# Who is immigration policy for?

**The media-politics of the Hostile Environment**

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

The official aim of all these policies 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. Migration figures continue to rise, while the ineffectiveness of vicious Immigration Enforcement measures is an open secret amongst Home Office officials. The level of resources – and violence – required to really seal borders would go well beyond anything yet seen.

This report examines the following key points:

- Immigration policy isn't really about controlling migration, it's about making a *show* of control. It is a spectacle, an emotional performance. In practice, this means attacking a few scapegoats seen as "low value" by business – often, the very weakest migrants such as refugees, so-called "illegals", or others without the right documents.
- The primary audiences for the spectacle of immigration control are specific "target publics": some older white people who are key voters and media consumers, and who have high anxiety about migration – but who make up only around 20% of the population.
- Policies are drawn up by politicians and advisors in close interaction with big media. Political and media elites share a dense "ecology of ideas", and anti-migrant clampdowns are part of their internal jostling for power – votes, promotions, audience share.
- Migration scares and clampdowns are part of a broader pattern – the anxiety engine that drives much of politics today, fuelled by stories of threat and control.

## *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 often having quite separate 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: "when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins".

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.

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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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3] After the 2001 race riots[4], Labour hardened a conscious strategy[5] of targeting asylum-seekers in an effort to "neutralise" the electoral threat from the BNP, as David Blunkett revived Thatcher's talk of "swamping".[6] 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.[7]

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 l 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[8] 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[9], the two co-exist in a dense ecosystem of relationships and shared ideas. Most 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[10] 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[11] called deep "sociological propaganda". *(See Section 6).*

The tabloids are not alone in spreading xeno-racism[12]. 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[13] and spin-tank Migration Watch[14]. 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[15]" 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[16] and IoD[17] 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[18] 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](#)"[19] 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](#)[20]: "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.

# 1. Introduction: what is immigration policy for?

**It doesn't "work"**

UK immigration policy is usually presented by politicians in terms of one objective: "getting control" over the flow of immigrants. But one thing is apparent: if the objective is control, immigration policy doesn't work.

Most obviously, numbers have not gone down. Net migration to the UK has been positive [in every year since 1994](#)[21], and over the current target of 100,000 in every year since 1997, peaking at over 300,000 in 2014 and 2015. Recent decline has not been caused by Home Office measures but by one big unanticipated factor – [Brexit scaring off EU immigrants](#)[22].

As an example, let's take a mainstay of Home Office Immigration Enforcement within the UK territory – raids on people working illegally. The Home Office carries out around [6,000 workplace raids](#)[23] each year, and makes around 5,000 arrests, half of which lead to deportations. For obvious reasons, there are no reliable figures on numbers of illegal workers – but [reasonable estimates](#)[24] put the figure at least in the hundreds of thousands. Immigration Enforcement thus has little impact on the numbers of "illegal workers".

This point is widely acknowledged, in private, by Home Office staff from top to bottom. The Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration (ICIBI)'s [2015 report](#)[25] on "Illegal Working" features candid interviews with both frontline officers and senior civil servants. To quote a typical example:

*"A senior Home Office manager told us that there was a general awareness within [Immigration Enforcement] that enforcement visits encountered and removed only a small proportion of offenders and that IE would never have the resources to resolve the overall problem. They described it as 'not a realistic working model'. Another senior manager commented: 'It's a business model that hasn't moved on'."* (para 4.7)

New research from the University of Oxford's COMPAS unit looks at this issue in greater depth. The "[Does Immigration Enforcement Matter?](#)"[26] research project conducted numerous interviews with Home Office staff of different grades. The overwhelming picture is of an institution with extremely low morale, where officials are well aware of their lack of impact.

The current "[Hostile Environment](#)"[27] policy, first introduced by Theresa May as home secretary, could be read as a new approach seeking to make immigration enforcement more effective whilst recognising the Home Office's limited resources. The rationale: if it's not possible to round up all the illegals, then creating "[a really hostile environment for illegal migrants](#)"[28] through limiting "[access to services, facilities and employment by reference to immigration status](#)"[29] will help control migration by acting as a deterrent. As they feel the chill, unwelcome people will opt to leave the country independently or through paid "voluntarily return" programmes. Others, hearing what Britain has become, will decide not to come in the first place.

As there are not enough Immigration Enforcers to create sufficient hostility alone, the policy aims to enlist ordinary citizens into a volunteer army of informers and collaborators. School teachers, doctors, nurses and hospital receptionists, charity workers, registry office staff, bank clerks, as well

as employers, landlords and letting agents, supply Big Data to better guide enforcement operations. And they also take over enforcement roles themselves by directly policing access to housing, healthcare, education and bank accounts.

The Hostile Environment is dramatically reshaping aspects of Britain's civil society – but how successful is it really as an immigration deterrent? Despite the rhetoric of "evidence led" policy, there are no official studies evaluating these measures' effectiveness. The most comprehensive research on the subject so far is the COMPAS project noted above. Researchers also interviewed "irregular" migrants of different nationalities, asking about their experiences and perceptions of immigration enforcement. This research suggests that many migrants are certainly aware of such measures, and are affected by them – above all psychologically, living with high levels of fear and anxiety. But there is little evidence, so far, that this psychic pain actually pushes many people to leave.

Immigration enforcement makes people miserable. But miserable enough to return to situations of still more extreme poverty and insecurity, or war and repression back "home"? Hostility would have to be ramped up to a truly intense level to adequately deter people, in a world where the sub-minimum wages and other conditions of life accessible to many "illegals" in the UK are still preferable than those found in its former colonies or its warzones.

The UK's ultimate "hostile environment" experiment is on the border in Calais. Here the British and French governments [spend millions](#)[30] to make people's lives [a living hell](#)[31] – and still people keep arriving, their other choices being so desperate.

**So what is it really for?**

Why do Home Office politicians and bureaucrats keep pursuing immigration enforcement policies if they know they don't work? Here are a few ideas:

- Ineffective policies are "better" than none at all. Policy-makers know that immigration control policies are weak instruments, but think having none at all would lead to an even worse outcome, i.e., even higher immigration. Immigration policy is like continually patching up a leaking building with half-useless tools.

- They just don't have any better ideas. Home Secretaries and their advisers have to be seen to do something, and the best they can think of is to keep proposing new measures even while knowing they won't succeed.

- Actually, immigration control policies do work – but the real objective is not what it's officially said to be.

There may be some truth in all of these, but we're going to concentrate on the third answer. Immigration policy makes a lot more sense if you judge it against different criteria than cutting numbers. That is: the effective aim is not actually to control immigration, but just to look like you are taking steps to control it. It is a spectacle, a performance, of control. So then we have the question: who is this performance aimed at?

**"public opinion"**

The immediate answer, if you listen to politicians talk, is "the public". This is a standard line from policy-makers and civil servants: "we have to respond to public opinion". This answer is common across the political spectrum. On the Left, it may be prefaced: "we don't really oppose immigration, but ..."

The story is: public opinion is inescapably in favour of strict immigration control, so all policy-makers need to start from this given, or face political suicide. But what, exactly, is public opinion? Who, exactly, is the public?

These terms are thrown around very lightly, but are actually very complex. In fact there are millions of people in the UK, with millions of different opinions. Nor are they all communicating with each other as part of one "public debate". When politicians talk about "public opinion" they are not talking about this enormous diversity of views, but about those views they consider particularly important. In the next section we will explore the nature of "public opinion" on immigration in depth.

# 2. From Public Opinion to Target Publics

Opinion polls give a crude perspective on the range of views people hold, and are skewed towards certain types of people who participate. More fundamentally still, individuals' thoughts, feelings, motivations, can hardly be summed up in multiple choice boxes. But still, polls are the only tools we have for trying to understand massive numbers of people's attitudes. We'll start with an overview of some key facts from immigration opinion surveys.

### 2.1. most people say immigration should go down

The polls are consistent on one point: most UK citizens say they want immigration to be reduced.

A recent long-term study of immigration attitudes by major polling firm Ipsos MORI, "Shifting Ground"[32], finds that "Britons are becoming more positive about immigration". In March 2015, 43% people said that immigration had a negative impact on Britain, and 33% said a positive impact. But by October 2016, those proportions had reversed: now 43% though immigration was positive, opposed to 32% negative. But despite that, 60% still said it should be reduced – little different from 62% in 2015. In fact, according to Ipsos MORI:

*"this is a common feature of immigration attitudes in the UK over many decades: despite significant ups and downs in actual migration figures and how top of mind a concern it is, our review of historical attitudes to immigration shows that there are always 60%+ who want immigration reduced."*

### 2.2. it matters – but how much?

We need to separate two points: what people feel  – or say they feel when asked by an interviewer; and how much it actually matters to them.

Immigration scares are nothing new to Britain. But the current wave of anxiety over immigration really started around the year 2000. Ipsos MORI has carried out its Issues Index every month since the early 1970s. The survey asks people two questions: "what they believe the biggest single issue facing Britain is" and "other big issues they believe are facing the country." Another Ipsos MORI report from 2013, called *Perceptions and Reality: Shifting Public Attitudes to Immigration[33]*, studies the results over almost 40 years.

For most of that time, less than 10% of respondents mentioned immigration as an issue. This changed in the "immigration panic" at the end of the 1970s: over 25% named immigration as important in 1978-9. But that panic didn't last, and the figure fell back below 10% in 1980, where it stayed for 20 years, apart from a brief spike in 1985. Health, defence, crime, and above all "the economy" remained the traditional political concerns.

