

Immigration and political trust

Project synthesis report 2010-2011

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Introduction

This Policy Network project, undertaken in partnership with the Barrow Cadbury Trust, aimed to explore growing levels of distrust in political institutions, including elected politicians and political parties, and to focus on public concerns about immigration as one of the explanations for low levels of political trust. Based on research by Lauren McLaren highlighting concern about immigration as a factor undermining trust in politics, the project sought to examine the ways in which public concern erodes trust and what can be done to reverse this. This report summarises key points in the project's discussions and publications.

The impact of concern about immigration on political trust

The project's starting point was new research by Dr Lauren McLaren, associate professor of politics at the University of Nottingham, based on four rounds of the European Social Survey. This research shows that concern about the effects of immigration has an impact on trust in politics. Controlling for other possible factors affecting levels of political trust, including both individual characteristics and national-level conditions, the research shows that if citizens' perception of the effects of immigration is negative, they are less trusting of the institutions of the political system and of politicians. Additionally, it finds that concerns about immigration are not the result of actual levels of immigration.

Negative perceptions of immigration

A majority of people in the UK have negative views about immigration and most believe immigration should be reduced. A recent poll by Ipsos MORI for the Migration Observatory found that 69% of people favour cuts in immigration. Negative opinion on immigration is not new and the feeling that numbers are too high is the public's standing position, irrespective of actual numbers. What has changed more recently, however, is the salience of immigration and how many people rank it among the most important issues. At the start of the Labour government hardly anyone rated immigration as their most important concern; by the later years of the Labour government, immigration was rated as one of the most important issues by around one third to 40% of people.

The project looked at three aspects of public concern about immigration: low confidence in the management of admissions and control; concerns about economic impacts; and anxieties about identity and community.

Admissions, numbers and control

One way of understanding the impact of concern about immigration on levels of trust in politics is to see immigration policy as one among many policy areas where people are dissatisfied with

government performance and where governments have gotten on the wrong side of public opinion. There is a gap between public expectations and what policy is seen to achieve, giving rise to a sense of policy failure and distrust.

Key points:

- Prior to 1998 net migration was modest and since then it has averaged at least 150,000 per year. Since 1998 the foreign-born share of the population has increased from around 8% to around 14%. This is relatively small compared to, for example, Spain, where net migration was around 600,000 per year in the early 2000s.
- Polling and other research shows that concern is based in large part on a perceived lack of control. Only a small minority think immigration should be stopped altogether but a majority think laws should be much tougher.
- Trust is undermined by policy failures and ineffective implementation. It was argued that people want a stable system, with criteria that they can have confidence in, which are effectively implemented. Policy failures cited include the inadequate handling of the rise in asylum numbers in the 1990s and the management of the 2004 EU accession. Another key deficit concerns data: even data on net migration is limited and flawed, despite this being a headline policy.
- Distrust is intensified by over-promising. Governments over-promise, resulting in a discrepancy between public expectations and what they can deliver. There is tough, securitised talk about enforcement and control by politicians in public, while officials on the ground tacitly recognise the impediments to control.
- For some, the answer is to stop talking about numbers altogether, because people will continue to come to the UK whatever happens, and to engage with concerns about impacts (see following section).
- It is not clear that opinion responds in a straightforward way to policy developments. People have little knowledge of immigration policies and immigration levels. The estimate for the percentage of people in the UK who were born abroad is 24%, about 2.5 times higher than the actual level. A significant minority think that the UK is already a majority immigrant country. It was suggested that it is important to think about how to get people's perceptions of numbers down. Tackling perceptions might require an independent set of policies, in the same way that tackling crime and tackling fear of crime are seen as requiring different responses.
- It was contended that it is necessary to unbundle immigration because the public are capable of understanding different flows requiring different policies in terms of control. This would create scope for different stories – student migration a gain for the UK economy, labour migration linked to growth, asylum to humanitarian issues and so on. A recent Ipsos MORI poll for the Migration Observatory found that people have very different preferences regarding different groups of immigrants. Only a minority think of students when they think of immigrants (29%), even though students make up the largest migrant group in government statistics. Only around one third support reducing student immigration. Conversely, many associate immigrants with asylum seekers and 56% support reducing asylum numbers even though they have come right down and asylum seekers now represent the smallest group (4% in 2009). There is widespread agreement on reducing irregular migration (even 61% of those who do not want to see overall immigration

reduced support this), though whether people support the necessary policies to tackle this is another question.

