



Access Denied

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Do recent gains by the right of **UK politics** mean that door is closing to immigrants?

Last November the names of some 12,000 members of the British National Party (BNP) were published on the Internet, leading to many in the UK asking themselves what it meant to be British.

Given that membership of this far right political party seemed to be growing, what was it about Britain in the 21st century that was so reviled by this and other right leaning political movements?

The left leaning media went through a prolonged session of hand wringing and soul searching as they pondered how

their dream of a multi-cultural Britain built on the tenet of equal opportunity for all could have turned so sour.

On the right, they claimed the higher ground, seeking greater protection from the meddling influences of Brussels and the EU, claiming that only Britain could be master of its own destiny.

A river running through the rhetoric on all sides however, was the question of immigration: has it gone too far, has it been managed well enough and what can be done to better integrate new arrivals with an increasingly unhappy indigenous population who are worried

about their jobs, their security and the loss of a distinct British identity.

Throughout its history, Britain has always been a country of immigrants. They have been arriving on its shores almost continually since the Romans invaded in 55BC.

Since then, various parts of the country have been colonised by the Angles and Saxons (Germany), Jutes and Vikings (Scandinavia) and the Celts (central and southern Europe, particularly Spain), Normans and Huguenots (France).

Modern Britons are descendents of all of these.

More recently, ever since Britain embarked on its empire, immigrants from all corners of the globe have been enlisted to power its continued expansion.

Britain, a tiny collection of islands in a damp cold corner of the northern Atlantic, could not have hoped to achieve its 19th century dominance without utilising manpower from beyond its confining shores.

Viewed from this historical perspective, it is almost impossible to see how anyone in Britain could accuse anyone else – no matter from where or when they arrived – of being an immigrant.

Britons are all immigrants; some are just more recent arrivals.

However, anti-immigration sentiment is nothing new. In the 1930s Oswald Mosley led his army of Fascist Black Shirts through East London, an area where huge societies of Catholic Irish dock workers and Jewish immigrants had settled along with other groups of immigrants. Their march was violently ended at Cable Street when a united front of these disparate groups took a stand against Mosley's protectionist ideology.

In the 1950s, west London saw race riots between newly arrived Afro-Caribbean immigrants, who had been invited to Britain to help in the rebuilding effort after the Second World War and local residents of areas such as Notting Hill, who claimed they were stealing jobs and receiving unfair benefits from the recently created welfare state.

Since then, the arrival of any new ethnic demographic has often led to increased racial tensions: Birmingham, Liverpool and London all saw race riots in the 70s and 80s.

But, throughout its history of racial tension, incidents such as these have been isolated and localised. Britain has never seen a successful, politicised anti-immigrant movement.

Is the country beginning to see one now?

This year, as the global economic meltdown has hurt British industry and claimed British jobs, and as the beleaguered Prime Minister Gordon Brown has struggled to keep the Labour Party in a position of viable, publically supported leadership, the far right has gained in terms of political representation.

In June, the far right British National Party (BNP) received 6.3 per cent of all votes cast in Britain in the European parliamentary elections, a rise of 1.4pc since the previous European Union (EU) election.

In two constituencies, they were the majority party and have since taken seats in Brussels.

By comparison, the Labour Party won just 14.98pc of the vote, pushing them to third place behind the mid-right UK Independence Party (UKIP) who garnered 16.6pc of the vote and took 14 seats.

The BNP and UKIP also made gains in the local council elections held on the same day as voters registered their dissatisfaction with the Labour government.

Has the question of immigration gone too far, has it been managed well enough and what can be done to better integrate new arrivals with an increasingly unhappy indigenous population?

Is this the evidence of a new nationalist ideology taking hold in Britain, and if it is what has caused it?

The immigration battle ground of the late 90s was all about illegal immigrants, those that fled their home country to claim asylum in the UK. At the time, Britain was seen as a soft touch for those looking for a better life. Such was the bureaucratic mess, asylum claims often took months, even years to process.

At that time 'illegals', as some in the British press termed them, would often, on entering the country, run as fast as they could to the nearest police station in order to claim asylum, safe in the knowledge that doing so and entering a then wholly insufficient system, would buy them the requisite time needed to vanish under the system's radar. They would be free in Britain: illegal, but almost untouchable.

The system has since been tightened up and the current battle ground is different. Those facing the ire of the BNP and UKIP are not illegal, nor are the majority claiming asylum. The battle ground now is divided along ideological and economic grounds.

Some, the BNP included, blame immigration for undermining Britain's identity and risking its security. They discuss the "Islamification" of the UK and Europe. Economically, both the BNP and UKIP blame immigrants from the expanded Eurozone for damaging Britain's economy.

