

Immigration and identity: An open letter to Labour

The centre-left has been outflanked on issues of immigration and identity. Labour must connect with the 'culturally threatened', writes [Matthew Goodwin](#) or risk undermining the public's trust in the political system even more.



Dear Labour,

You know the story well. Beginning in the late 1990s, and then fuelled by accessions to the EU, a new and unprecedented wave of migration encountered a hostile public reaction. Public concern about the issue reached historic levels. At one point, voters were more concerned about immigration than public services. And while these views were seldom grounded in objective reality, most voters reached the same conclusion: their government (i.e. you) should reduce immigration. Between 1995 and 2010, the proportion favouring reductions jumped from 63 to 78 per cent.

You often responded by attempting to frame immigration as an opportunity, rather than a problem. But voters were never won over. Even today, after years of historic migration and persistent attempts to appease public anxieties, citizens of the UK are more likely than their counterparts on the continent and in the U.S. to consider immigration problematic: while 25 per cent see an opportunity, 68 per cent see a problem. It is also worth noting that this latter figure has jumped seven points since 2008. Your strategists will know that this is nothing new: the electorate was never sold on immigration. If this were the late 1960s we would still be talking about a reservoir of public hostility. But at the same time, these parallels are also misleading as other more recent trends have made the story more complicated, and your challenge multifaceted.

Since 2001 concerns over immigration have been joined by a cluster of anxieties over security-related issues – such as crime and terrorism – and more specific discomfort over settled Muslims. The growing significance of the latter is reflected in research which shows that the far right now polls strongest not simply in ethnically diverse areas, but where there are large Muslim communities of Bangladeshi or Pakistani heritage (while this support is lower in areas with large numbers of Black British citizens). The challenge of anti-Muslim prejudice – that is often rooted in arguments about defending the rights of women, homosexuals and Jews – lies well beyond the 'immigration debate' and requires a broader and more difficult conversation with voters. I set out the main thrust of this conversation below, but at the moment no political party is really talking about this issue.

At the same time, the continued growth of established minorities and continued EU-based migration will ensure that promises to curb net migration will continually fail to satisfy a public appetite for more tangible measures. The simple reality is that demographic trends are now beginning to overtake what can realistically be achieved through the levers of policy. This means that all political parties will increasingly struggle to exhibit competence on immigration and identity issues. And nor is this lost on voters. When asked about steps taken by the government to manage immigration, 74 per cent say the government is doing a poor or very poor job (a four point increase since 2010). But this will be especially difficult for you, Labour. In short, you were never the preferred party on these issues. And when you were in power you simply failed to convince voters that you were enacting sensible policies on immigration. More fundamentally, you failed to convince voters that you were simply being open and honest with them about one of the most profound changes taking place in the country.

Underneath the shifting tides of public opinion there also lie deeper and longer-term currents. Your bonds to voters have weakened considerably. The class-based loyalties on which you once relied are now less important to citizens. Elections are shaped more strongly by concerns over specific issues than ideological or party affiliation. And, increasingly, perceptions of party competence on the key issues and

the images of leaders are paramount. Like your centre-left counterparts on the continent, these deeper forces have cultivated a perfect storm for new and more innovative populist challengers. On immigration and identity the centre-left has been outflanked. The fact that the far right is delivering a more resonant narrative is reflected in the way in which – across Europe – these parties have made their most striking inroads into the traditional core base of the centre-left: blue-collar skilled workers.

Charting a Way Forward

Unless you acknowledge the nature of the challenge then any attempt to make progress in immigration and identity politics will be flawed from the outset. The most important task you face is to connect with the “culturally threatened”. You have long argued that – ultimately – anxieties about immigration and identity can be resolved by tackling economic grievances. This was most recently reflected in your leader’s speech on immigration, which was primarily one about its economic impact. A speech about jobs, wages, resources, companies, and economic incentives.

This economic narrative has been reinvigorated by the financial crises, with many tracing a xenophobic backlash in Europe to recession and austerity. The fact that the far right was rallying immigration and identity concerns during periods of economic stability and growth is conveniently ignored. Instead you assume that these concerns can be resolved by focusing on economic grievances, whereby you speak to the individual (rather than collective) and the financial (rather than cultural) anxieties of voters.

Economic forces are important. No one is saying they are not. In the electoral battleground this is reflected in the fact that – at the 2010 general election – the far right polled strongest in seats that had experienced the largest increases in unemployment since 2005. Large numbers of voters also continue to view immigrants as economically threatening: they are a burden on social services, say 63 per cent; they take jobs away from natives, say 58 per cent; and they bring down the wages of native citizens, say 52 per cent. But the key point is this: feelings of economic threat are not at the crux of what is going on. And nor is this opinion.

Decades of research in the social sciences deliver a clear message: it is a perceived sense of threat to the cultural unity of the nation – rather than economic threat – that is the strongest driver of prejudice, and also the desire for more restrictive immigration and asylum policies. To quote just one conclusion of many: ‘Britons are clearly worried about the symbolic threats of immigrants – the threat of religions that are perceived to emphasise non-British values and a terminal community other than that of Britain, and the threat to shared customs and way of life’. More recent studies paint the same picture: while concerns over immigration are strongest among groups who feel both economically and culturally threatened, it is divisions over culture that are a more important driver – and they are growing.

In fact, UK citizens are now more likely than their continental neighbours to say that immigration is negatively affecting their national culture. Across five European states the average who thought so was 35 per cent. In the UK it was 50 per cent. You have often argued that these cultural anxieties are primarily a knee-jerk reaction to more important economic and class-based issues: a legitimate front-stage to more toxic backstage tensions over which group got what resources, and how much. I contend that this goes the other way: arguments about jobs and housing are more acceptable to voters than deeper concerns about whether minorities share the same values, norms and ways of life. Across Europe, the far right has been so devastatingly effective not because it has pitched to concerns about resources but because it has spoken to fears about a loss of cultural unity, national identity and ways of life. These concerns are not rooted in individual experience: they are concerned mainly with the impact of diversity on the wider national community. The challenge, then, is to speak to the culturally threatened, and think far more innovatively about how to speak to their value-based rather than resource-based concerns. Beginning to open up this conversation is paramount. Talking about economics is merely scratching the surface.

Final Words

One response to all of this is that – ultimately – immigration and identity concerns do not really matter. These anxieties have never swayed elections, and citizens who are most concerned about these issues lack the numerical significance to warrant more than token gestures. But this is a dangerously naïve view, not least because it ignores evidence about the longer-term impact of these issues: namely that when

public concerns over immigration and cultural unity remain unresolved, overall levels of public trust in the political system go down. Research in the U.S. has shown that – as a result of perceptions of cultural differences between groups – citizens become less favourable toward using the institutions of the state to reduce poverty and provide welfare. This speaks directly to the core centre-left agenda. You will be nervous about the conversations above. But not having them may well undermine your longer-term goals. The same applies in Britain, where academics such as [Lauren McLaren](#) have shown how feelings of cultural disunity do not apply only to feelings toward other citizens: they also stretch to feelings about political elites and how the overall community is governed. Put in other words, by ignoring these concerns over immigration and identity – and in particular getting to grips with the cultural dimension – you risk undermining not only your own goals, but broader trust in the British political system.

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