In 1999, with more people around the world leaving the countries of their birth, the numbers of people concerned about immigration in Britain started to jump, and since 2001 at least 20% of respondents have named immigration as an important issue in almost every monthly survey. So far, the peak of the new panic was in 2006-2008, where over 40% regularly did so. In 16 months in these three years, immigration was the number one issue named. Then in 2009, with the credit

crunch and recession, "the economy" retook its traditional position as top issue. But immigration has stayed up there, with a recent peak of 38% in August 2013. As of <u>December 2017</u>[34], the figure had dropped to 21%. One reason is that a new issue, Brexit, has taken over as the top concern.

## 2.3. it's complicated

So what has caused that jump in immigration anxiety? An obvious explanation might be: because immigration has been going up. And that's certainly a factor: the polling data indeed shows a clear positive correlation between immigration levels and the "Issues Index".

But it's not the only factor. For example, the overall immigration level doesn't explain why things started to move around 2000, when immigrant numbers were already rising before this. Or why there were previous shorter "panics" in the 1970s and 80s, when immigration was much lower than now. Also, looking at opinion polls across Europe, Ipsos MORI point out that there "is virtually no relationship between levels of net migration and concern across the EU27 countries (and the same is true for every measure of stock or flow of migration or immigration that we examined)."

It's not just that people are more worried when there is more immigration. There are other important factors at play here.

## 2.4. a few people are very worried indeed

Another measure of immigration concern is the "MPs' Survey", where MPs record the "postbag" of issues brought to them by constituents. This shows an even steeper rise of concerns about immigration. In the mid-80s, less than 10% of issues raised by constituents were about immigration. This began to change in the late 1980s, and in 1992 over 20% of issues were migration related. Since 2002, at least 40% of all constituent contacts with MPs have been about migration. In 2006, at the highest point, just under 80% were about immigration.

We can note two points here: constituent concerns started to escalate some years before the "general" attitudes surveyed in the Issues Index; and then they climbed to much higher levels. While around 20% of the overall population now generally think of immigration as a political issue, a smaller segment have become particularly vocal, including making the effort of going to their MPs.

## 2.5. who's worrying?

### *older people*

Concern about immigration is strongly linked to age. All "generations" have become more concerned since the 1990s, but, for example, in 2013, 40% of people born pre-1945 saw immigration as an issue, compared to 38% of "baby boomers" (born 1945-65), 30% of "generation Y" (1966-79), and only 22% of "millennials (1980-2000). It is also extremely relevant here that older people are much more likely to vote – and to contact their MPs.

### *lower middle*

Immigration anxiety is also related to social class, but the effect is less strong than with age. In fact, until 2000, Issues Index surveys saw minimal differences between social classes in migration attitudes. Since then, there is a clear trend of "skilled manual workers" (called "C2"s) being particularly concerned about migration – an extra 5% or more people in this group are likely to

name immigration as an issue. Differences amongst other classes are smaller and less consistent, although concern tends to be lowest at the extremes – "professionals" (A) and "unskilled workers" (E). Very roughly speaking, immigration worry is strongest amongst the lower middle and skilled working classes.

*geography*

77% of the total population agreed, when asked by pollsters in 2013, that immigration should be reduced a little or a lot. This was true of the majority of white British people in all areas of the country – but the proportions varied a lot by area. The lowest agreement was in areas classed by pollsters as "cosmopolitan London" – where 68% agree. This compares to 85% of white British people living in "new, large freestanding and commuter towns", "migrant worker towns and countryside" and "low migration small towns and rural areas", and 84% in "industrial and manufacturing towns". In "asylum dispersal areas" – which are impoverished areas predominantly in the North and Midlands –  83% agree with reduced migration; and 67%, the highest proportion, think it should be reduced "a lot".

*immigrants can also be anti-immigration*

Anti-immigration feeling also exists amongst immigrants. It is closely correlated to how long people have lived in the UK. 70% of immigrants who arrived before 1970 also agreed that immigration should be reduced; only 28% of those who arrived after 2006 did.

*segmentation analysis*

To bring together some of these demographic factors, pollsters use a technique called "segmentation" analysis, which involves identifying loose groupings of people who tend to share both similar characteristics and similar views. We will mention two notable segmentation studies.

In 2013 the Conservative pollster Lord Ashcroft conducted a detailed study on immigration opinion based on a poll of 20,000 people, called "Small Island: public opinion and the politics of immigration".[35] This broke down interviewees into seven "segments". At one end of the spectrum is a "universal hostility" segment (16% of respondents); at the other a "militantly multicultural" pro-migration segment (10%).

In between, there are two segments who may not be outspokenly pro-migration, but don't see it as an important issue. One is the "urban harmony" (9%) grouping, mainly young and ethnically diverse, who frame their issues in terms of the economy, jobs and public services, rather than immigration. The other are the "comfortable pragmatists" (22%), well-educated and well-off people who don't particularly feel migration either as a threat or a benefit to them.

The other three segments all have concerns about migration, but for different reasons. The "cultural concerns" group (16%) are usually older people, often owner-occupiers, who talk about immigration in terms of social change and a threat to the British way of life. The "fighting for entitlements" group (12%), also generally older than average and with less education, are concerned about pressures on public services. The "competing for jobs" segment makes up 14%.

Ipsos MORI's analysis in "Shifting Ground" is broadly similar. It identifies four segments:

- A strongly "anti immigration group" (28%), often opposed to migration on numerous grounds, including "immigrants taking away welfare services and jobs", but also because they are "nostalgic for the past". "Older, lower levels of education. Social renters. Highest support for UKIP. Voted heavily to Leave."

- A relatively hostile "Comfortably off and culturally concerned" segment (23%) These "don't feel personally threatened by immigration" but are worried about its impacts on a changing society. "Oldest group, retired, most likely to own house outright. Highest support for Tories. Split on EU referendum vote."

- The "Under Pressure" 25% may say that "other people get priority over them for public services and immigrants get priority over jobs". But immigration isn't the main thing they blame – their biggest concern is "the economy". "Youngest age group, highest number of part time workers." "Politically disparate and highest group of undecided voters. Marginally more Remain than Leave."

- The "Open to Immigration" segment (24%) is "Well educated, highest group of private renters. Highest group of Labour supporters. Mostly voted Remain."

## 2.6. cultural vs. economic concerns

The segmentation analysis suggests three kinds of ways that people worry about immigration:

- Some people have strong anti-immigration feelings in general. They may cite a range of reasons for concern, including both "cultural" and "practical" or economic issues. But their anti-migrant feeling goes deeper than any of these particular reasons.

- Some people's anti-immigration worry is closely linked to "cultural concerns" – they feel immigration as a threat to an accustomed "way of life". This is particularly true for older white British people. Many people who fear immigration in this way are comfortably off, and don't personally feel economically threatened by immigration.

- Some people may worry about economic or practical impacts, e.g., feel they have to compete with immigrants for jobs, housing or benefits, without fearing cultural change from "diversity". These kinds of concerns may be heard from younger people who live in diverse urban areas, and may come from migrant backgrounds themselves.

One important point, noted by Ipsos MORI, is that "cultural" worries about immigration seem to be stronger than "economic" worries. Many inner city workers who feel themselves directly competing with migrants tend to be less anti-immigration than "comfortably off" suburbanites who worry about migration as a threat to a way of life. When asked, they may agree immigration should be reduced. But they are more likely to think of "the economy" as the main problem.

This point is also argued by Scott Blinder of Oxford University's Migration Observatory in a 2011 briefing on "UK Public Opinion toward Migration: Determinants of Attitudes".[36] He writes:

*"At least three basic explanations of attitudes toward migration have been researched extensively:*

- *Contact theory holds that sustained positive contact (i.e. friendships) with members of other ethnic, religious, racial, or national groups produce more positive attitudes toward members of that group.*

- *Group conflict theory suggests that migrants or minority groups can appear to threaten the interests, identities, or status of the majority (as a group), and that those who feel this sense of threat most acutely will be most likely to oppose migration.*

- *Economic competition theories suggest that opposition to migration will come from native workers who compete with migrants with similar skill sets, or (conversely) from wealthier natives who feel (or perceive) a financial burden for tax-payers if migrants use public services such as hospitals, schools."*

Reviewing the survey evidence and literature at that point, Blinder concludes that: "Evidence is quite strong for the first two theories, and mixed for the various economic explanations." In particular:

*"Subjective perceptions—of one's own economic security and of migrants' impact on jobs, wages, and the costs of maintaining the welfare state—do seem related to anti-migrant attitudes. But these subjective perceptions are only loosely related to actual individual economic position."[i]*

### 2.7. whose problem?

The Ipsos MORI *Perceptions and Reality* report makes another very important, and related, point. Most people who think immigration is a problem don't think it is a problem for them personally, or for their local area.

Surveying by Eurobarometer, cited in the Ipsos MORI report, asks people for their two top issues "nationally" and "personally". In various surveys over 2008-13, between 18% and 32% of people in the UK named immigration as a national issue; but only between 6% and 10% said it was a personal issue. Similarly, across the EU27 countries, between 7% and 9% named immigration as a national issue, but never more than 4% as a personal issue.

A similar picture emerges from some of Ipsos MORI's own polling between 2006 and 2010. This asked the question:

*"Overall how much of a problem, if at all, do you think immigration is in Britain at the moment? And how much of a problem, if at all, do you think immigration is in your local area at the moment?"*

Consistently across this period, they found a dramatic 50% gap between the two answers. At the highest point of concern, in November 2010, 77% said they thought immigration was a problem in Britain. But only 26% thought it was also a problem in their "local area" as well as nationally. (8% thought it was a problem locally but not nationally, and 22% neither.) As the pollsters say, "these types of gaps exist in other policy areas, such as crime and health services – but they are particularly striking with immigration."