- Lessons might be learnt from looking at the group of people who are not concerned about immigration in order to see how attitudes change. This minority ebbs and flows, incorporating around one fifth of the UK public. Importantly, there is significant change in attitudes towards immigration over generations and the majority now go out of their way to distance themselves from traditional, overt racism. It was suggested that there is potential for a more positive narrative on immigration among the younger generation and those who stay on in education. Policy interventions should seek to secure this group.

- A further challenge is that concern may not be quelled by people feeling policy has delivered noticeable changes around them because people consistently say that there is pressure nationally but not in their local area. Immigration has a symbolic role in national discourse. Therefore even if numbers were to come down it is not clear that anti-immigration opinion would be easily assuaged.

- Narrative and discourse play a key role in driving perceptions. Rhetoric may have a significant effect on perceptions even if the substance of policy does not change. This, it was noted, was the case with Powell's 'rivers of blood' and Thatcher's 'swamping' rhetoric. But hammering up tough talk may play into the problem of over-promising. Furthermore, it was suggested that playing in to the idea that there is something going wrong and immigration is a constant threat, and linking it to crime and security, may be detrimental to trust in the longer term.

- The role of the media is central in creating expectations and constructing the narrative around performance on immigration policy. The media are an important driver of public opinion on immigration and studies have shown that amount – and importantly tone – of immigration coverage is related to public concern about immigration. In the UK, newspaper readership is more closely related to attitudes towards immigration than attitudes to any other issue. Positive examples were cited of co-operation with the media, for example between the local authority and local media in Leicester, and in Portugal, where government-sponsored training for journalists on understanding immigration takes place. Some stressed the need for discriminatory descriptions and incorrect statements in the media to be challenged through an early response mechanism.

- Politicisation has moved immigration up the political agenda, involving more elements of conflict, including party political conflict and competition. One option is to try to depoliticise immigration, presenting it in technocratic, rational terms. The technocratic delivery of policy could, for example, encompass asylum decision-making through an independent body, with judicial oversight. Cross-party consensus on certain aspects of immigration was mentioned, such as firm opposition to the far right or upholding the right to seek international protection.

- Several risks of depoliticisation were highlighted. First, lack of trust in the competence of the UK Border Agency could undermine any attempt to promote a technocratic discourse. Second, the Migration Advisory Committee has been asked to resolve trade-offs and that should be the job of politicians rather than experts. Some raised concerns about an agency that exercised functions of government, such as issuing visas, being at one remove from the government. Third, making demand-driven labour migration policy about technocratic delivery against labour market objectives may do little to stem public concerns and the feeling that numbers are too high,

however those numbers are determined, and may create space for populist anti-immigration narratives.

- Many expressed the view that there is no alternative but to engage in the debate. There is no good in people thinking that the debate cannot be had and perpetuating the myth that no one is allowed to talk about immigration. There are different views as to how to engage in the debate. First, it was suggested that it should involve reframing the hostile immigration discourse with a balanced position that includes the benefits. Simplicity and emotionalisation should be at the core of communication strategies, including stories with a human face. It was suggested that narratives playing off the 'good' versus the 'bad' migrant should be avoided. Threat frames could be turned around ('who will look after granny?'). Second, it was argued that persuasion is necessary. It is not about blaming the public for their concerns, but listening to them. While politicians can shape expectations and lead opinion, this involves persuasion and a messy process of telling people honestly about what has not worked in a language that resonates with them, drawing on values and a sense of fairness. Politicians cannot go around the problem but have to go through it.

- It was suggested that part of the problem was the process of policy-making and the way in which people feel that immigration policy is imposed on them – a very distant part of policy-making that the state does to people. This creates space for political entrepreneurs to be 'the voice of the voiceless'. The question was raised whether there could be more partnerships with communities or universities and more local-level determination.

