Politicians who genuinely seek to build trust between communities and in the political system will get nowhere by casting immigration as a threat

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Patrick Diamond and Nabeelah Jaffer argue that politicians should be wary of legitimising ideas of immigration as a constant threat. Pandering to populist polemic will only raise expectations of a solution that Government cannot provide and does nothing to address underlying socio-economic problems.

Discussions on immigration are often accompanied by heated polemic. As Theresa May discovered, failures to deliver on tough populist rhetoric result in the depletion of public trust in both politicians and the political system. The controversy over decisions to relax border controls last summer centred as much on the Home Secretary's pilot scheme, which reduced checks on citizens of EU countries, as it did on Brodie Clark's decision to further ease controls in an attempt to deal with excessive queues.

Despite credible suggestions that May's pilot scheme actually resulted in tougher policing, the level of public ire directed at both Clark and May signals a broader problem. In 1998 Ipsos MORI's monthly sample found that no more than 7 per cent of Britons named immigration as a 'most important issue', but in 2008 this peaked to 42 per cent. The Conservatives have so far sought to appease rather than face up to growing negative perceptions of immigration which, as suggested by new research from Dr Lauren McLaern, are connected with a lack of trust in political institutions.

Policy Network's recent project on Immigration and Political Trust explored the link between concern over immigration and low levels of public trust in the political system. It found that fears about immigration are not determined by actual levels of migrants, a point borne out by the more detailed examinations of concern over the control management of migrant admissions, the economic impacts, and anxieties about identity and community.

Admissions, numbers and control

Governments enticed into over-promising on border control and the implementation of tough security policies, risk puncturing their inflated image, giving rise to a sense of mismanagement and distrust.

Yet, over-promising simply intensifies the existing problem of mistaken perceptions fuelled by polemic and grounded in unrealistic ideas of immigration levels. The public estimate for the percentage of people in the UK who were born abroad is 24%, which is about 2.5 times higher than the actual level. A recent Ipsos MORI poll for the Migration Observatory at Oxford noted that only a minority (29 per cent) think of students when they think of immigrants, though they make up the largest group in government statistics. 56 per cent would support reducing asylum numbers, though they made up just 4 per cent of immigrants to the UK last year.

By drawing on anti-immigration rhetoric as short-term credit to bolster their appeal, politicians risk running up a heavy deficit of public trust in the long-term. Cameron's speech in early October set out a tough stance which aimed to get 'a grip on immigration', limiting marriage visas and urging people to report illegal immigrants. In legitimising the idea of immigration as a constant threat, Cameron raised

expectations for a solution, and made the later revelations of relaxed controls seem all the more a cause for distrust.

The Conservatives can no longer afford to ignore widespread misconceptions of levels of immigration. Redressing the problem should, however, involve listening to the public, rather than blaming them for their concerns. Engaging with concerns about asylum seekers, for example, may prove more fruitful than discussing migrant numbers.

Economic security and fairness

Though immigration serves as a lightning rod for concerns on a range of areas, anxiety about economic and social insecurity fuels a toxic sense of unfairness, sapping public trust. The Ipsos Global @dvisor survey this August found that three in five Britons (62 per cent) agree that immigration has made it more difficult for British people to get jobs, whilst concern about the pressure placed by immigrants on public services was higher in Britain than in any other country surveyed, with three quarters (76 per cent) of Britons voicing concern about this.

Suggestions for practical solutions range from asking employers to pay a fee to hire migrant workers, to employing a system for rationing public goods such as housing. Some emphasise the importance of allowing immigrants only gradual access to the welfare state and to the privileges of citizenship on the basis that they must put something in before they can take something out. Others point out the importance of full citizenship for integration, and the flaw in the underlying assumption that the interests of immigrants are opposed to those of the unemployed. Immigrants are already more likely to face sustained socio-economic disadvantage, with many of the 36.4 per cent of foreign-born workers in elementary process plant occupations in 2010 having more skilled backgrounds.

Whilst there is no single policy answer to manage economic concerns about immigration, seeking to reduce inequality and redress domestic deficiencies would serve well as guiding principles. Countries with greater income inequality tend to have citizens who are less hostile to newcomers, offering less fertile ground for a sense of injustice to take root. A more comprehensive vocational training system would better equip young people to fill the demand in the construction sector which is currently drawing on migrant workers, whilst ending the structural dependence on low-cost migrant workers in the social care sector would help rebalance the numbers of British workers employed in London. Politicians cannot afford to simply promise to cut the numbers of migrants if they are to meaningfully affect concerns about the economic impact of immigration.

Community, identity and solidarity

The argument that concerns about immigration draw more on cultural than economic anxiety has gained ground in recent years. Lauren McLaren's research found that trust in the political system was higher among those who emphasised the importance of acquired characteristics like language as a basis for national identity. This suggests that it can be difficult to accept foreigners into a national identity based on less apparent or acquisitive traits, like a common culture or set of values.

Though concern about immigration is sometimes symptomatic of a fear of outsiders or of change, it is simplistic to characterise all anti-immigration sentiment in this way.

Individuals must additionally feel positive about their own relationship with the political system. Research into the Citizenship Survey by Alan Manning of the London School of Economics has shown that while multicultural policies have had the positive effect of fostering a sense of belonging and trust in political institutions among ethnic minorities, they have taken this for granted amongst the white majority.

Citizenship education can play a role in establishing a common framework, redressing the caricature of

liberal tolerance for honour killings, for example. The importance of shared language in uniting people is clear, and the potential to build trust through an inter-cultural approach based on interaction at a local level seeks a path between the separateness of multiculturalism and stark diktat of assimilation. However, renewing a sense of common nationhood may require us to address the more fundamental sense of personal alienation from the political system which underlies the sense that immigrants are getting a better deal.

The links between anti-immigration sentiment and a lack of trust in the political system are varied, and point to a broader spectrum of concerns. Building a positive narrative of immigration into its economic and cultural context and seeking solutions to social problems such as inequality, must be seen as the way forward. Politicians who genuinely seek to build trust between communities and in the political system will get nowhere by casting immigration as a threat.

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