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i    Here Blinder refers to *Card, David, Christian Dustmann, and Ian Preston. "Immigration, Wages, and Compositional Amenities." NBER Working Paper No. w15521, The National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge MA, 2009. http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1505844.*

Many people's worries about immigration do not arise from personal experiences, or from what they see in the areas where they live. For many, we could say, immigration worry is not about concrete problems we experience directly impacting us or those around us. It is something more abstract: a fearful sense of "cultural change", a narrative of loss and threat, felt to be affecting "the country" as a whole.

**2.8 summary**

Most British people, when asked by pollsters, say they think immigration should be reduced. But this doesn't mean that most people think of immigration as a significant problem.

Some people are really concerned about immigration – and their number has been rising, from less than 10% of the population before 2000, to more like 20% now. Some of these people feel very strongly, and are very vocal. Also, they are often people who are likely to vote, and to contact their MPs.

We can think of two main groupings of people who are most likely to worry about immigration – two anti-migrant minorities. Both are typically older and white. But their social circumstances may be quite different:

- Typically older, white, working class people hit hard by poverty and social tension, often living in run-down neighbourhoods in the North or Midlands with large migrant populations, including "asylum dispersal areas". Excluded from the economic consumer dream, they may feel directly impacted by immigrants, identifying them as a threat to jobs, services, benefits. But they also feel immigration as a "cultural concern" – a feeling reinforced by personal experience of seeing their neighbourhoods changed by new arrivals. Economic and cultural concerns may build together into a deeply felt "universal hostility" towards immigrants.

- Typically older, white, middle class people, often living in suburban or rural areas. They may be more or less comfortably off, and do not perceive immigration as a personal threat – maybe they rarely meet migrants except those serving them a curry. But they feel anxiety about immigration as a cultural concern, a threat to their values and identity.

Some of those who worry about migrants are excluded from mainstream society and blame migrants for their troubles. Others are comfortably included. The common factor across these two groupings is not economics, or personal experience, but a more generalised anxiety about migration as a cultural threat. Where does this anxiety come from?

# 3. Politicians: immigration and elections

Politicians live off the approval of others. In the next three sections we look at three ways in which the quest for approval shapes immigration policy. First, in this section, we will see parties seeking the support of key "target publics" in election campaigns. When it comes to immigration, we will see that the target voters politicians look to in election campaigns are above all the anti-migrant minorities noted above. At the same time, politicians are also deeply concerned with approval from their own peers, and from the media, as they seek to advance their careers. We will look at these issues in the next two sections.

## 3.1 Election strategies: target voters

No policy is going to please everyone. But politicians don't need to please all the people – just those whose support matters for their success. By "target publics" we mean groupings of people whose approval policy-makers are aiming to win, when they make policies.

How aware are politicians of who they are targeting? This is an interesting question, though not one we can tackle here. As a rough thought, we can suppose that much of the time effective politicians have an intuitive idea of the target groups they need to reach. But there is at least one time when politicians need to identify target publics much more precisely: during election campaigning. In modern election campaigns, intuition and unguided prejudices are supplemented by more sophisticated techniques. Understanding election targeting can at least give us a start to understanding "target publics" in general.

**Who are the decision-makers?**

Here there is no better guide than the (in)famous "wizard of Oz" Lynton Crosby, known in the UK for the 2005 and 2015 Conservative election campaigns, as well as Boris Johnson's mayoral victory. However, Crosby's techniques are by no means exceptional, and similar approaches are now the norm across the political spectrum. As Crosby explains in a "[campaign masterclass](#)"[37], the core of any successful campaign is identifying the crucial decision-makers. "Who is the target, who matters? What matters to them? Where are they? How do you get to them?" Most basically, this means identifying three types of voters:

- *the base*: those you can rely on to support you

- *the antis*: the opposition's base

- *the swingers*: people who could be persuaded either way

Campaigning is all about maximising the use of limited resources: money, activists, and time. None of these should be wasted on trying to persuade committed antis – the best you can hope for is to discourage them. So the campaign consists of, first, "locking in" the base; second, targeting those voters identified as most likely "swingers". In the UK, those swingers are particularly important in so-called 'marginal' constituencies.

For example, in the [2015 UK general election](#)[38] the Conservative "40/40" strategy identified 40 defence seats, the Tory marginals where they needed to lock in existing voters, and 40 attack seats identified as potential swings to the party. The bulk of the party's "ground" campaign – including thousands of bussed-in canvassers, local advertising and targeted direct mail-outs – was directed at just these 80 seats.

A massive [data gathering operation](#), planned two years before the actual election, involved door-knocking not just to classify every voter as pro or anti-, but using a ten point questionnaire to make a detailed profile of each individual. Unpublished opinion polling continued throughout in the 80 seats, while information collected in-house was supplemented with commercial databases, including from the big credit rating and consumer profiling corporation [Experian](#).[ii]According to [one account](#)[39]:

*"Behind closed doors, [chief campaign pollster Jim] Messina boasts that he has 1,000 pieces of data on every voter in the U.K., one admiring Tory official revealed. […] Messina knows where every target voter shops, what they buy, how they travel to work — and much more besides."*

All of this data was crunched to provide a highly detailed picture of the key voter "segments" to be targeted. These targets were then hit with [precise messages](#)[40], differentiated both in terms of issues and of delivery (e.g., email, phone, text, hand-signed letter, doorstep visit).

As many noted after the 2015 result, this local propaganda effort went largely unnoticed by London-based media pundits – and by many opinion polls. They saw only the nationwide "public campaign", or "air war" – the impact of big politicians' speeches and television appearances, the famous Saatchi billboards and national advertising campaigns. They missed the "ground war" taking place "below the line". While the public "broadcasting" campaign set the main campaign messages, an equally crucial role was played by "narrowcasting" which didn't talk to one great "general public", but to highly targeted segments in specific marginal constituencies.

(Another increasingly important form of "narrowcasting", much in the news due to the [Cambridge Analytica scandal](#)[41], involves the use of facebook and other social media data. But we shouldn't forget that this is just one aspect of the political use of Big Data.)

**Differentiating issues**

Crosby is famous for insisting that parties focus on just a small number of key issues – "[scrape the barnacles off the boat](#)"[42]. Although this stripped-down messaging can misfire – as in the 2017 election where Theresa May looked like a vacuous robot endlessly repeating her "strong and stable" mantra. Crosby gives a four point test for identifying issues to campaign on:

*Salience*: "is it out there and people are talking about it"?

*Relevance*: "is it personally relevant, [does] it relate to people and their lives"?

*Differentiation*: can you use it to "set yourself apart from your opponent"?

*Actionable*: it lead people to want to vote a certain way.

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ii    Experian's "Mosaic" product is now a standard part of the basic infrastructure of major parties' campaigning, second only to the Electoral Register. [Mosaic](#) locates and categorises households in 67 categories based on income, location, and "social capital". On another note, Experian is also now the Home Office's main corporate partner in gathering Big Data to identify and target migrants as part of the Hostile Environment approach.

Connecting this to the points above, the issues must be ones that matter to your specific target publics. So the campaign strategy asks: what issues are these target voters talking about, and what issues do they feel emotionally connected to? And it's important to remember here that "there are lots of things people disagree or agree with but have no influence on people's vote." E.g., people may agree immigration is too high, but is this something that will bring them out to vote?

Beyond this, an issue will only work if you can use it to differentiate from the opposition, to say you're the ones who are on the targets' side on this – unlike the other lot. The aim is to downplay or "minimise points of differentiation on issues where you are weak", and "establish differentiation on your terms", highlighting the issues that make your story stand out.

Of course, a campaign may have a number of different target groups, each with different issues. "These days you will get caught out", says Crosby, if you try to tell completely different stories to different groups. The trick is to use the public "broadcast" campaign to "set up your overall position" with "messages designed to appeal to everybody". And then use the targeted "narrowcast" campaign to direct more "fine tuned and relevant messages to particular groups".

Finally, besides manifestos and campaign literature, there are also more subtle ways parties can flag up their issues and stories. For example, Crosby advises focusing only on "positive" campaigning in official propaganda. Negative attacks on opponents are best done by using "proxies", i.e., let other actors, such as friendly media outlets, raise the stories and issues that fling mud on the opponents, while your own hands stay looking clean.

Now we can look at some of these strategic basics in action over the last 20 years of immigration politics.

## 3.2 UK immigration politics 1997-2017

When Blair came to power in 1997, immigration was not an issue on either of the main party's agendas, nor did it feature in "public opinion" lists of political issues. Labour's pitch was based on five pledges concerning education, the NHS, crime and punishment, youth employment, and frozen tax rates. In so far as Labour had an immigration narrative, it was to ape Tory rhetoric: then shadow home secretary Jack Straw famously said in 1996 that "not a cigarette paper" should separate the two parties on immigration.

The climate began to shift from 1999, beginning with fevered media reporting of Sangatte[43] and the "asylum crisis". Polling on immigration as an issue for "public opinion" began to rise. Yet in 2001, Labour effectively ignored immigration as an election issue, focusing again on an updated list of the same five issues. In 2005, for the first time immigration was explicitly added as a sixth election pledge, under the slogan "Your country's borders protected."

It made good sense for Labour not to flag up immigration as an electoral issue. It was one of the few policy areas where opinion polls saw the Tories firmly ahead of Blair. The election strategy was thus clearly to "neutralise" on immigration and shift attention onto stronger ground.

