

What is immigration policy for?

Hostile Environment and anxiety media-politics

Summarised version

For 20 years UK governments have continually introduced new immigration control measures, each more vicious than the last. Labour passed five major immigration acts in 1999-2009, dramatically expanding the detention and deportation system and making swingeing attacks on asylum rights. The Conservatives' "[Hostile Environment](#)" approach builds on this legacy.ⁱ

But what drives these attacks on migrants? The official aim is "control": whether that means simply cutting numbers, or making sure only the "right" kinds of immigrants enter. But, in those terms, none of these clampdowns actually work. Most basically, migration figures continue to rise, while the ineffectiveness of vicious Immigration Enforcement measures is an open secret amongst Home Office officials. In fact, the level of resources – and violence – required to really seal borders would go well beyond anything yet seen. (*See Section 1*).

Target publics

Politicians say they are responding to "public opinion". But in fact anti-migrant policies are primarily directed at quite specific and narrow "target publics". Surveys such as the regular [Ipsos MORI "Issues Index"](#) show that most citizens agree – when asked by pollsters – with reducing immigration.ⁱⁱ But this doesn't mean many see immigration as a particular problem. Before 2000, less than 10% of the population identified immigration as a top political issue. After the millennium this doubled to around 20%. Although some of these immigration worriers feel very strongly, and are very vocal – for example, immigration is now the number one issue raised by constituents in the "MPs' postbag".

Roughly speaking, we can identify two main demographic groupings worried about immigration. While both are typically older and white, their social circumstances are quite different. One group are alienated working class people hit hard by poverty and social tension, often living in run-down neighbourhoods in the North or Midlands. The others are comfortable "middle Englanders". Whereas the first have personal economic and social troubles to blame on migrant scapegoats, the second often have little contact with migrants at all. But what both share is a generalised anxiety about migration as a "cultural threat". (*See Section 2*).

Media-politics: the politicians

Migration levels alone do not explain the escalating xenophobia. The big factor is anti-migrant propaganda, carried out in tandem by both media and politicians. The tempo clearly picked up with the [Sangatte asylum panic](#) in 1999.ⁱⁱⁱ After the [2001 race riots](#)^{iv}, Labour hardened a [conscious strategy](#)^v of targeting asylum-seekers in an effort to "neutralise" the electoral threat from the BNP, as David Blunkett revived Thatcher's talk of "[swamping](#)".^{vi} In one notorious incident from 2003, The Sun and Blair's cabinet [worked together](#) to plot out an "asylum week" of scare stories coordinated with Home Office policy announcements.^{vii}

For the politicians, first of all, there is a basic electoral logic, which applies to both main parties. Centrist politicians face an electoral dilemma: on the one hand, they mustn't alienate "small liberal" supporters; on the other, they are deeply concerned about losing key older white voter bases to anti-migration campaigns from the right – which, most recently, meant UKIP. Governments have no interest in making immigration a central election issue; but knowing others will do so, they seek to assuage their anxious "target publics" by pointing to tough measures against scapegoat groups. (See Section 3).

Secondly, there are also more personal motives at play. We might trace the pattern back at least to Tony Blair's weaponisation of the Jamie Bulger case as shadow Home Secretary. Following him, a succession of "tough guy" Home Secretaries – from [Straw and Blunkett](#)^{viii} to Theresa May – have made their names with escalating clampdowns measures against the latest tabloid spectres. (See Section 4).

Media-politics: media

Politicians and media are close partners. As evidenced by [Aeron Davis' extensive interviews](#)^{ix}, the two co-exist in a dense ecosystem of relationships and shared ideas. Politicians are media junkies on a constant news drip, terrified of the power of tabloid campaigns to make or break their careers, not just responding to stories but nervously anticipating them, often consulting their journalist and editor "friends" even in the early stages of making policy. Politics today is media-politics. (See Section 5).

On the media side it is true, as tabloid editors insist, that hate stories feed an existing demand, and so boost sales and advertising revenue. The power to bring down politicians with hate campaigns also provides important leverage, exploited to the full by power players such as Murdoch. It is important to note that "popular" press' core audiences are largely the same older white demographics chased by politicians. But as [Roy Greenslade](#)^x has written, while media "reflect what they think people think", they also set off "a chain reaction in which the reflection and enhancement go on escalating". When The Sun launches an asylum attack week, it is stirring an existing well of hatred. But also, over months and years, it is continually reinforcing and embedding the same stories and attitudes, playing the role of what [Jacques Ellul](#)^{xi} called deep "sociological propaganda". (See Section 6).