Economic security and fairness

Many people concur that concern about immigration is often a proxy for concerns about wider issues. It has been referred to as a 'vortex issue' and can act as the focus of wider anxieties about economic and social insecurity. But there are also specific concerns that people have about immigration's economic impacts. The idea of immigrants taking jobs, undercutting wages and undermining labour protections is central to the debate on immigration. So too is the sentiment that immigrants receive more from the state than they contribute and get preferential treatment in public services, including housing. Dealing with concern about immigration and building trust must involve addressing such concerns. For some, this is where the focus of engagement should be, rather than on numbers; it is better to have a discourse that accepts the reality of immigration and engages with concerns about impacts and the sense people have that immigration is creating conditions that are unfair and that migrants get a better deal.

Key points:

- The rise in net migration since the late 1990s was due to the buoyant UK labour market, the opening of the world labour market for the highly skilled, the sharp rise in foreign students, and the EU accession of the A8 countries. Looking at the impact on the native-born population, the overall effect of immigration on unemployment is negligible. The effect of immigration on GDP per capita is tiny because the occupation mix for migrants is similar to the native-born occupation mix. Migrants are employed in a wide range of jobs. However, since the early 2000s, the share of foreign-born workers has grown fastest in relatively low-skilled sectors and occupations. According to a recent Migration Observatory briefing, among the ten occupations with the highest shares of foreign-born workers, only one low-skilled occupation featured in 2002, whereas there are now at least five low-skilled occupations on this list. For example, in elementary process plant occupations 36.4% of workers were foreign-born in 2010. Some of these workers are relatively skilled but are in lower skilled jobs in the UK.

- Immigration has had some slight wage effects for the unskilled, particularly unskilled service sector workers. The economist Stephen Nickell estimates that pay for the unskilled may be around 3% to 4% lower than it would have been without the recent increase in immigration. The economic impacts are generally considered to be small, though they are differentiated and may be concentrated on a particular group. Moreover, many people, including commentators and opinion formers, believe that the employment of migrant workers, especially Eastern Europeans, is depressing wages. According to a recent Ipsos MORI poll for the Migration Observatory, there is majority support for reducing immigration of low-skilled workers (56%). The difficulties in doing so are considerable, however, because practically all low-skilled labour migration comes from the European Union.

- There is a question about what policy is trying to achieve: growth and equitable incomes are not necessarily the same, and cohesion is another matter. Some people feel that policy should stress the selectivity of (discretionary, non-EEA) immigration based on economic need. In some cases (scientists, engineers etc) this is straightforward, but the 'needs' of the economy are not always clear cut. The needs of employers and employees often differ and it is necessary to scrutinise employer demands. For example, does the idea of migrants having a better work ethic simply mean that they are prepared to accept lower wages and work longer hours? The importance of the minimum pay rate in creating a level playing field in low-paid jobs was mentioned but it was felt that it is too low (and does little to impact on irregular workers, where the suggested solution is a regularisation, such as those that have taken place in Italy). It was argued that progressive policy should work against economic insecurity. Further strengthening EU-level protections was mentioned as one direction for this.

- Immigration is necessary to fill shortages and to attract people in sectors where the labour market is global already (for example, academics). Businesses may relocate if they cannot recruit the workers they need. The public appears to recognise this: only 32% support reducing immigration of highly skilled workers, according to the Ipsos MORI poll. But immigration is not the only answer to skills shortages. Other answers are education, apprenticeships and an active training policy, and raising wages and increasing regulation in certain sectors to attract workers from the resident workforce. As Bridget Anderson and Martin Ruhs have argued, the debate about immigration too rarely takes into account the regulatory framework determined by a wide range of public policies and how this contributes to the growing demand for migrant labour in the UK economy. For example, the lack of a comprehensive vocational training system has contributed to increasing demand for migrant workers in the construction sector. In the publicly funded but privately provided social care sector there is a structural dependence on low-cost workers due to under-investment over years, so that migrant workers make up two thirds of social care workers in London, on very low wages and working long and unsociable hours. Changing immigration policy will not be enough to change this; rather, it is necessary to look at the wider public policies that create demand, for example through a radical rethink of social care.