However, beyond electioneering, Labour Home Secretaries did make clear efforts to respond to anti-immigration public opinion with a quick succession of tough new laws. These were: the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999[44]; the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002[45] (following the 2002 "Secure Borders, Safe Haven"[46] white paper); Asylum and Immigration

(treatment of claimants) Act 2004[47]; Immigration, Asylum and Nationality Act 2006[48]; and Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009[49].

This pace of successive anti-migrant laws was unprecedented in UK history. But the most obvious feature was that they focused on a particular category of migrants: asylum-seekers. In essence, they made life ever tougher for refugees by making asylum claims harder, removing support, and expanding the detention regime – funded, of course, by Labour's favoured PFI schemes. Besides asylum, they also added in headline-grabbing measures against "sham marriages", "foreign criminals", or "terrorists" seeking asylum.

The Labour government's immigration policy might be summed up quite succinctly:

- true to neoliberal principles, Labour remained relatively liberal on immigration seen as economically beneficial: e.g., workers, European free movement, and the booming foreign student business;

- meanwhile, in an attempt to assuage anti-immigration sentiment – that is, to neutralise immigration as an issue for opponents – Labour made spectacular attacks on asylum seekers, who were migrants seen as not of economic value, and so available scapegoats.

This double approach did begin to change towards the very end of the "New Labour" period under Brown. The party began to move away from its more overt immigration neoliberalism with the "Points Based System" for non-asylum entrants, rolled out from 2008.

**Conservative opposition: "are you thinking what we're thinking?"**

Despite the attacks on refugees, Labour's overall immigration policy was still seen as too "soft" by some voters. In the 2001 and 2005 general elections, Conservative challengers William Hague and Michael Howard attempted to capitalise on this by deploying immigration as an election issue.

In 2001, Hague made immigration – and the asylum scare in particular – one of his top three issues, alongside tax cuts and Europe ("saving the pound"). But the attempt was notably unsuccessful in making inroads against the Blair machine.

In 2005, Howard again played the immigration card, alongside crime and hospitals. The campaign was run by Lynton Crosby, hired after a notable run of successes for the Australian right-wing Liberals, which had centralised anti-migration anxiety. The slogans "are you thinking what we're thinking?", "it's not racist to impose limits on immigration", epitomised the "dog whistle" tactic – framing messages in a way to chime with certain target publics, whilst avoiding open hostility that might offend others.

Polling suggested that the Tories had a strong lead over Labour on immigration. But Labour still beat them on all the other main issues: by a long way on health and education, and even slightly at that point on traditional Tory issues of tax and crime. And immigration was only fourth on the list of "salient" issues. It may well have made sense for the Tories to flag immigration: it was one of very few issues where they clearly stood out from, and beat, Labour at that point. However, many commentators argue that the strategy only really reached the Conservatives' own base, rather than the swing voters they needed to win over.

**Conservatives under Cameron: detoxifying**

After 2005 the new leader, David Cameron, tacked back to the centre ground. The plan was to target "small l liberal" swing voters, which required "detoxifying" the "nasty party" by rolling back on the right-wing messages. The 2010 election campaign was fought on the economy, again a winnable issue for the Tories after the 2008 crash. The 2015 campaign continued the economy and austerity story, but became largely a full-on assault on Ed Milliband's weakness, from his bacon sandwich issues to his potential dependence on a coalition with the SNP.

However, as Tim Bale and co-authors[50] write, Cameron managed to "have his cake and eat it" on immigration in the run-up to 2010. Leaving immigration out of the broadcast campaign package helped reassure the "small l liberals". But in fact the party could still gain from the immigration issue, largely thanks to "proxies" who would flag it up for them. In the "long campaign" before official electioneering, backbench Tory MPs did the job of making more outspoken anti-migrant comments, which could then be gleefully amplified by right-wing media, without implicating Cameron's leadership.

In the 2010 campaign itself, the notable example was Bigotgate[51], when Gordon Brown was unwittingly recorded calling a pensioner who had complained to him about immigration numbers a "bigoted woman". With the media frenziedly running the issue, there was no need for party leaders to introduce it themselves. Thus the Tories managed to attract anti-migrant voters, whilst at the same time not alienating "liberals".

In the 2015 election, there were further reasons for the Conservatives not to flag immigration. Key to the Tories' aim of winning an outright majority was "decapitating" Lib-Dem support, and the main battleground switched to Tory/Lib-Dem marginals[52] – meaning even greater need to attract "small l liberals". On the other flank, UKIP had become a real electoral problem, and it was now they who "owned" immigration among many target publics. Not only because UKIP would always use tougher rhetoric, but also simply because the Conservatives were now in government, and so faced the inevitable fact that they can't actually keep migration "under control".

**Labour in opposition: apologies**

Labour did not have to worry too much about its immigration weak point so long as it led the Tories on other more salient policy issues, including the economy. After 2010, with its economic reputation smashed, it no longer felt this luxury. Under Milliband, the party took a new approach, symbolised by its infamous "controls on immigration"[53] branded mugs: it would embrace a "tough" stance on overall immigration, which involved apologising for its previous "mistakes".

In the wake of defeat, Labour strategists were finally waking up to the idea that the party needed to reconnect with working class voters taken for granted by Blairism. Groupings such as Prospect[54], the Fabian Society[55], and the Blue Labour[56] tendency, were influential in arguing that the way to do this was to cleave to "socially conservative" and nationalistic values.

This attitude was galvanised by the threat from UKIP, growing in the build-up to the 2015 election. Although so far UKIP had done more damage to the Conservatives, a 2014 Fabian Society report identified five Labour seats as under direct threat from UKIP victories – and, more importantly, a greater number where losing votes to UKIP would let in Conservatives.

**the battle for UKIP voters**

Throughout recent decades, the mainstream parties have worried about losing votes on immigration to smaller parties emerging from the "far right". In the 1970s, it was the National Front; in the 1990s, the British National Party; and recently, UKIP. Although UKIP's official main issue was independence from the EU, their growth in support in 2010-16 largely came from positioning themselves as an anti-immigration protest vote. In the run-up to the June 2016 referendum, immigration was the [number one reason people gave](#)[57] for deciding to vote Leave.

Ahead of the 2015 election, losing votes to UKIP was a crucial issue for both Conservatives and Labour. Labour's strategy guidance on "[Campaigning against UKIP](#)"[58], leaked and published by The Telegraph, makes clear that "Immigration is the issue people most often cite when explaining support for UKIP." Like the Conservatives, Labour based its "ground war" on the Experian Mosaic database, alongside in-house research, and the document analyses UKIP's support using Experian categories.

According to this analysis, UKIP's main target public was "older traditionalist" voters, who make up approximately 23% of the population. This category is broken down into four Mosaic groups: D "small town diversity", E "active retirement", L "elderly needs" and M "industrial heritage". D and E are more affluent segments of older people who usually tend Conservative. That is, they are the key "comfortable but culturally concerned" demographic of anti-migrant "public opinion" we looked at in Section 2.

L and M are older, white working class people, classic Labour targets – that is, the other key anti-migrant demographic we looked at. The absolute model of a UKIP switcher was "White, Male, Aged 47 – 66, Further education – not university educated, Mosaic Type 42 – 'Worn Out Workers', Lives in Yorkshire." In addition, Labour identified two other Mosaic categories – called J "claimant cultures" and I "ex-council communities" – of younger traditionally Labour voters who were also in danger of UKIP's lure.

These four Mosaic categories became Labour's main target publics in seats identified as UKIP threats. Campaigners were instructed to "listen to their concerns" and explain Labour's new hardline policies on immigration, then steer conversation onto "our key policies".  In order not to alienate pro-migrant base voters, a tough line on immigration was not a major part of the "broadcast" message, but only flagged to specific target publics as part of the "ground war".

To sum up: Labour's campaigning effort in 2015 was largely directed at the particular demographics we discussed above in Section 2. The "public campaign" was not explicitly fought over immigration, but a large part of the "ground war" was fought over the hearts and minds of those target publics seen as most anti-migrant.

Labour's 2015 campaign was a notable failure – although, as it turned out, the main problem was not UKIP but the Tories hoovering up Lib Dem seats and the SNP decimating Labour in Scotland. And by the 2017 election, the UKIP bubble had burst, while Corbyn's Labour managed to make an unexpected comeback. The new tougher line on immigration stayed in the manifesto, which promised to outdo the Tories in hiring [500 extra border guards](#)[59].

## 3.3 Summary

Conservative immigration policy in 2010-18 in many ways mirrors Labour policy in 1997-2010. In both cases, it makes sense for the governing party not to explicitly flag immigration as a campaign issue. There are obvious reasons:

- Whatever its rhetoric, no modern government working within the reality of a globalised economy is actually able to get immigration "under control" – certainly not to the satisfaction of anti-migrant media and "public opinion";

- Both governments are vulnerable to attacks from the right on immigration – Labour from the Tories and UKIP, the Tories from UKIP. This is because both parties have important target publics who fall into the key anti-migrant minority demographics discussed in the last section. For the Tories, these are the "comfortable but culturally concerned". For Labour, excluded older white working class voters – those who the party rushed to try and win back with its "Blue Labour" turn.

- At the same time, neither party wishes to alienate its more "liberal" target publics by overplaying toughness against vulnerable migrants.

But it can help to neutralise its overall "failing" by taking action between elections. Although the government can't actually "control" immigration, it can use policy to make spectacular attacks on easy scapegoats. Under Labour, this meant a spiral of ever tougher asylum laws. Under the Conservatives, the "Hostile Environment" policy against "illegals". Attacks on these marginal groups won't scare off too many "liberal with a small l" voters, but can – the logic goes - be displayed as signs of toughness to help assuage anti-migrant defectors.