The tabloids are not alone in spreading [xeno-racism](#)^{xii}. We also need to understand how more liberal media contributes by presenting anti-migrant propaganda as one side in a "public debate" – e.g., the BBC's close working relationships with [UKIP](#)^{xiii} and spin-tank [Migration Watch](#)^{xiv}. And the important roles played by far-right propagandists – from neo-fascist parties through "alt-right" sites to more respectable think tanks – in "[shifting the window](#)^{xv}" of acceptable narratives. (See Section 8).

What about business?

Both politicians and media depend on finance. So how do anti-migrant policies square with the fact that Big Business wants migrant workers? E.g., in recent Brexit position papers corporate lobbies such as the [CBI](#)^{xvi} and [IoD](#)^{xvii} all call for liberalised immigration controls. The answer is that, while policies like the "Hostile Environment" make life miserable for a highly vulnerable minority, they actually have minimal impact on numbers. So there is no contradiction when City lobby group [London First](#)^{xviii} simultaneously advocates both free movement and "robust enforcement to clampdown" on "low value migration". After all, border profiteers like G4S can happily staff their

immigration detention centres with migrant workers. Even Rupert Murdoch personally advocates “generous”^{xix} immigration policies in line with his overall neo-liberalism – presumably The Sun’s campaigns are not seen as causing a serious threat to business. (See Section 7).

Some implications

How can we counter the anti-migrant propaganda machine? This analysis calls into question some approaches currently popular in pro-migrant campaigning. Campaigners often aim to get alternative views and voices into the liberal media sphere, trying to influence the “public debate” on migration. But there is no “public debate on immigration”: this idea is a charade that obscures how power really works. There is no one public, but many different people having many different conversations. And it’s not a debate, it’s a propaganda war, fought not with facts and reasons but with emotive stories. As Conservative campaign guru Lynton Crosby [says](#)^{xx}: “when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins”. (See Sections 9 and 10).

Right-wing politicians and propagandists, at least the clever ones, are well aware of these points. They understand who they need to talk to, and how they need to talk to them. This isn’t to say we should copy their strategies, as indeed our aims and values are very different. But to strategise effectively, first we need to understand how the enemy works.

- i <https://corporatewatch.org/the-hostile-environment-turning-the-uk-into-a-nation-of-border-cops-2/>
- ii <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/publication/1970-01/sri-perceptions-and-reality-immigration-report-2013.pdf>
- iii <https://www.article19.org/data/files/pdfs/publications/refugees-what-s-the-story-case-study-.pdf>
- iv <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2012/09/blighting-burnley>
- v <https://www.palgrave.com/us/book/9781403939166>
- vi http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/politics/1949863.stm
- vii <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2004/may/24/uk.pressandpublishing>
- viii <http://uobrep.openrepository.com/uobrep/handle/10547/565808>
- ix <https://www.amazon.com/Mediation-Power-Critical-Introduction-Communication/dp/0415404916>
- x https://www.ippr.org/files/images/media/files/publication/2011/05/wp5_scapegoats_1359.pdf
- xi https://archive.org/details/Propaganda_201512
- xii <http://www.irr.org.uk/news/the-emergence-of-xeno-racism/>
- xiii http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/question-time-ukip-nigel-farage_uk_58d95295e4b03787d35ae186
- xiv <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2007/mar/16/watchingdavidcoleman1>
- xv <https://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2018/02/25/overton-window-explained-definition-meaning-217010>
- xvi <http://www.cbi.org.uk/cbi-prod/assets/File/pdf/cbi-business-priorities-for-a-new-migration-system-dec%20-016.pdf>
- xvii <https://www.iod.com/Portals/0/PDFs/Campaigns%20and%20Reports/Europe%20and%20trade/Immigration-Report-2016.pdf>
- xviii http://www.londonfirst.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/London-First-immigration-proposal_300617.pdf
- xix https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/06/18/ruport-murdoch-immigration-reform_n_5509876.html
- xx https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=2&v=H_YareK6WKK