- With unemployment going up and wages in decline, it was argued that there will continue to be a tendency to scapegoat and to blame immigrants. Adapting to a toxic debate is not the answer and will not provide solutions. Language is important and there should be standards below which it is unacceptable to fall. Instead, there should be a focus on improving training and wage rates. A new agenda should seek to address migration not through vacuous talk about numbers but by stressing the rights of all workers, not just migrant workers.

- In terms of the impact of immigration on public services and resources, it is clear that with more people, greater infrastructure is necessary – more people simply need more roads, more utilities, more airports and so on. The problem is that most people appear to dislike these things. There is also a need to ease pressure on public service provision in areas of demographic change, so there needs to be real-time demographic data so services can respond and allocate resources.

- In the UK the issue of housing is also central. In England the number of households is rising by around 220,000 per year. Immigration accounts for 30% to 40% of this, with other reasons being higher birth rates and a higher proportion of single-person households due to family break-up and rising life expectancy. Over the last 12 years house-building rates have been around 50,000 below the rise in the number of households, resulting in housing shortages at all levels, higher house prices and a large increase in the demand for social housing. Exacerbating this, most new houses were built in the north rather than in the south, even though it is the south that has seen the greater growth in population.

- The answer is to build more housing. But some argue that this cannot be the only answer and that it is also necessary to recognise that resources like social housing are scarce and that there needs to be a system for rationing public goods. There is much discussion of the need to emphasise putting something in before you get something out. Some advocate rules for eligibility that in part depend on citizenship, time someone has spent in a place, connection to the community, or what they have put in, with a balance struck between allocating on need and fairness. Some suggest a qualifying period before immigrants can access social housing (it is important to note here that many migrants already have no entitlement to social housing).

- To address the sense of unfairness and entitlement, some take this further and put forward policies designed to show that citizenship provides protection for insiders, such as a preference for UK workers in government contracting (the high numbers of NEETs and unemployed graduates were mentioned here), and a deposit scheme for immigrants so that they make a financial commitment to the UK, serving to give the message that generosity is not being abused. Some agree that the idea of ‘free riding’ might be less of an issue with a more contributory system that emphasises the club-like nature of the welfare state: paying in before you take out. It was suggested that future regimes should allow migrants to enter the labour market, contribute, and earn full citizenship rights, so that a full set of entitlements is earned over time, adapting social protection for conditions of mobility.

- There may be limits to such an approach. Many argue it is incorrect to oppose the interests of the immigrant with those of the unemployed: there is no lump of labour that can either be filled by British workers or foreigners; labour markets are dynamic. Contribution-based schemes cannot, of course, apply to universal services such as education. Additionally, such an approach must take account of the restrictions and disadvantages migrants already face. For example, migrants are already at greater risk of both statutory homelessness and multiple exclusion homelessness due to sustained socio-economic disadvantage (rather than to personal problems such as mental health, drugs, alcohol and crime). Discrimination in the labour market persists. For many it is critical for upholding human rights that everyone with the right to stay long-term is given citizenship rights and in particular voting rights, promoting maximum political participation among immigrants. The debate about duties is important, but the state has a central role in creating a virtuous cycle of reciprocity. Furthermore, it was highlighted that migrants already invest a lot to travel and

work in a different country, rarely with the intention of taking advantage of their host community. Many have restricted access to welfare, and often make a considerable contribution to society, for example in the NHS.

