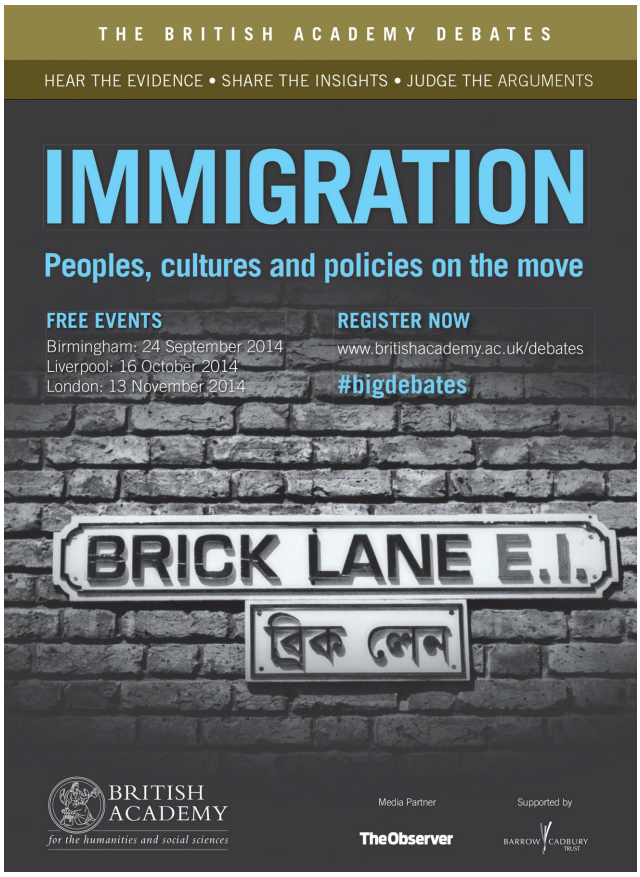
Immigration: The state of debate

In September – November 2014, the British Academy held its second series of 'British Academy Debates', on the subject of Immigration. The three Debates were held in Birmingham, Liverpool and London. To watch video recordings of the Debates, or to download the *Immigration* booklet that summarises the arguments that were presented, go to www.britishacademy.ac.uk/immigration

The following article reproduces the first part of the British Academy's booklet on *Immigration*.



Public concerns

Immigration has moved to the forefront of the British political consciousness. For only the second time in recent years, it now outweighs the economy, the NHS, and unemployment in measures of public concern.[1] A recent poll suggests that 40 per cent of Britons rate immigration as the most important issue facing Britain today.

How does this concern relate to the underlying reality of immigration? On average, Britons estimate the percentage of foreign-born people living in the United Kingdom at around 30 per cent. This is more than double official estimates of between 13 per cent and 14 per cent. The last two decades have seen gross immigration and gross emigration rise to 500,000-600,000 and 300,000-400,000 respectively. However, what has shifted most notably is the balance between the two. After a long period of approximate balance, we have seen a period of net immigration, of between 150,000 and nearly 300,000 year on year, for around two decades. For 2013/14 (ending March) it is 243,000.[2] Of the 560,000 people who immigrated to the UK in that year, 38 per cent were EU citizens from outside the UK and 47 per cent were non-EU citizens. A similar split has been recorded since 2004, before which in-flows were more heavily weighted towards non-EU immigration.[3] How do people perceive and experience the associated changes?

Polling of public attitudes shows that the way individuals view immigration is highly variable. Heated polarisation in the immigration debate obscures a quieter majority of around half of the population for whom immigration is taken to be a pragmatic matter requiring balanced consideration. The remaining half of the

1. *Economist*/Ipsos MORI September 2014 Issues Index.
2. ONS Migration Statistics Quarterly Report, August 2014.
3. See *Britain's '70 Million' Debate: A Primer on Reducing Immigration to Manage Population Size* (Migration Observatory report, September 2012), p. 12, fig. 4.

population is made up of two camps. On one hand, there is a quarter of the population for whom a sense of rapid demographic and cultural change is profoundly troubling. Another quarter of the population are confidently cosmopolitan, seeing new diversity as an essential facet of the social world in which they live.

It is possible to make further distinctions within this broad picture.[4] This can help reveal people's reasons for their positive and negative attitudes towards immigration. While some of the population report being totally against immigration in all its aspects (16 per cent), other distinct groups note specific concerns about culture (16 per cent), the labour market (14 per cent), and access to the welfare state (12 per cent) as underlying their negative views.

The first of the British Academy Debates on Immigration was held in Birmingham on 24 September 2014. It was chaired by *BBC Midlands Today* presenter Mary Rhodes, pictured here (right) with one of the panellists, Professor Montserrat Guibernau.

Similarly, there is a clear distinction among those whose attitude to immigration is broadly positive. On one hand, there are those graduates and professionals who see immigration as unremittingly positive, benefitting themselves from its positive economic effects (10 per cent). However, there are also urban dwellers who value multicultural harmony while being concerned by increased competition for jobs or public services (9 per cent).

Alongside such variations are important differences in the way people see the criteria determining whether someone is British – with age being a particularly marked factor.[5] Different generations view what is central to the national identity of individuals very differently. This is registered in how variable proportions across three key generations see the importance of ethnic and civic ways of categorising people.

