

Assimilation and the immigration debate: shifting people's attitudes

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Immigration has proven one of the hardest issues for Britain's main parties to address, and UKIP has been the beneficiary. But, according to [Eric Kaufmann's](#) YouGov/Birkbeck/Policy Exchange survey [data](#), many UKIP voters will change their views on immigration if politicians can reassure them by highlighting the impressive rate of assimilation already taking place in British society. He argues this doesn't obviate the need to control immigration, but it offers a partial solution for what is a cultural problem, not an economic one.



In a hard-hitting piece in a recent Fabians' report by senior Labour figures, [Facing the Unknown](#), pollster James Morris writes that Labour must engage with the genuine concerns many ordinary Britons have about immigration. However, Labour's leaders continue to deflect concerns onto the comfortable terrain of public spending and local planning. On Andrew Marr's programme, when asked about his views on free movement, Jeremy Corbyn talked up the idea of an immigration impact fund. Sadiq Khan, in a recent article in the Chicago Tribune, spoke mainly about housing, planning and laws. Unfortunately, academic research suggests these policies will have little or no effect on the public's view of immigration.

The [consensus](#) from scholarly research across the West is that cultural, not economic, motivations are central for those who want lower immigration. Immigration strips away the hazy illusion in the minds of many White Britons that their group is more or less the same thing as Britain. This ethnicises the majority, notably those who cherish their cultural traditions, myths and memories.

In response, politicians from Gordon Brown to David Cameron have articulated a centralised Britishness based on common values and institutions. But the question politicians need to be asking is not, 'What does it mean to be British,' but rather 'What does it mean to be *White* British' in an age of migration. This is not racist, but reflects the fact that all ethnic groups – including the majority – want their community to have a future.

One liberal way groups perpetuate themselves is by assimilating others who wish to join. And the fact is that majority groups have an in-built advantage due to their influence on the mainstream national culture. In view of this, it is astounding how little we hear about the fact many members of ethnic minority groups – especially Europeans and those of mixed race – intermarry or identify with the White British majority.

Having [written](#) about this following UKIP's ascent in 2014, I was curious whether knowing these facts might change the way White British people think about immigration. To find out, I conducted a survey, but split it into three random groups. All answered questions about immigration, but two of the groups were assigned to read a short passage about national identity.

Nations are like rivers: on the one hand, you can never put your foot in the same water twice, but if you look at it from a distance, it is unchanging. My first passage took the first path, offering the conventional storyline about a rapidly changing Britain:

'Britain is changing, becoming increasingly diverse. The 2011 census shows that White British people are already a minority in four British cities, including London. Over a quarter of births in England and Wales are to foreign-born mothers. Young Britons are also much more diverse than older Britons. Just 4.5 per cent of those older than 65 are nonwhite but more than 20 per cent of those under 25 are. Minorities' younger average age, somewhat higher birth rate and continued immigration mean that late this century, according to Professor David Coleman of Oxford University, White British people will be in the minority nationwide. We should embrace our

diversity, which gives Britain an advantage in the global economy. Together, we can build a stronger, more inclusive Britain.'

The second changed the tune to one of timeless continuity through assimilation:

'Immigration has risen and fallen over time, but, like the English language, Britain's culture is only superficially affected by foreign influence. According to Professor Eric Kaufmann of the University of London, a large share of the children of European immigrants have become White British. Historians tell us that French, Irish, Jews and pre-war black immigrants largely melted into the white majority. Those of mixed race, who share common ancestors with White British people, are growing faster than all minority groups and 8 in 10 of them marry whites. In the long run, today's minorities will be absorbed into the majority and foreign identities will fade, as they have for public figures with immigrant ancestors like Boris Johnson or Peter Mandelson. Britain shapes its migrants, migration doesn't shape Britain.'

It's rare for stories such as these to shift people's attitudes on contentious issues like immigration, yet this is precisely what happened. When White British respondents read a story about change and diversity, this made them slightly more worried about immigration than when they read no passage. But when they read about how immigrants are assimilating into their ethnic group, they became noticeably more relaxed.

This is especially true for working-class, tabloid-reading or UKIP-voting whites, many of whom simply haven't heard this argument. In figure 1, for instance, 61 per cent of white working-class (C2, DE) respondents who read the diversity passage wanted immigration reduced a lot compared to 47 per cent of those who read the assimilation passage. Those who read no passage were in the middle, at 56 per cent.