- An alternative suggestion was for employers to pay a fee, as a percentage of the wage, to hire migrant workers (this is being done in Singapore). Immigration, recruitment and training policies could be more explicitly linked: employers can employ migrants if they invest in training.
- As well as differentiated rights and an emphasis on contribution, others favour different approaches, including turning the narrative into a more positive one. In many European countries there is a debate around migrant dependence on welfare. In the Netherlands, for example, the process of socioeconomic integration of immigrants has been relatively successful but the cultural frame has set up a strong antagonism. It was suggested that this framing is a political project and it is here that work needs to be done, for example through constructing counter-frames on the socioeconomic success of second generation migrants, or by creating a forward-looking narrative based on population ageing (Dutch women have an average of 1.7 children) that anticipates the future European race to attract population surpluses from other parts of the world (though others pointed to alternative policies including better childcare to encourage people to have more children as a better cure for the demographic problem).
- For some, concern about immigration should be understood as part of a wider feeling of globalisation fatigue (it is estimated that in the Netherlands, for example, around 20-25% of the electorate feel this) and that this should be tackled by turning industrially based welfare states into post-industrial welfare states, in particular through education policies. The example of Scandinavia was cited, where the education system develops emancipatory work. It was suggested that addressing concern about immigration is part of a broader process of working with people who feel betrayed by a progressive political elite that promised them opportunity but then provided them with an education system that resulted in a lack of social mobility. Ignoring concerns, it was suggested, creates fertile ground for populist co-option of anti-capitalist and anti-globalisation narratives.
- At a general level, it was argued that reducing inequality is one way to think about decreasing concern about immigration. Countries with greater income equality and better socioeconomic safety nets tend to have citizens who are less hostile to newcomers. This might be because, as has been well established, economic inequality has a substantial impact on generalised interpersonal trust, and less trusting societies may in turn be less trusting of newcomers. Inequality may weaken the sense of a shared political community and therefore people may struggle to account for the place of newcomers.

Community, identity and solidarity

Many people contend that concern about economic impacts may be cultural at root. Indeed, much poll-based evidence suggests that the driving force behind public concern about immigration is not perceived economic threat but is identity- and culture-based and that reducing the sense of cultural threat is the priority in addressing public concerns about immigration and building trust.

Key points:

- Lauren McLaren suggests that if concern about immigration has potential consequences for

the functioning of political systems, this is because such concerns relate to the nature of the political community itself. Immigration may in some way undermine the traditional relationship citizens have to their political institutions. If European political systems have been built on cultural connections, a perceived weakening of these connections may weaken attachment to the political system. Lauren McLaren argues that ‘the construction of the modern European state, with its emphasis on common culture and identity, seems to have made it difficult for many citizens in these states to reconcile the functioning of their national political systems with the incorporation of newcomers who are perceived not to share the same culture and values.’

- Lauren McLaren invites us to revisit the construction of national identities, with the aim of more clearly establishing what national identity consists of and where the millions of foreigners living in European countries fit within this construct. Canada was put forward as an example of a state that has been successful in expanding the concept of national identity. Others suggested that it is important to promote the idea that you can be a ‘hyphenated European’. Through new research on national identity, Lauren McLaren finds that trust in the political system is higher among people who emphasise acquired characteristics like language and civic rights over ascriptive characteristics like ancestry. Lauren McLaren’s research also shows that political trust is low where integration policy is out of sync with people’s perceptions of national identity.

- There is an ongoing debate about whether diversity weakens generalised, interpersonal trust and solidarity and there are questions about how this affects political trust. Rather than go into the detail of these debates, the project sought primarily to ask what pro-trust policies look like in diverse political communities and which policies erode trust.

- The importance of an individual’s sense of identification with national and political institutions was highlighted; how you define the nation state matters, and not just for newcomers. Trust can be built by improving identification with political and legal institutions and through non-discrimination legislation and policies that work towards the accommodation of difference, including in the areas of education and employment. People must have a stake in the system and feel their needs are represented. Regardless of whether this is called multiculturalism or not, it is important to consider the ways in which national myths have excluded large numbers of people and to think about participatory politics and institutions in a way that allows for greater identification. A widespread sense of belonging to the polity may be a more important focus than a shared national identity.

- Research by Alan Manning of the London School of Economics based on the Citizenship Survey shows that such identification has been a positive effect of multicultural policies that aim to foster a sense of belonging. Trust in, and identification with, political institutions among members of ethnic minority groups has been a success. However, multicultural policies took the attitudes of the white majority for granted, resulting in concern about immigration and distrust among a segment of the majority population, some of whom are sceptical about the ability to retain a minority ethnic or religious identity while being British. This raises the question of distinguishing concern about immigration from ethnocentrism. It was argued that we must be able to say that you can be concerned about immigration and have a non-racist view, but this is not to say there are no racist or extreme views. Some argue that there might be different strategies for large numbers of ‘immigration sceptics’ to those aimed at the estimated 15-20% with more hardened views who are considered to be amenable to far-right messages.

