

How to stop Britons feeling like strangers in their own land

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Using shortages, pressure on the social services, queues at the hospitals, terrorist infiltration, a feeling by too many Britons that they are strangers in a strange land. Different problems, with a common cause: an unprecedented wave of immigration.

Gordon Brown is reluctant to interfere with the influx that has already brought the total of immigrants working in Britain to more than 1.5 million. After all, these workers help to paper over the skills shortages resulting from the under-performing education system and labour shortages created by a benefits system that makes work unattractive compared with the dole and other benefits, contribute to reducing wage pressures that might trigger inflation, and add to the ranks of potential Labour Party voters.

Nor does he have much to fear from the Tories, who rather wish the entire issue would go away. It is difficult for a party in the process of shedding its image as "the mean party", and always sensitive to the charge of racism, to come up with a programme that restricts the flow of immigrants. Which is a pity, since there is a debate to be had.

Immigration creates winners and losers. The winners are the general population, if the flow of newcomers is properly managed, and employers, who want to hire workers who are either cheaper than the native population or willing to do work native workers will not do at any price. The losers are the native workers whose wages are depressed by lower-paid immigrants, and the broad

section of society that bears the social costs of immigrants, who increase the burden on the social services, compete for available housing and, in this age in which multi-culturalism has replaced assimilation as the goal of public policy, make Britons in many cities strangers in their own land.

Any sensible policy, whether it is to control pollution, traffic or immigration, must make those who create costs for society bear those costs. In the case of immigration, employers – what the Home Office identifies as "those who benefit from immigration" – should be required to reimburse society for the costs their decisions impose on it. That can be accomplished as part of a broader plan that will limit immigration to economically desirable levels without damaging the economy, and separate those who want to come to Britain to work from those attracted by its generous social benefits.

The first step is to decide just which immigrants will make a net addition to the wealth and well-being of the native population. The Government proposes to accomplish this by having bureaucrats from big business, the trade unions and the public sector sit down together as a Skills Advisory Board and predict just how many of each type of worker the British economy needs and will need in the future. The advantage to businesses, which will express their "specific sector needs", is that they can look to more foreign workers rather than raise wages to tempt more British workers into their "specific sectors".



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At first blush, this self-declared emulation of the Australian system of assigning points for various skills and educational attainments makes sense. But closer examination reveals that Australia has a long list of 247 "skilled occupations", many vaguely defined. There is no reason to believe that the Home Office, which intends to write "descriptors... [of] the attributes... for each of the criteria" for gaining admission points, will find the task of matching applicants with needed "skills" less challenging. That leaves it to the interviewing officer to decide just how desirable an applicant is – a system open to corruption of the sort not unknown in Britain's visa-granting bureaucracy. Finally, a bevy of civil servants will be needed to rate "sponsors" of applicants according to their trustworthiness and ability to monitor immigrants (inevitably favouring big businesses known to civil servants), and determine which "skills" are in short supply (meaning which employers are unwilling to raise wages or

establish training programmes). Other officials will be needed to study the efficacy of the myriad rules underlying the programme, and propose modifications as experience dictates, although the criteria for such a determination are unclear.

Most of which would be unnecessary with a four-part programme. First, the Government should fully fund and activate the border-control force the PM promised last month, but so far has not decided how to fund. Second, it should deny tax-funded benefits to newly arrived immigrants, so as to make the incentives to come here unambiguous; the costs of any special medical, educational and other needs should be borne by the employers who sought the work permits.

Third, it should deport as many of the illegal immigrants as it can round up, some to the country from which they came, others to such countries as are willing to receive them, in return for payment if necessary. This process might be facilitated by requiring immigrants to sign a waiver of their right to contest deportation as a condition for obtaining a work permit.

Fourth, it should abandon the bureaucratic nightmare it has concocted to determine who shall be permitted to come to work in Britain, and substitute a market-driven system, along the lines of the one that Charles Clarke's Home Office jettisoned when it – not unsurprisingly – found such a system unpopular among employers because it might force "employers to think about how valuable a migrant worker is to

them". Too great a burden for them to bear, it seems.

Under such a scheme, employers would bid for work permits. The fees paid would reflect the relative value of prospective workers, as determined by supply and demand conditions in specific labour markets. The proceeds of the sale of permits would be directed to the communities bearing any costs that might be imposed by foreign workers.

Two efficiencies would result: workers who can add the most to the British economy, as identified by free markets, gain preference, and employers no longer get to impose the social costs of immigration on taxpayers and society. Throw in a requirement that permits lapse after six months if a worker does not become fluent in English and conversant with British history and values, and some of the justifiable grumbling about the economic and social consequences of immigration will disappear.

The Government will undoubtedly argue that some of these proposals, although well intentioned and perhaps of some benefit to Britain, are inconsistent with EU regulations and rules. At a time when it is proposing to subject the British people and the economy to still more such rules by signing up to the new constitution/treaty, such a response would, shall we say, be inopportune.

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Simon Hefter is away