

Who are we?

In few areas has so much changed in the past 13 years.



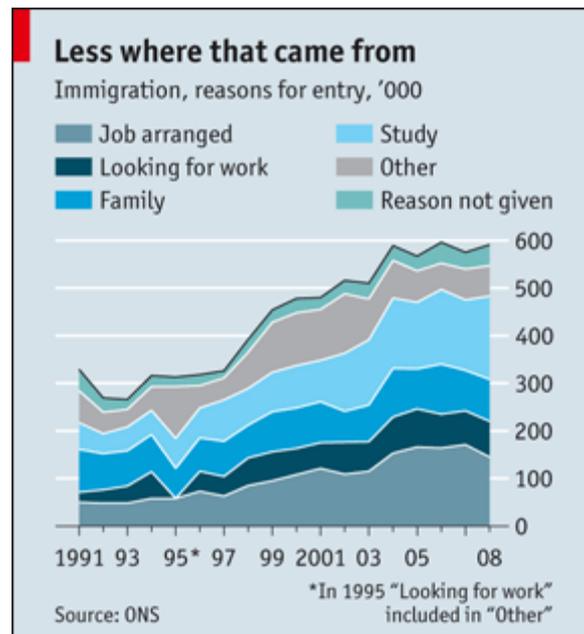
IMMIGRATION yielded the worst gaffe of the campaign on April 28th, when a microphone caught Gordon Brown describing as “bigoted” a widow who had just complained to him about it. For the most part, however, one of the biggest issues facing Britain (so people tell opinion pollsters) has been ignored in the run-up to the election on May 6th. Immigration merits about a page in each of the Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat manifestos.

Such reticence makes political sense. Labour largely ducked talking about the issue as it presided over the biggest influx Britain has ever seen: 5.6m people have come to the country for at least a year since 1997. Much of this was down to a decision by the government not to impose temporary restrictions on migrants from the central and eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004.

The Tories, meanwhile, avoid the subject for fear of reviving their old image as the “nasty party”—an image assiduously softened under the leadership of David Cameron. The Lib Dems’ caginess is similarly political: their relatively relaxed line on immigration, which includes an earned amnesty for some illegal migrants, does not go down well with most voters.

Compared with a decade ago, the laissez-faire approach to immigration has fewer takers, even on the left. Influential writers such as Polly Toynbee of the Guardian and David Goodhart of Prospect worry that the welfare-state consensus may not hold if those paying for it feel less connection to those benefiting from it. Britain’s liberal culture may be compromised as migrants with illiberal values arrive. And MPs such as Frank Field and Jon Cruddas, at the cerebral end of the Labour Party, talk of the stress that immigration puts on public services.

This change in elite opinion has something to do with the lack of conclusive academic evidence that the past decade’s influx has been the economic boon it was cracked up to be. To be sure, migrants have not “stolen” jobs from Britons. Employers need the newcomers, especially in sectors such as agriculture where many of the low-paid jobs migrants take would not make sense at the higher wages needed to attract natives from unemployment and other benefits. And talented, educated foreigners have made up for a lack of highly skilled local workers too.



But although immigration has contributed to economic growth overall, there is no evidence that income per person has gone up greatly as a result. And if the argument for immigration is utilitarian—that is, that some people lose out from it but the economy benefits overall—this matters.

Britain's new points system, which sets educational and other restrictions on non-EU immigrants, may have started to make a dent in the numbers, as would the absolute cap on arrivals suggested by the Tories. More importantly, the slower economy and weaker pound of recent years have cut inflows and encouraged some migrants in Britain to move on. The lion's share of immigration is from the EU and cannot be restricted; even if it could, EU rules also let Britons move the other way. Some 5.5m of them now live abroad, many in Europe, according to the Institute for Public Policy Research, a think-tank. The absence of a proper system for recording the flow of migrants, and for preventing illegal entry, is troubling.

But if there is little the government can do to cut the number of immigrants, it may be able to do more to integrate them once they arrive. The shift in opinion away from open borders has been matched by a move away from Britain's traditionally hands-off approach to identity. Unequivocal defenders of multiculturalism are now hard to find; even its advocates concede the need for newcomers to learn to speak English, and, to a degree, for values and institutions to bind together a diverse population.

Much of this is happening: language tests, exams on life in Britain, citizenship ceremonies and a nascent idea of civic service for young people may, slowly, build a richer idea of citizenship. "Britain is engaged in a mild form of nation-building," says Mr Goodhart. "We didn't even use the term 'citizen' very much in 1997."

Most countries that try to assimilate immigrants, such as France and America, can point to a defining event when their national identity "began"; Britain did not have the same kind of revolution. But it has much else to inspire newcomers: a sweeping history that is also broadly progressive, a language everyone wants to speak, longer experience of racial diversity than most European nations. And "Britain" itself is a civic invention rather than an ethnic community, created in 1707 to supersede more blood-based notions of Englishness and Scottishness.

Damian Green, the shadow immigration spokesman, has a deep Tory scepticism about the state's role in matters of identity. Yet he admits that he was moved by the citizenship ceremonies he has attended ("Poles, South Africans, Brazilians...all thrilled to become British").

Civic nationalism is no longer easily dismissed as a French or American notion, not least because attitudes were changed by the events of July 7th 2005, when Britain became the first and so far only Western country to suffer suicide bombings by people born and raised at home. Mr Brown's own attempts to put "Britishness" on the table also played their part. Sadly, his contribution to matters of immigration and identity is likely to be reduced to a petulant quip during a losing campaign.

Fonte: The Economist, Apr. 29th 2010. Disponível em: <www.economist.com>. Acesso em: 5 maio 2010.

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