- Concern about immigration was described as a reaction to change, especially in communities where generations have lived in close proximity. Immigration is perceived as part of the process by which people's communities are changing – and often becomes the symbol for this change. At the same time, however, it is important not to characterise white working class areas simply as immobile and threatened by the arrival of 'outsiders'.

- For some, the primary task is to find a simple language in which to talk about national identity. More nuance is not winning any ground or building trust in a progressive approach. One question raised was whether national identification focussed on public institutions, put forward in opposition to a narrative centred on ethnic nationalism, is enough to occupy this ground. Some raised doubts about whether a rooted cultural identity can be based on constitutional principles alone.

- Priorities mentioned in relation to building trust include citizenship education as a normal part of learning and an emphasis on a common framework and all citizens obeying the law without any cultural excuses for disobeying it, partly in order to redress the caricature of liberal tolerance of, for example, honour killings or homophobia and the pernicious misuse of the language of liberal aims by the far right. One view is of a strong framework of fundamental rights and anti-discrimination legislation which is not contingent but that can be enhanced with earned access to additional benefits. There was also emphasis placed on the need for greater diversity among decision-makers in the political system and the media and the promotion of role models.

- There was agreement on the importance of language, including promoting free language lessons and language requirements, because shared language is key in uniting people. It was argued that there should be more emphasis on contribution in relation to language learning and expecting people to speak English in public places but also that integration rhetoric must be matched by resources for language learning.

- Shared experiences and collective identification were highlighted by many. For some, these are best promoted through an intercultural approach, concentrating on the local level and locally specific policies and strategies across all areas of municipal government, with an emphasis on interaction, common bonds and relations between citizens – a path between assimilation and multiculturalism, unity and diversity. Interaction builds trust and promoting equal interaction involves thinking about issues such as the design of public spaces, housing, local shops, segregation in the education system, or a cultural programme that is attractive to everyone. Such an approach faces up to tensions on the ground. An example of how barriers between people were broken down was the 'rumours strategy' in Barcelona, which sought to dispel myths people had about one another through videos that were watched by thousands in a progressive campaign that, in what can be seen as a good sign, was accused of demagoguery by the right. Where such messages come from is also important: public information may not be trusted and messages may be more effective coming from other people in society or trusted professionals.

- For others, promoting collective identification may mean taking a tough line on certain issues, such as marriage visa entry age requirements. Based on the example of Denmark it was argued that integration must be proactively addressed by mainstream progressive parties and this must be done in a robust way, emphasising 'harsh rules' based on core progressive values, and asking immigrants to follow the values of a social democratic society, for example regarding gender equality or childcare provision for all in kindergartens where all children learn together.

- Some contended that promoting such collective identification must involve a wider view of community-building and the renewal of understandings of identity, nationhood and belonging. Along this view building trust is about engaging with a deeper sense of anxiety, a sense that a covenant has been broken. There is a more profound problematic in which immigration is emblematic of something much deeper that was broken under the guise of neoliberalism, with its lack of emphasis on belonging and lack of identification of what modern nationhood is. This view stresses the need to reconnect with family, faith, neighbourhood and the dignity of labour. It seeks to speak to nationhood and to take back the sense of duty and common life.

- Some put forward the critique that people will find ways to construct communities; it is not for the state to take care of. Several people emphasised that 'common life' must also look to migrants and migrant communities in order to see the potential for positively influencing the renewal of political community. There is a need to think about community and belonging but also about inclusiveness. Investment in local cultures and localities was stressed. Other arguments went further in this direction, saying that there is a need for a strong defence of the value of diversity and the contribution of migrants, and positive language about multicultural society as much stronger than a 'monocultural', monolingual society or cultural mediocrity, as well as a need to avoid fostering suspicion, Islamophobia and the exaggeration of value differences.

Conclusion

In exploring how to tackle public concern about immigration and its effect in eroding trust the project sought to discuss three central aspects of public concern about immigration. The question is how to get a balance between these three, rather than a debate between them, because distrust is based on all three elements: many people want immigration to decrease, driven by economic insecurity and by perceptions of a cultural threat. Policy Network will take this work forward in a new project on immigration, populism and electoral politics, kindly supported by the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

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