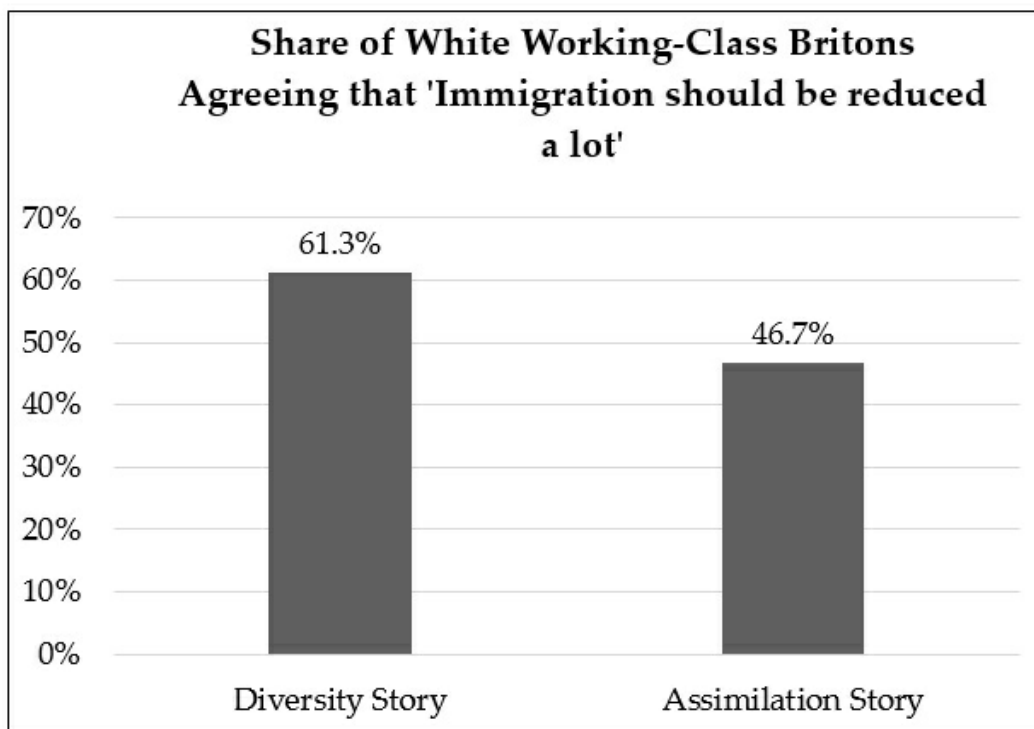


Figure 1, source: Yougov/Birkbeck/Policy Exchange [survey](#), Aug. 20, 2016. Note: results significant at $p < .05$ level.

Respondents were also asked about the extent to which they were willing to pay for 'hard Brexit'. In the event that Brexit causes financial hardship, this is a barometer of how much people would be willing to trade off access to the benefits of the single market in order to reduce European migration. Once again, what we see is that whites, especially working-class, tabloid-reading and UKIP voters, are reassured by the facts on assimilation. In Figure 2, for instance, the share of White British UKIP voters willing to pay 5 per cent of their income to cut European immigration to zero drops from 45 per cent after reading the diversity story to 16 per cent when reading the assimilation piece.

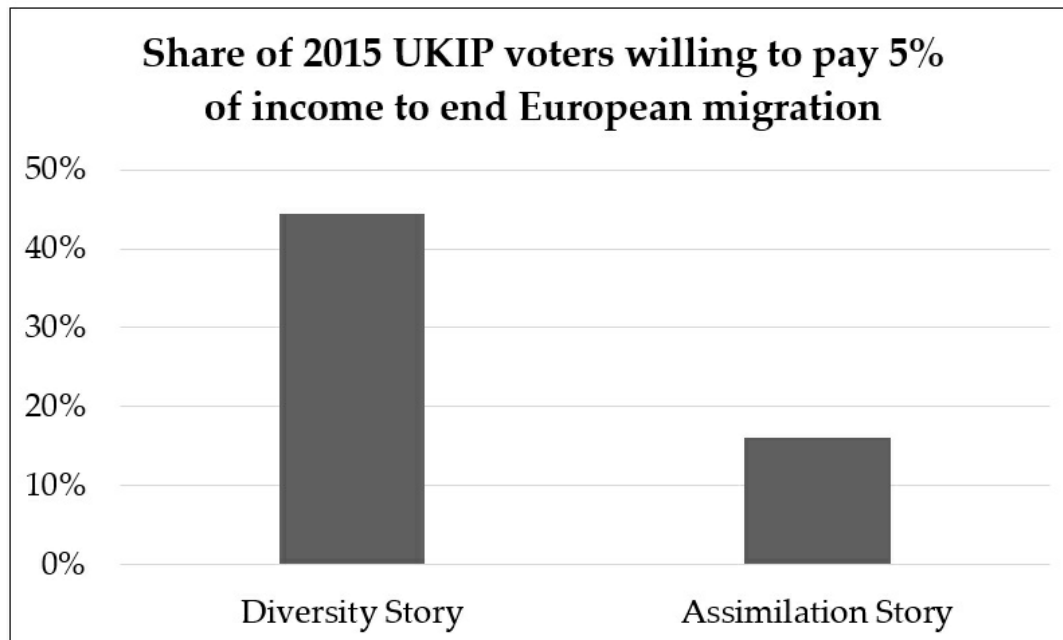


Figure 2, source: Yougov/Birkbeck/Policy Exchange survey, Aug. 20, 2016. Note: results significant at $p < .05$ level.

If this is the case, why is it that politicians continue to hammer away at the diversity story? Probably because it's the mainstream view and therefore all they know. In addition, they may be skittish about offending minorities who fear assimilation. But it's not inconsistent to say, as Sadiq Khan [did](#), that minorities can keep their culture, while pointing to evidence of voluntary assimilation. Dual identity is also common, with minorities pulled between their roots and the culture of the majority. For instance many British Jews identify with their ethnic group, yet most consider themselves – and are considered to be – White British.

It's also the case that national identity is not monolithic but in the eye of the beholder: some members of minority groups may prefer to see Britain as ever-changing while conservative white Britons consider it a timeless river. It's up to politicians to reach out to both with a different message, secure in the knowledge there is no single way of perceiving the nation.

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[About the Author](#)

Eric Kaufmann is Professor of Politics at Birkbeck College, University of London. He is the author of *The Rise and Fall of Anglo-America: the decline of dominant ethnicity in the United States* (Harvard 2004), *Shall the Religious Inherit the Earth* (Profile 2011). His latest publication is a Demos report, freely available, entitled [Changing Places: the White British response to ethnic change](#). He tweets as [@epkaufm](#).