To sum up: these policies are directed not at "the public" as a whole, but at particular "target publics" identified as key electoral demographics. Governments launch vicious attacks on scapegoat groups as a way of trying to assuage these anxious minorities.

# 4. Politicians: Home Office agendas

The more immigration is a salient political issue, the more immigration policies will be directed by the overriding imperative of winning elections. But there are also other dimensions of immigration policy-making to consider. So long as they fit within the broader electoral baseline, Home Secretaries and their juniors also have scope to pursue their own agendas.

For example, in the high profile Operation Vaken "Go Home van" policy, the Home Office paid for advertising billboard vans to drive around migrant areas with the slogan "In the country illegally? Go home or face arrest." This was a media-focused strategy headlined by the Immigration Minister (junior to the Home Secretary), then Mike Harper. From what we have heard anecdotally, the idea itself was first thought up by a Home Office civil servant, before being signed off by ministers. According to recent press revelations[60], Theresa May (then Home Secretary) discussed the plan by email while on holiday in Switzerland, and requested that the wording on the vans be "toughened".

**Junior ranks: "nobody likes us, we don't care"**

Policy formation within the Home Office is harder to study than electioneering: there is less transparency, and also less interest in the subject. Two recent academic research projects, COMPAS' "Does Immigration Enforcement Matter?", and the book *Go Home*[61], gained access and insights from lower level Home Office staff, but were largely rebuffed at policy level.

The authors of *Go Home* discuss the performative character of Home Office immigration policies, tracing the current approach back to a communications strategy developed under Labour Home Secretary John Reid in the mid 2000s. They write:

*"a rebranding of the UK borders was undertaken in 2006, so as to amplify the sense of a national border, via flags, insignia, uniforms and other symbols. Meanwhile, a communications strategy aimed at getting more images of immigration raids into the media was launched […] this included inviting journalists along to witness raids, so as to divert media attention to the physical 'toughness' of the border, and away from the rhetoric and perceived elitism of politicians."*

The best known fruit of this strategy was the UK Border Force[62] Sky TV series sponsored by the Home Office, which ran in eighteen episodes from 2008, and featured star narrators Timothy Spall and Bill Nighy. The series ended in 2009, but the Home Office continues to sporadically run stunts "embedding" TV crews and other journalists in raids.

As *Go Home*'s authors note, the Home Office faces a dilemma in its immigration PR strategy:

*"While some interviewees suggested that keeping migration out of the news altogether was the ideal political scenario for the Home Secretary, the medium-term implausibility of this means that any Home Office needs to pay constant attention to the news cycle. […] On the other hand, given deep levels of mistrust in the government's ability to manage immigration, even very tough messaging can backfire if it reminds the public of issues (such as illegal immigration) that have otherwise fallen out of the news cycle."*

The writers also point to "the context of the Home Office's own exceptional status":

*"The ministry has been frequently mired in controversies and media attacks, leading it to be represented as a 'political graveyard' […] the department as a whole operates on a relentless communications cycle, which inculcates a sense of paranoia and watching one's back. In addition to this, there are deep structural reasons why the Home Office encounters regular conflicts with other Whitehall departments, especially where the latter operate according to more liberal economic rationalities. For these reasons, one interviewee joked that the internal philosophy of the Home Office could be summed up by the well-known chant of Millwall football fans, 'No one likes us, we don't care'."*

Again, this view comes from further down the hierarchy. At the top, and most of all for the Home Secretary in person, the office is a notable power position. Far from being a "graveyard", it is one of the senior ministries where politicians who distinguish themselves may go on to challenge for the Prime Minister's job – as did current premier Theresa May. Other recent party leaders who made their names as home secretaries or shadow home secretaries include Tony Blair and Michael Howard.

**tougher than the last**

One useful research project on Home Office policy at the top is a [2014 PhD thesis](#)[63] by Lisa Thomas, which involved interviews with four Labour Home Secretaries – Jack Straw (1997-2001), David Blunkett (2001-4), Charles Clark (2004-6) and Jacqui Smith (2007-9) – about their policy-making and their relations with media. Although the research focuses on terror rather than immigration policy, there is clear crossover. At the same time as pushing through an unprecedented succession of new anti-asylum laws in the 2000s, these Home Secretaries pushed through a wave of five major terrorism laws in 2000-2008.

Indeed, it makes sense to see both sets of legislation as part of the same overall "security" agenda. David Blunkett himself makes this clear in his interview, where he discusses the asylum scare and the Oldham race riots of summer 2001 as building a heightened sense of insecurity in the UK ahead of the 9/11 attacks later that year:

*"Immigration, subliminal fear of rapid change, threat to the 'normal' way of living, the instability that that causes, obviously has implications as to how people receive messages about other aspects of security and of what's happening in the world. Coupled with the fact that we had just moved into an era of seven days a week, 24-hour news. We were also beginning to see people using the internet and mobile technology. All of those things came together at the same time."*

Blunkett reveals that he believed the Home Office had actually "got on top" of the asylum issue. However, a major concern was the "massive upsurge of the right across Europe". He says:

*"Some of us had been arguing that we needed to be aware of this, and not panic or pander, but actually get a grip to the point where people were secure in their minds that we knew that there was an issue to be addressed. Providing them with that reassurance was as much a part of the security, because it affected their psyche and the way that they saw things, as was the physical security."*

In short, the big motivation of Home Office policy, on both asylum and terror, was to provide a show of "reassurance" through toughness, thus warding off threats from the right. The pattern began

at least with Blair himself. As shadow Home Secretary in 1994-7, Blair made his reputation politicising the murder of two-year old Jamie Bulger, as part of positioning himself as a tough guy responding to public anxieties about crime. As he [wrote later](64): "Very effectively I made it into a symbol of a Tory Britain in which, for all the efficiency that Thatcherism had achieved, the bonds of social and community well-being had been loosed, dangerously so."

Over the Blair years, Home Secretaries were a succession of tough guys taking up the cudgel shadowy ranks of national bogeymen, where asylum-seekers, then terrorists, joined criminals and paedophiles. When Jack Straw wasn't tough enough to quiet the tabloids – despite policies including removing asylum seeker benefit payments, restricting trial by jury, etc. – he was replaced by Blunkett, who had boasted of making his predecessor look like a "liberal". Both revelled in provoking outrage from those labelled "[woolly-minded Hampstead liberals](65)" or "[airy fairy libertarians](66)".

Since 1997, there has been a rapid increase in the pace of lawmaking on crime, terror, and immigration. First of all, this is demanded by the overall domestic strategy at the heart of government since Blair: demonstrate toughness and control in the face of insecurity and vague threat. But also, it is demanded by the more specific career aims of Home Office ministers. The ministry provides a stage for politicians to make a name for themselves by posing as tough. To do this they need to show action: new even tougher laws, or other new policies such as the continual restructuring of the immigration agencies.[iii]

## Summary

As immigration becomes a high-saliency issue, policies must fit with the basic political imperative: win elections. But this leaves scope for Home Secretaries and their assistants to come up with their own ideas. Indeed, the two agendas support each other:

- governments need tough Home Office policies to neutralise electoral threats from the right;

- Home Secretaries want to look tough to grab headlines and make a name for themselves.

So both party electioneering, and Home Office positioning, lead politicians towards "spectacular" anti-migrant policies. At the base of all this, we could say, politicians are led by the need for others' approval – not just from voters, but from their own colleagues, as they seek to advance their careers. And there is another crucial group whose approval politicians crave. We can't fully understand immigration policy-making until we look at our next topic – the key relationship between politicians and the media.

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iii    The Home Office section dealing with immigration control was called the Immigration and Nationality Directorate until 2007; then restructured as the Border and Immigration Agency (2007-8); and soon after the UK Border Agency (UKBA, 2008-13). It is currently split between the Border Force (from 2012) and Immigration Enforcement (from 2013).

# 5. Media and politicians: a dense ecosystem

In this section and the next we will look at two kinds of media interactions: between media and their "publics"; and between media and politicians. We will start with the various ways in major media contribute to the formation of policy. Much of this section draws on Aeron Davis' 2007 book *The Mediation of Power*[67], which provides a valuable study of the relationship between UK politicians and media, based on interviews with 40 sitting MPs, plus also other ex-ministers and some political journalists.

- **direct collaboration**

To start with the most blatant cases: sometimes politicians and media collude to organise joint campaigns. This guarantees stories for journalists, and coverage for the politicians. Perhaps the most infamous example of this to become public involves the Blair government's collaboration with the Sun on its anti-asylum campaigning. According to political journalists Peter Oborne and Simon Walters[68], the Blair government knew in advance that the Sun was planning an "asylum week" of attack stories in August 2003. An interview with David Blunkett was already scheduled ahead of the week, where he would announce "tough measures to crack down on asylum cheats".

- **heavy exposure**

Most politicians are "news junkies". "On average, MPs consumed four to five different news sources, including three newspapers, each day. Just over two-thirds listened to radio news and the same amount watched television news. A third used online news services." Many have 24 hour news constantly playing in their offices.

