

Investigating British immigration policies: Greater fairness regarding immigration is in the interest of Britain

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*The Home Office “Go Home or Face Arrest” campaign which piloted in the summer drew complaints of racism and was later banned for being misleading. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, a policy of greater fairness is in the interest of host countries, writes **Hamza Siddiq**.*



Messages like “Go Home or Face Arrest” or “This plane can take you home, we can book the tickets” are among the latest controversial measures in the history of British immigration. This history is a rich one as immigration has always been a subject of heated debate and controversy in the UK.

A critical analysis of immigration policies since the post-war period reveals interesting trends. Measures such as [Primary Purpose Rule](#) (1993) have disregarded the socio-cultural needs of immigrants and torn apart social and kinship networks. Public opinion has been instrumental in shaping immigration discourse as policies have evolved to respond to public demands for immigration control. Despite recognizing the inevitable need for migrant labour, British public has demanded tightening of national borders. This has been fuelled primarily by two factors in recent times: growing security concerns post 9/11 and the global economic recession.

The recent introduction of a minimum income threshold for those wishing to sponsor a non-European Economic Association (EEA) spouse or partner has left South Asian immigrants earning less than 18,600 pounds unable to get visas for their spouses/partners. These policies have clearly targeted the intrinsically cultural practice of transnational marriage. The Primary Purpose Rule had to be abandoned because of its untenable implications including penalization of genuine cases and fracturing of family ties. Such measures infringed upon the basic freedom of choosing a marital partner from home countries and lead to disrupted families.

The notion of freedom is critical to understanding some of these measures. It is evident that the neoliberal ideology in the West has enormous implications for effective immigration control. The principle of freedom which is the defining feature of neoliberalism only applies to movement of goods and capital in practice and excludes people and human capital. The main implication of the argument for the free movement of people is that freedom can be curtailed for the sake of freedom by posing a threat to public order, cohesion and social well-being. For immigration restrictions to have an ethical rationale, it should be clear which freedom or freedoms are being protected, which are being threatened, why such a threat is real and how restrictions will help to retain a particular freedom.

By looking beyond the surface of public debates, it is clear that theories of social exclusion, including racism, lie at the heart of immigration policies. Nothing exemplifies racial motivations against immigration during the 1960s better than Enoch Powell’s extremely controversial [“Rivers of Blood” speech](#) in 1968 in which he envisioned the River Tibet foaming with blood in future. When viewed from South Asian perspective, Britain’s immigration policies begin to look as an extension of its colonial past. In the 1950s and 60s, colonies were looked upon as repositories to meet the



Stirring racial tensions

acute post-war labour shortages in Britain, in much the same way that they were forced to supply cotton and other raw materials during the industrial revolution. The state's attempts to control immigration reflect a strong sense of self-interest and Euro-centrism, which were key features of colonial thinking. It is worth noting that the earliest migrants from South Asia were brought over as servants by Englishmen as it was much cheaper to acquire them from Indian subcontinent than from Africa. A more recent example of colonial thinking can be seen in the [Points Based System](#) which was primarily a vehicle for achieving economic growth by allowing only those migrants that are beneficial to British economy. Furthermore, public fears about immigration are manipulated by politicians to serve their own political ends. Cuts in immigration are designated toward non-EEA immigrants and disproportionately affect South Asians and their transnational networks.

It is clear that the problem of immigration does not have an easy answer. However, an anthropological approach based on inclusion and holistic understanding of the issue may be worth consideration. In an increasingly interconnected and interdependent world, a policy of greater fairness is in the interest of host countries. A model of "polycentric multiculturalism" based on the idea of empowering the disempowered and promoting the viewpoint of margins would be effective in tackling the immigration challenge. Campaigns like "Go Home or Face Arrest" urging illegal immigrants to return home only stir racial tensions and division in the community while intimidating vulnerable communities. While the scheme may have encouraged some voluntary responses from illegal immigrants, we need to look at the bigger picture of fear and intolerance promoted by such policies challenging the notion of multi-ethnic Britain. In imposing restrictions, one has to bear in mind the justification for such limits and their wider socio-cultural implications.

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About the Author

Hamza Siddiq is a Research Assistant for LSE Cities Ordinary Streets project. He holds a postgraduate degree in Anthropology and International Development from the LSE and a BSc (Hons) in Anthropology from LUMS University, Pakistan. His master's thesis on "South Asian immigration" investigated the underlying trends, motivations of British immigration policies and their implications for South Asian immigrants in the UK. He can be reached at: hamzasiddiqkhan@gmail.com