This supposed European 'Islamification' is not a new idea. Indeed, the phrase 'Eurabia' was first coined in the 1970s to describe a world in which the Islamic population of Europe outnumbered the non-Islamic population.

The idea has become fashionable again following statistical 'proof' – based on current levels of Islamic immigration to Europe predominantly from north Africa combined with their higher birth rate – suggested that Eurabia would come into being by 2025.

Islamophobia has been on the rise in the UK and Europe since 9/11 when a dark spotlight was trained on Islam. When the UK suffered its own attack, on July 7, 2005, fingers were freely being pointed at a section of the immigrant population that saw violence as a viable way of expressing their dissatisfaction with British life.

The BNP has traded freely on the fear the London attacks instilled in the UK. In its European election manifesto, the BNP stated that Britain should control its own borders to stop "unlimited and uncontrolled immigration to reduce crime and terrorism".

Going further it suggested that "Britain not the EU should decide who lives in the country" and "anyone not from Britain who commits a crime should be deported." This last has been taken to mean anyone, irrespective of when they arrived and were nationalised in the UK.

In July, BNP leader and Member of the European Parliament, Nick Griffin, suggested this as a means of dealing with illegal immigrants from Africa: "... the only measure is to get very tough with those coming over. Frankly, they need to sink several of those boats."

Strong statements, but their election

results proved that some in the UK support this view. The fact of the matter is that UK immigration is a contentious issue. And it is not just the (predominantly) white working classes that are seeing problems with status quo.

In 2005, in the aftermath of the 7/7 attacks, Trevor Phillips, Commission for Racial Equality Chair, had this warning for the UK's policy makers on immigration.

“Residentially, some districts are on their way to becoming fully-fledged ghettos – black holes into which no one goes without fear and trepidation and from which no one ever escapes undamaged.”

His comments, made in a speech entitled ‘Sleepwalking to Segregation’ warned of a divided Britain that no longer understands its component parts. In the same speech he stressed the need for “interaction: no one should be trapped within their own community”.

The second key factor has been the rapid expansion of the EU from its original rich western European bias, in the aftermath of the collapse of the soviet empire, to include many poorer, eastern European nations.

Before the current economic downturn, this Eastern bloc witnessed an exodus of millions of its people looking for work in richer, western countries. It was estimated that at its peak the Polish Diaspora in the UK numbered one million people.

Would-be immigrants at a camp in Mukachevo, a small town in western Ukraine, waiting to sneak across Ukraine's border. (File picture Reuters)



Attracted by a government enforced minimum wage – and the huge earnings potential offered by the possibility of undercutting it to secure contracts and employment off the books – the UK sometimes seemed to have been annexed by Poland.

One woman who ‘Bahrain Telegraph’ spoke to said that she referred to her home town, Shirley, on the peripheries of Southampton, as ‘Shirls-ski.’

“All the shops sell Polish food and even in the supermarkets, more and more space is being given over to Polish brands,” she said.

Indeed, a recent visit to London revealed that, at Victoria bus station, a common point of entry for Poles, signage was in Polish as well as English, something that has never happened before to this writer's knowledge or memory.

This army of economic migrants are utterly sanctioned under EU rules. Indeed many, such as medical staff willing to work anti-social evening and weekend shifts in the National Health Service, were welcomed; held up as proof of how European multiculturalism enhanced British quality of life. And whilst Britain was booming, the legions of construction workers were regaled as evidence of Britain's growth and its continued development.

Then things began to unravel. The banking crisis has seen unprecedented levels debt spiral out of all control. Businesses, both large and small have gone bust and some of the UK's biggest banks are now majority owned by a



UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon during a Global Forum on Migration in Manila. (Reuters)

government that has had to borrow billions in order to prop the British economy. With this as a background, it might not be so surprising that UKIP did so well at the polls.

In their European election campaign, UKIP lobbied hard on the twin issues of jobs and immigration saying: “our membership of the EU is already costing jobs in the UK, with British workers not even having the opportunity to apply.”

On immigration, the party says: “the only people who should decide who can come to live, work and settle in Britain should be the British people themselves. The open-door immigration policy has been voted against by only one party – UKIP.”

So, do these gains by right leaning parties truly represent a more general shift away from inclusive immigration policies that have long been the driver of British development? Is the door finally being closed? Main stream politicking might suggest that it is.

As long ago as 2007, Gordon Brown pledged the development of “British jobs for British workers.”

Since then this phrase has been seized by striking employees at companies that employed foreign nationals over the heads of British workers and by far right parties in their campaigns.

Perhaps it is precisely that the British government has failed to deliver on this pledge that these parties have done so well and that the tide is turning against immigration in the UK.