In his interviews, Aeron Davis asked politicians: 'What are your main sources of information when it comes to informing yourself about, and deciding where you stand on, political issues?' "News media was the second most mentioned source by all interviewees with four out of every seven listing it." It was most common source given by back-benchers, who don't have a staff of civil servants to brief them. To quote one interview, with Sadiq Khan, now mayor of London:

*"Obviously the newspapers are very important to me. I read habitually ... and I try to keep up with what the latest thinking is. And then, if something's referred to, I'll go look up the original source ... So those daily and weekly newspapers and magazines signpost me where to go."*

- **media campaigns**

Davis critiques a popular "stimulus-response" model of media influence – the idea that media raise an issue, then politicians jump – arguing that media influence often takes more subtle forms. This is not to say that it never happens. The most obvious cases of media influence are where several journalists, perhaps across several outlets, mount a concerted steam-rolling "campaign" to highlight an issue or call for a policy. "Most MPs" interviewed could "think of examples of when the weight of a media campaign had been responsible for initiating or altering new legislation and budgetary decisions". Immigration was one of the issues named here – alongside casinos, dangerous dogs, or funding for schools and hospitals.

But perhaps even more than issues, media campaigns are often directed at individual politicians themselves. "Several [of Davis' interviewees] also talked about media campaigns being the main driving force behind a ministerial resignation or sacking." But also, ambitious politicians can get considerable career boost if they can become "favourites" of journalists and outlets who highlight their actions, champion their policies, and laud them with gushing profiles. Blair's pact with the Murdoch press is the classic recent example, alongside the Daily Mail's promotion of Thatcher – and, less successfully, Theresa May.

- **anticipation effect**

One of the more subtle mechanisms, and perhaps more important, is what Davis calls an "anticipatory news media effect". That is, politicians take account of the likely reactions of media while shaping policies in the first place.

*"Former government ministers and shadow ministers explained that discussions of policy were frequently linked to the issue of how the policy would play in the media. For many, in fact, this had bordered on media 'obsession'. Almost every interviewee who had served in a cabinet or shadow cabinet since the late 1980s, talked in such terms."*

Ann Widdecombe, the 1999-2001 Conservative shadow Home Secretary who led on the asylum scare, says: "We never discussed a policy without discussing the media impact ever." Labour's Frank Field describes the Blair government as "obsessed" by media, saying: "It's the number one priority. The number one priority [in 1998–99] was the media coverage because at all costs we had to win a second time . . . Never mind about getting reforms." Former Conservative minister John Whittingdale similarly describes Tory leaders John Major and William Hague as media "obsessed".

Whittingdale also explains how this obsession doesn't just lead politicians to check or filter their own policy ideas. Rather, the need for media approval can drive policy-making from the outset:

*"the concern was always how can we get coverage. And the only way you get coverage is by saying something new. And by saying something new you were having to announce something."*

Former Labour minister Chris Smith similarly talks about a media-driven "'something must be done' syndrome". And Ann Widdecombe specifically talks about Conservative immigration policy in this way:

*"Asylum was huge during our time... I don't think the media actually dictated policy but it did create an atmosphere in which it was felt something had to be addressed. Something had to be done about it."*

- **political go-betweens**

One reason politicians pay such attention to media is as a main source of information about other politicians. Politicians exist in a viciously competitive micro-world, always wary of attacks from rivals – and keen to find ways to strike first. These rivals may be in their own party, as well as on "the other side". Big media provide the bulletin board, as it were, where politicians read about each others' actions and announcements – and get a sense of each others' plans and positionings.

*"A quarter of MPs also stated that news was a way of gauging what others, either in one's own party or in rival parties, were thinking on issues. Some also recounted that they often attempted to*

*work out who the political sources of stories were and why they were sourcing the story. In effect, news media aided MPs in their attempts to interpret 'feelings' or trends in opinion within the parties themselves."*

In addition, as <u>Peter Van Aelst and Stefaan Walgrave argue</u>[69], the media is not just an information source for politicians to keep track of "the debate", but also itself a primary arena where the game takes place. Politicians use media to make public announcements, and also more subtle signals – off the record comments, leaks, etc. Some is targeted at "the public", but much at the other players.

- **on the team**

The remarks so far present politicians and media as two separate "teams" of independent actors. But in fact the lines are much more blurred, as the Davis study shows. First of all, politicians are in very regular contact with journalists.

*"In all, just over two-thirds talked to journalists, on average, at least once a day, and usually several times a day. At busy periods some said they could have between 10 and 20 conversations with journalists in a single day."*

Some MPs present the relationship as a close functional symbiosis: journalists need stories every day, politicians need to get their messages out. So politicians need to keep journalists close because, as Iain Duncan Smith puts it, "you want to be able to feed them with your information."

Some of the MPs Davis interviewed go further. *"Many used terms like 'friend' or 'colleague' and would meet for social as well as professional reasons. Others referred to relationships as part of 'alliances' or 'coalitions'. In all these cases it seemed clear that journalists were very much part of the policy networks that evolved within parliament"*.

The political journalists he interviewed were still more explicit on the nature of this relationship. Politicians don't just anticipate media responses, but while making policy many actively consult with journalists. They may cultivate a number of close relationships with influential columnists and political commentators, whom they value for their analysis and "inside knowledge".

For example, Guardian columnist Polly Toynbee who says: "people are very keen to talk [to me] about policy when they're sitting there all day wondering how to make their particular department work better." The Telegraph and Daily Mail commentator Simon Heffer says: "People in the last Conservative administration did so [consulted me] all the time", adding "I had friends who were well known to be sympathetic to the Labour party, who were often consulted by Conservative ministers."

Politicians and political journalists occupy a shared micro-world based around Westminster. They work on the same issues, share information, share social environments. There is continual crossover between the two professions, and through the in-between category of "special advisors", press officers, PR gurus, etc. It may often make sense not to think of them as on two opposing teams, but the same one.

- **Quid pro quo**

Another possible form of media influence is not mentioned by Davis or his interviewees, and it would be hard to gauge its extent. As in other workplaces, gossip swirls in and around the

Westminster bubble, and much information is widely known that doesn't get into print. Sometimes this may be for legal reasons, e.g., in the case of the numerous public figures with "super injunctions". Other times, due to editors upholding "gentlemen's agreements" – or purposefully holding back information in order to build and maintain the relationships on which Westminster thrives.

For example, in 2016 Davis' interviewee Whittingdale was [sacked as culture minister](#)[70], responsible for media regulation, after his relationship with a sex-worker was eventually exposed. The story had previously been investigated by four newspapers, from The Sun to The Independent, but all held off publishing. The Hacked Off [campaign group has alleged](#)[71] the newspapers withheld the story whilst Whittingdale was making media-friendly moves on press regulation.

## Summary: mediapolitical ecosystem

Politicians pay enormous attention to media. Davis' research brings out how policies are shaped not just in response to media coverage, but anticipating it. This is not because politicians believe that media "represent public opinion". If politicians want a picture of "public opinion" they look to polling, or maybe their own far from representative experiences of meeting constituents. Out of Davis' 40 interviewed MPs: *"Only three believed news was an actual reflection of public opinion and looked to it for that purpose. Just under half, without prompting, described political coverage as overly 'trivial' and dominated by 'personalities' and the 'dramatic'."*

How does this fit with the point that politicians' paramount need is for approval from voters? Here are a few partial answers:

- First, politicians know that, while media don't "reflect" current public opinion, they do have power to shape future public views. Most of all, they know that media have particular power over key target publics – as we will see in the next section.

- But above all, media have power to mobilise their audiences' feelings around specific campaigns, which often target specific politicians. These include attack campaigns that can destroy a politician's career – and positive campaigns that can raise a politician's profile.

- These strategic considerations aside, politicians are "news junkies" living in a media hothouse where all their thinking and feeling is framed by 24/7 media exposure. However much or little they're aware of it, they are much more media creatures than most of us.

- Not only are politicians continually exposed to media stories and images, but they work and socialise alongside editors and journalists. They are colleagues and friends, they speak the same language, share the same values. Politicians actively consult journalists as they make policy, or even plan joint campaigns in advance – as in the infamous 2003 "asylum week" planned out by the Sun and the Blair government. In short, it makes sense to think of politicians and media as sharing a dense media-political ecosystem, where they feed off each other in spinning and weaving their stories.

# 6. Media and people: communication power

What about the rest of us? How much power do media have to shape our minds? There is considerable academic research tackling this issue from different perspectives.[iv]Still, as <u>Scott Blinder</u>[72] at the Migration Observatory observes, it is hard to pin down an "empirical" answer:

*"It is extremely difficult to test for media impact on attitudes empirically, because it is virtually impossible to discern whether people learn their political viewpoints from the media sources they rely upon, or if conversely they choose to rely on media sources that reflect their pre-determined political viewpoint. It would seem likely that both processes occur, but research to disentangle one from the other faces formidable challenges and is likely to remain inconclusive."*

Our starting point is that people do not form their attitudes in isolation. Rather, our views are shaped throughout our lives in continuing interaction and communication with many others. For example, I may have personally experienced being turned down for a job, being on a housing waiting list, seeing my neighbourhood change. But also, I have talked about these experiences with friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, and heard their experiences, and these conversations shape how I understand what has happened. They give me new information, and they help me grasp contexts or "frames" that fit events into patterns, making them exemplars of familiar narratives.

All of us are continually receiving ideas from many others, and in the process our own views are continually being influenced and re-shaped. At the same time, we are all transmitting our ideas to others, and helping influence their views. But, clearly, some people and institutions have much greater power to direct these flows of ideas.

We can use the term "the media" as a shorthand to mean: organisations with particular access to major communication channels – and so with concentrated power to spread ideas and influence people.

To be clear, big media are certainly not the only sources of our views. But in a landscape where a few big players dominate major communication channels, this has important effects on our "ecologies of ideas". We can then ask a few questions:

- just what reach do big media have?

