, etc) are a further managerial burden. Not only are governments under pressure to show that borders are under control, they are also struggling to manage the short-term dislocations that immigration has led to with regards to public services and social cohesion. Recently this has been accentuated by large short-term movements into communities already under pressure in terms of healthcare and school places. But it is also driven by the changing pattern of immigrant settlement. The traditional immigrant “ghetto” model has receded substantially, for example, in the US, where the mid-west and prairie states are now attracting large numbers of low-skilled workers from Latin America. In the UK this has also been apparent, with large scale, unplanned settlement in semi-rural areas, in East Anglia and in the north-east. In these places, it is not surprising that political concerns have erupted. They are partly about relieving tensions that arise over competition for scarce resources, and partly about mitigating the effects of sudden social change. The congestion effects are meanwhile experienced in urban areas already accustomed to past immigration. The climate here is one of frustration and neglect, with widespread feelings of being on the immigration front line. For example, one inner London borough has effectively turned its back on national government population statistics to measure their rapidly changing local demographics, choosing instead to invest faith in the figures generated by local supermarket loyalty schemes!

Cross-cutting challenges

Migration involves a number of important cross-cutting challenges. These involve looking at the phenomenon in terms of both opportunities and threats. A brief discussion of the key challenges (below) shows that: a) the causes and impacts cannot always be easily separated, and b) developing a solid framework for solutions is often as hard as identifying the solutions themselves.

a) Costs and benefits. In most countries the costs and benefits of immigration have shifted over several decades. Today, they are often unclear, open to manipulation, and thus controversial. For example, gains to labour market efficiency cannot be easily pinned down unless they are examined in both the short and long term. Also, the gains that flow to particular population subgroups or social classes may vary considerably. London's vocal middle classes have become accustomed to a cheaply-funded and flexible service sector propped up by mass immigration. It stands in contrast to the white working class (and some parts of the black and Asian working class) whose prospects appear to have been severely squeezed by recent immigration. The overall aggregate gains are also hard to agree upon. Migration Watch, an anti-immigration pressure group, has claimed that the net gain per capita per annum may only equal the price of a Mars bar. While this may not be accurate, it reveals the degree of dissensus about economic benefits alone. It is mainly for this reason that Philippe Legrain, among others, has called for a Stern Report on migration.

b) Identity politics. The economic calculus, however fraught, shrinks in comparison with debates about group and national identity. Recent immigration to the UK, for instance, now creates a completely new identity dynamic. This has been called "hyper-diversity" by Steve Vertovec: no single group comes close to being a majority except in a small handful of places untouched by immigration. This means that black/white models of ethnic relations are now rather redundant. It also means that policies are needed to make the most of the mosaic and to curb tendencies towards separateness and Balkanisation. At the national level, there is considerable appetite to develop a settled understanding of identity that is both ethnically and culturally neutral whilst based around common civic values.

c) Political pressures. The political salience of immigration has increased in most developed countries in recent years. This is partly in response to the rising levels of immigration to begin with, and also a reflection of the reactive stance of many governments. The central challenge, however, remains the extent to which these pressures are harnessed to shape strategic policies or merely seen as reasons to keep immigrants out at all costs. Zig Layton-Henry has noted the "zero-immigration mindset" that many politicians have adopted, even though many have presided over progressive immigration policies. Anti-immigrant public sentiment has been particularly widespread in France, Austria, Italy, Denmark and Switzerland and has led to very little room for manoeuvre. The elite response all too often has been to follow rather than lead the political crowd. And yet, recent general elections in Australia and Spain have shown that resisting such political pressures can be associated with electoral success.

d) Policy questions. In the past, policy-making questions tended to be tackled in a non-partisan climate. This practice has eroded considerably and policy matters are now addressed in a divisive and controversial atmosphere. That said, governments face three main policy questions:

- The degree to which an effective immigration policy is based on simple managerial competence. Immigration, in this sense, is no different from most other public policy challenges, so it may be useful to think about the task in a business-as-usual manner.
- The use of immigration policies in a way that supports the logic of trade, aid and development policies. The use of cheap labour in western economies may help to alleviate poverty elsewhere through remittances but it can also thwart effective development of poor economies.
- The extent to which it is possible to attain economic benefits from immigration without threatening social cohesion. This is sometimes thought of as a trade off, but it also suggests that immigrants are not just small parcels of human capital but also people with faces, identities and a desire to belong.

Conclusion

The idea of managing migration operates at two distinct levels. At one level, it is about understanding how effectively governments can pull and influence policy levers to smooth the movement of people who are needed (and wanted). This chiefly involves calibrating demand and supply in the labour market, anticipating congestion effects, championing transparency about costs and benefits, and also smoothing the settlement of new groups into existing communities.

It also operates at a second level, whereby migration is managed to create successful plural societies. These are societies that not so much react to the challenge of migration but rather see it as a normal part of their character. In this instance, the role of government may not involve leading so heavily on policy matters. Instead its role is likely to be about championing a cosmopolitan ethos that values difference and engenders solidarity at one and the same time. However, it is hard to do so in practice, not least because of the policy trade offs that everyday managerial issues create. This dimension of managed migration is therefore centred on emphasising a shared future that is both desirable *and* attainable.

Respected elite opinion in the US about a century ago concluded that the country had inevitably reached its absorptive limits for new immigrants. It was thought that past waves of immigrants had been plentiful and future candidates seemed unattractive. The religious and cultural character of Jews and southern Europeans in particular appeared most unappealing. That view was in direct opposition to the—now common—assumption that the US could only have succeeded like no other country in the 20th century in the main because of—rather than despite—its substantial patterns of immigration.

There is a lesson in this observation. It is that political and social imagination is likely to be the biggest obstacle of all in addressing immigration challenges. Many developed societies appear unable and unwilling to think of immigration in terms other than representing a cultural and security threat. That the political and policy challenges are considerable is without doubt, and these may or may not be soluble in the long term. However, strong strategic leadership is one obvious prerequisite of increasing the odds of success. And imagining a better, shared future is another.

Further reading

Legrain, P. 2007, *Immigrants: your country needs them*, London, Little Brown.

Turner, A. 2007, 'Do we need more immigrants and babies?', lecture presented at the London School of Economics, 28 November. Available at: http://cep.lse.ac.uk/conference_papers/28_11_2007/TurnerImmigrants_Lecture.pdf