Among members of the population who were born before 1945, polls suggest that 86 per cent think both ethnic and civic Britishness is essential. For this group, to be truly British requires both a white British heritage and, for example, a British passport. In those born between 1945 and 1964, 61 per cent define Britishness in both ethnic and civic terms, but there is a significant minority of 33 per cent for whom only civic criteria count. In those born after 1964, the civic-only attitude is held by 40 per cent while a noteworthy 10 per cent include neither ethnic nor civic criteria in their judgements about who counts as British.

Theoretical responses

The general lesson here is that immigration is an irreducibly many-sided issue. This affects the kinds of research that are needed to expand our understanding and to address public concerns – including those of migrants themselves. Firstly, there is considerable research which addresses the overall effect of different immigration flows on the British national economy. Secondly, there is research which investigates the 'congestion effects' associated with a growing population to which net immigration is a contributor – for example, how immigration affects the functioning of the health care system, schools, the transport network, and the housing stock. A third layer of research investigates the processes underlying different experiences of immigration and the extent to which these emerge as worthy of consideration in public debate. Has immigration fundamentally changed the social landscape to become one of 'super-diversity'?[6] What are the different ways in which people negotiate their national identity? Are the experiences of some migrants ignored or sidelined amidst the fractious contentions of political and public policy debate?

As with public attitudes, it is possible to discern some standard positions which give the academic debate some of its major contours. One central distinction might be characterised as being between 'liberals' and 'nationalists'. A more 'liberal' approach to immigration emphasises the benefits to economic activity of the free movement of peoples, contending that this is an important motor of a more general prosperity. For example, in *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future*, Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan argue that states will increasingly need to attract rather than restrict migrant labour by opening their borders.[7] The basic argument comes as two steps. First, states need to encourage those considered to be the most productive – a globalised labour force of 'exceptional people'. Second, they need to find ways of ensuring that the poorest of their national citizens are not left behind.

A more 'nationalist' position reverses this, as in David Goodhart's *The British Dream: The Successes and Failures of Post-War Immigration* (2013). Here the first priority becomes that of reinvigorating and rediscovering a sense

4. Bobby Duffy and Tom Frere-Smith, *Perceptions and Reality: Public Attitudes to Immigration* (Ipsos MORI, January 2014), pp. 19-20.
5. A. Park, C. Bryson and J. Curtice (eds.), *British Social Attitudes: the 31st Report* (London, NatCen Social Research, 2014), p.81-2.

6. Steven Vertovec, 'Super-diversity and its implications', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 30:6 (2007), 1024-1054.
7. Ian Goldin, Geoffrey Cameron and Meera Balarajan, *Exceptional People: How Migration Shaped Our World and Will Define Our Future* (Princeton University Press, 2011).

of national identity in the existing British population. This is to be matched by a rekindling of a social contract where British citizens can claim priority over non-citizens in accessing state services and are the presumed beneficiaries of government policy and legislation. Immigration policy should then be tailored to meet the needs of the national economy and new migrants offered ways of integrating into British culture. Nationalists anticipate that stronger nation states will provide restrictions on what they see as the destructive effects of rapid migration. For example, in *Exodus: Immigration and Multiculturalism in the 21st Century* (2013), Paul Collier argues that too rapid a flow of emigration out of the poorest countries in the world, such as Haiti, can result in a 'brain-drain' of talent, further disrupting an already precipitous state infrastructure.[8]

The one thing that both these perspectives have in common is a view of immigration that places the market at the centre of the debate. A different approach is found in the work of scholars whose starting point is human rights rather than the economy. In *Borderline Justice: The Fight for Refugee and Migrant Rights*, Frances Webber highlights the ways in which the extension of immigration control at and within the borders of the UK effectively violates the human rights and dignity of migrants. For example, she cites cases in which individuals have been denied life-saving medical treatment due to suspicions about their immigration status.[9]

Germane to this human rights-led approach is research on low-profile modes of citizenship and political identity, where people define themselves in the course of their own social life rather than conforming to external categories and definitions – what Leah Bassel has called 'frame shattering'.[10] Research in this direction explores immigration as an opportunity for Britons themselves to redefine their own identity at a local level in the presence of others. This represents a challenge to both 'liberal' and 'nationalist' positions, suggesting that the common good can be found in the democratic solidarities of social life itself rather than in world trade or a homogenising national culture.

The British Academy Debates were launched at the start of 2014 to provide a contribution to the public understanding of some of the great challenges of our times. The Debates build on the argument set out in the Academy's multimedia publication *Prospering Wisely: How the humanities and social sciences enrich our lives*, that we need a new national conversation, with the humanities and social sciences at its centre. See www.britishacademy.ac.uk/prosperingwisely

The Debates aim to show humanities and social sciences 'at work' – helping us understand the nature of the challenges we face as societies, as economies and as individuals. They demonstrate how new insights from research can challenge and question existing assumptions, illuminate dilemmas, and help us explore possible new directions, choices and possibilities – and so push forward political and public debate.

In Spring 2015, the British Academy Debates are addressing the subject of 'Well-being': www.britishacademy.ac.uk/well-being/

In Autumn 2015, the Debates will be on energy and the environment.

More on the series of British Academy Debates can be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/debates/

8. Paul Collier, *Exodus: Immigration and Multiculturalism in the 21st Century* (Allen Lane, London, 2013), p. 219.
9. Frances Webber, *Borderline Justice: The Fight for Refugee and Migrant Rights* (Pluto Books, London, 2012), pp. 88-9.
10. Cf. Leah Bassel, *Refugee Women: Beyond Gender versus Culture* (Routledge, London, 2012), p. 139.