- what ideas do big media spread?

- and why: what agendas or projects drive them?

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iv  One theoretical discussion we find generally helpful is Manuel Castells's book <u>Communication and Power</u> (2009). Stefan Walgrave and Peter Van Aelst in "The Contingency of the Mass Media's Political Agenda Setting Power: Toward a Preliminary Theory" (2006) give a survey of many empirical studies up to that point. Much of the empirical literature works with paradigms of "agenda setting" and "framing": Robert Entman is among the leading theorists here, <u>this 2007 article</u> gives an introductory summary of some of his approaches. A lot of this literature is focused on US and other powers' foreign policy, and above all on war.

## 6.1 media reach

Another 2011 Ipsos MORI survey, cited in the [Perceptions and Reality](#)[73] report, asked: "which two sources would you say provides you personally with most of your information about immigration and asylum in Britain?" These were the answers given:

- News programmes on TV or radio: 55%
- National newspapers: 44% (tabloids 20%, broadsheets 18%)
- TV documentaries: 23%
- Personal Experience: 16%
- Internet: 10%
- Radio programmes: 9%
- Word of mouth: 9%
- Local newspapers: 8%
- Friend's and/or relative's experience: 7%

Without putting too much weight on this survey, it gives an indication of the importance many people themselves ascribe to the media in their thinking about immigration.

**media segments**

However, again, we need to see clearly that there is no one "public" in relation to the media, but many different people, reached by different media outlets, in different ways.

As the Ipsos MORI  survey indicates, television is still extremely powerful. Although if the survey were carried out now, we could expect a stronger role for online media. According to more recent [Yougov / Oxford University sampling](#)[74], UK use of online news sites overtook TV for the first time in 2016.

Both TV and internet are much widely accessed than newspapers: over 70% of people said they had read news online in the last week, and a similar figure had watched TV news, but less than 40% had read a newspaper. On the other hand, newspapers are often considered to have particular influence in the self-referential media "debate" – what some academics call "[intermedia agenda setting](#)"[75]. TV programmes are dedicated to "what the papers say", and broadcast news often takes the lead from the morning papers. The press, and above all the most influential newspaper commentators, may play an agenda-setting role for the media overall.

There are marked generational differences in media reception. E.g., 84% of people aged 24 and under said online news and social media is their main source, with only 9% for TV. But 54% of people over 55 put TV first, and 15% of this age group relied most on newspapers. This is, of course, particularly relevant for our "target publics" – older white people with immigration anxiety.

Indeed, to go back to the main Ipsos MORI study we discussed in Section 2, here is one interesting fact: people who said they saw immigration as a problem "nationally but not locally" were particularly likely to be newspaper readers. 51% of this group said they read newspapers – as opposed to 41% of those who saw a "national and local" problem, and 43% of those who didn't see immigration as a problem. And 16% of them read "mid-market" newspapers – i.e., The Daily Mail and Daily Express – as opposed to 9% and 6% in the other two groups.

## 6.2 immigration stories

There is considerable research on how media cover immigration. We will review a few highlights from four notable studies of UK media coverage:

- "What's The Story?"[76] Article 19's study of the original asylum scare in 1999-2001 which led to the closing of the Red Cross refugee centre in Sangatte, near Calais.

- *Bad News for Refugees*[77] by researchers from the Glasgow Media Group, which includes case studies of coverage during May 2006 and June 2011.

- *"Press Coverage of the Refugee and Migrant Crisis in the EU"*[78] a UNHCR commissioned study by Cardiff School of Journalism, which analyses reports from 2014-15 in five countries: UK, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Sweden.

- "A Decade of Immigration in the British Press"[79] by David Allen from Oxford University's Migration Observatory, which studies press coverage over 2006-15.

All of these are essentially "content analyses". They categorise and analyse the use of language, key words, different sources, narrative patterns, "frames"[80], and other elements. Most focus on newspaper reports – perhaps largely because they are particularly easy to search and categorise, but *Bad News* and UNHCR also look at TV reporting.

To start with the obvious point, the UNHCR study notes that: *"coverage in the United Kingdom was the most negative, and the most polarised. Amongst those countries surveyed, Britain's right-wing media was uniquely aggressive in its campaigns against refugees and migrants."*

All countries' media gave space to anti-migrant views – the UK stands out for the way major newspapers actively campaign in their own voices.

*volume*

The volume of media coverage of immigration roughly mirrors the "public attitudes" surveys discussed in Section 2. The Migration Observatory study charts the overall volume of stories mentioning "immigration" or "immigrants" over ten years, looking at all national newspapers for which there are full records. In 2006 there were just under 600 articles per month on average; coverage declined to under 400 stories per month in 2008-2012, with the exception of a jump around the 2010 general election; but then rose again to new highs of over 800 stories per month as the "refugee crisis" began in 2014-15.

So the more media talk about migration, the more people surveyed by pollsters say it is important. Of course, this does not identify cause and effect: it could be that media talk more about migration because "the public" is already doing so.

*threat stories*

Media overwhelmingly frame migration as a problem and a threat. Migration Observatory write: "About 7 in 10 articles (69%) mentioning EU immigration, and about three-quarters (76%) of articles in the illegal immigration sample, contained only mentions of problems."

Drilling down, Migration Observatory identify eight main problem themes. The most frequent, by far, is the sheer quantity of immigrants, followed by "rules too weak or abused", and "poor quality

of debate". We should also note that the much smaller proportion of "pro-migrant" stories are also typically framed in terms of problems: the "rules are too tough", "racism/xenophobia", "suffering of migrants".

The problem themes change over time, as do the terms used to describe migrants. We could broadly identify three periods:

- In the early 2000s, there is a major focus on "asylum seekers". As [Roy Greenslade writes](81), editors succeeded in "having demonised the concept and practice of asylum-seeking, and turning the very phrase into a term of abuse".

- By 2005-6, the "illegal immigrant" replaced the "asylum seeker" as the main bogeyman, while EU migration becomes a major issue.

- In the next ten years, references to "illegality" die down, and the main focus is on quantities – masses, floods and swarms.

Migration Observatory track the use of "modifiers" describing immigrants. Across 2006-2015, in 30% of all times migrants are described, they are described as "illegal". In 2006, illegal was in fact over half of all descriptions in tabloid and "midmarket" papers. By 2015 this had fallen to around 30%, while broadsheet descriptions of illegality had dropped from over 30% to 14%.

But the main kind of description, and increasingly so, is about scale – including modifiers such as 'mass', 'uncontrolled', 'high', 'more', 'unlimited', 'unrestricted', 'excessive', 'unfettered', etc. By 2015, 63% of all descriptions of "migration" or "immigration" were in terms of scale. Along with scale comes the issue of control. 20% of all verbs used in migration articles in 2006, rising to almost 40% by 2015, concerned actions to do with limiting: "'control', 'manage', 'tackle', 'regulate', 'reduce', 'cut', 'curb', 'limit', 'restrict', 'stop', 'cap', 'slash', 'prevent', 'discourage', 'stem', 'halt'."

As asylum-seekers lose centre stage in the mid-2000s, new concerns arise with "European migrants", and later with "refugees". But the essential narrative remains: immigrants, in masses and/or illegally, asylum-seekers or Europeans, threaten peace and order, and the problem must be controlled. There are two central villains in this story: first of all, migrants themselves; secondly, politicians who are failing to exert control.

***voices***

Both the Migration Observatory and *Bad News* studies analyse the "messengers" or "voices" telling the stories in reports. Most often by far, the "messengers" are simply journalists themselves, asserting a fact or interpretation often without any further sourcing. "In nearly half of [articles about EU or illegal immigration] the author of the article is the person who is communicating the main issue—asserting whether it is problem or success."

18% of articles give the "messenger" role to a politician. This contrasts with coverage of other political issues, notably foreign policy, where politicians are commonly given centre stage. The UNHCR study breaks down the parties of politicians featured: "68.6% of political sourcing came from the coalition government whilst the main voice explicitly opposing government policy came from UKIP (9.3%)."

Much smaller numbers of articles centred civil servants or spokespeople from NGOs or thinktanks. Only a tiny handful gave the "messenger" role to migrants themselves.

## 6.3 media roles: campaigners and debaters

Of course, there is considerable difference in how media outlets treat migration. We might divide the big UK media into two broad categories on migration. First, there are a number of outlets, mainly newspapers, that brazenly campaign on anti-migrant agendas. Second, the rest of the media tends to frame migration as a "debate" in which different voices – within a more or less narrow range – are given space.

- *anti-migrant campaigners*

The two "mid-market" papers, the Daily Mail and the Express, are notorious leaders here. Murdoch's tabloid The Sun follows a few steps behind: its owner is known to support the benefits of economic migration (see discussion below), but does not interfere with rabid commentators or infamous articles such as the July 2003 "Swan Bake"[82] front page. In the broadsheet sector, the right-wing Telegraph broadsheet also adopts a consistently anti-migrant hard line.

These four papers between them have around 60% of all UK national newspaper sales. The Sun and the Daily Mail are the two biggest selling newspapers[83] by some margin. The Sun still sells over 1.5 million copies a day, or 25% of all national daily newspaper sales, as of January 2018; the Daily Mail around 1.3 million. The next biggest-selling daily is the Mirror, with around 580,000. Newspaper sales are declining across the board, and these figures are well below their historic peaks. Two obvious reasons are free papers and internet use. The Metro gives out almost 1.5 million copies, the London Evening Standard nearly 900,000. Newspaper websites are still some of the biggest news sites, and the Daily Mail remains the notable success with over 13 million "unique browsers" per day.

The Sangatte study gives in-depth analysis of these papers' all-out campaign against against asylum-seekers at the end of 2002. Roy Greenslade writes: "At one point in 2003 the Daily Express ran 22 'splashes' (front page lead stories) about asylum-seekers and refugees in a 31-day period." Headlines included the likes of "ASYLUM: Tidal wave of crime". The constant connection of asylum and crime was also the Mail's signature. "As early as 1998, the Mail ran a story headlined, 'Brutal crimes of the asylum seekers', which claimed that asylum-seekers were having a 'devastating impact' on crime in London".

- *Outlets which present a "debate"*

Other print media, and TV channels, tend not to take openly partisan anti-migrant lines. This does not mean that reporting is pro-migration, but that there is an appearance of "balancing" different views.

Of course, the range of allowed views differs greatly, and in most cases it is heavily skewed against migrants. For example, the main TV channels BBC and ITV will often invite comments from UKIP or the anti-migrant think-tank Migration Watch (see Section 8) to provide an oppositional voice to government, which is presented as "soft" on migration. As the Huffington Post reported[84], UKIP spokespeople appeared on a quarter of all BBC Question Time shows in 2010-2017. Liberal pro-

migrant voices are also given some space on main news and commentary programmes – but less of it.

The least anti-migrant big media outlet is the Guardian newspaper. The paper stands out in two main respects. First, it gives much greater space to pro-migrant sources, e.g., sourcing more quotes and opinion pieces from pro-migrant NGOs, academics, or activists. Second, it has a higher proportion of stories using "humanitarian" rather than "threat" frames – e.g., reporting on the suffering of migrants and their experiences along routes. That said, Guardian articles still often use the indiscriminate anti-migrant language common across the media, e.g., until recently, referring widely to "illegals". And pro-migrant voices and humanitarian narratives feature alongside, or juxtaposed with, anti-migration messages and narratives from official figures and other commentators.

That is: the Guardian is not a migrant "friendly" paper in the same way the Mail is a "hostile" paper. It appears as relatively friendly because, more than other outlets, it attempts to balance hostile with friendly messages in a two-sided debate.

## 6.4 Media agendas

Why do media push anti-migrant messages? First, we need to note that "the media" are formed of multiple actors: not just diverse competing outlets, but diverse actors within each organisation, each with their own goals. Yet media organisations tend to be extremely hierarchical, with political lines set from the top down. Over-simplifying, we might think about the motivations of, and external pressures on, three main kinds of actors: media owners; editors and other executives; and journalists.

- **Media owners**

UK media ownership is highly concentrated. According to the Media Reform Coalition's 2015 report[85]:

*"three companies dominate 71% of the national newspaper market […] When online readers are included, just five companies dominate some 80% of market share. In the area of local news, six giant conglomerates account for 80% of all titles"*

In broadcasting, there are even less players on the scene. The BBC still dominates with around one third of all viewing, followed by ITV with 22%, Channel 4 with 11%, Sky with 8%, and Channel 5 with 6%.

Not only are there few competing companies, but ownership of these companies is concentrated in few hands. Nearly 60% of national newspaper sales are effectively controlled by two individual owners as family businesses: Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation owns The Sun and The Times; Lord Rothermere's Daily Mail and General Trust owns the Metro freesheet as well as the Daily Mail. The next biggest circulation free paper, the Evening Standard, as well as the Independent, is owned by ex-KGB oligarch Alexander Lebedev and his son Evgeny.

We might think about two kinds of agendas for the media barons:

1. Profit motive. To maintain their position, they first of all need to make profit, which means sales and audience share – but also, finding and monetising new media forms online.

2. Specific policy agendas. Highly centralised control gives scope to pursue more particular political, campaigning or personal agendas.

There is a long tradition of media owners pursuing "hobby horse" campaigns; but there are also limits to how far they can go. Essentially, they can't rub too hard against the grain of existing audience attitudes. While a strong dash of anti-semitism may have pleased Daily Mail readers in the 1930s, Adrian Addison in *Mail Men*[86] argues that the first Lord Rothermere went too far in openly supporting Hitler. Using the paper to parade his fascist views helped push the paper into a decades-long decline against its rival the Express.

### So why does The Sun hate migrants?

Murdoch is an interesting case study here. On the whole, Murdoch has used his outlets to push standard neoliberal policies favouring global business elites: privatisation, deregulation, free trade, the occasional war. As we will see in the next section, big business is generally pro-immigration – in the limited sense of free movement of labour. And in fact, Murdoch not only appears himself to have largely pro-immigration views in that sense, but has expressed these publicly in numerous articles and interviews. In the US, he has publicly called for "sweeping, generous immigration reforms"[87], and recently mocked Trump's[88] xenophobic rhetoric on twitter. In the UK, too, he has more occasionally taken pro-migrant stances, such as speaking against[89] Michael Howard's immigration cap policy in 2005.

At the same time, he gives his editors and columnists free rein to launch full-on anti-migrant campaigns. How to explain this? Here are maybe some parts of an answer.

First, the Sun's anti-migrant populism is, indeed, popular. Its target audiences lap it up. The paper races to feed its audiences' passions, and in doing so nourishes and builds them further. By now, the feeding of anti-migrant fear and hate at the Sun has been going on for decades, and stopping the machine might would be difficult and costly. This is a winning model, and selling papers remains the top priority.

Second, Murdoch relishes the power that The Sun and similar outlets carry to make politicians jump. He is known for making, and breaking, political careers – and for switching allegiances. Seen in this light, the power to whip up controversies around immigration is a handy stick to hold over politicians. The interests and power of media in helping "manufacture consent"[90] for political systems have been well analysed. But media power agendas may also involve manufacturing dissent[91] – at least in controllable doses.

Third, once again, it's not as if The Sun's anti-migrant rhetoric actually leads to effective immigration controls. The Sun, and other media, have been instrumental in directing anti-migrant rage onto more limited, and business-friendly, "scapegoats" such as asylum-seekers.

It's notable, here, that The Sun's "populism" has clear limits. For example, after some dallying, Murdoch swung the paper behind Brexit[92]. (An hour after the referendum result, Sun editor Tony Gallagher gloated in a text message to the Guardian[93]: "so much for the waning power of the print media.") But he also swung it against UKIP, rallying behind the Conservatives.

So far, the UK rightwing press has played this game successfully. It gleefully wields language and narratives that in other European countries are associated with neofascist or "outsider" politicians.

But then it swings behind the establishment parties – in effect, using far-right rhetoric to mobilise for the centre-right mainstream. The game would not play the same way in other countries where a more "radical nationalist" right looms stronger, attracting beyond the small rump that cleave to UKIP here.

- **Editors**

Many media owners still take strong command of editorial lines, determine campaigns, and write editorials under their names or unsigned. For example, Murdoch has declared himself a "traditional proprietor"[94] setting the editorial line on major issues at The Sun – but is supposedly less hands-on at the Times.

Elsewhere, editors are given free rein. At the Daily Mail, the current (fourth) Lord Rothermere is reputed to leave editor Paul Dacre in full charge – so long as the paper maintains its sales position. In Dacre's case, the editor's personal crusade to voice the hateful anxiety of the pure white Middle England he remembers from a 1950s suburban childhood has proved popular with the paper's ageing readership. Dacre, who barely leaves the office and then only in a chauffeur driven car, is also a particularly vicious boss known for his "vagina monologues"[95] – though he is not the only editor to keep up the good old ways of Fleet Street bullying.

- **Journalists**

We might think of three main classes of journalists at the coalface of anti-migrant propaganda.

First, there are prized commentators, columnists and presenters, who have xenophobia as part of their schtick. They are famous, highly paid, seen as assets by their employers, and may be head-hunted across outlets. Do they sincerely believe in their diatribes? Do they crave the attention and controversy? Are they in it for the money and power? All of the above? Should we care?

At the other end of the spectrum, tabloid attack articles are often written by junior reporters starting their careers. *Bad News for Refugees* quotes from confidential interviews with a number of journalists:

*"It's not a meritocracy, it's authoritarian – you do what you're told. It's an authoritarian system in a way, you're just told how to write and if you don't write it in the way they want then it's only going to come back to you to write it again."*

*"Invariably it's the younger reporters who are sent out to do these sorts of monstering jobs – because they want to get on. The newsroom is an authoritarian place. A more experienced reporter could refuse. One editor had a terrible reputation for bullying but the imbalance between news editor and young inexperienced reporter is enough to get the person to put their conscience aside and go and monster an asylum seeker."*

*"In general the approach used to be to use young reporters of Asian background to 'do their own'. [A reporter] was used to do a lot of these stitch-up jobs on asylum seekers. The paper wants to cover itself by using a reporter of an ethnic background to do these sort of jobs."*

Those who refuse, if not simply fired, may be bullied into quitting:

*"[One journalist] very openly spoke out and said 'I don't want to write these kinds of stories, you know, I don't want to do this.' As a result, she got absolutely, sort of, screamed off the news room floor and for the next couple of weeks she was given every anti-Muslim, anti-asylum seeker story to do, every single one until she just resigned."*

Roy Greenslade notes that many stories come from even lower down the food chain, from local freelance agencies and individual "stringers" who sell stories to the nationals.

*"they also understand that certain papers are more likely than others to publish specific stories – due to their political prejudice, possibly, or their penchant for human interest or humorous tales – and therefore, in order to secure an income, try to satisfy that appetite. [...] This top-down process is even clearer when national paper editors launch topical campaigns (such as dogs attacking babies). Freelancers are generally quick to latch on to the money-making possibilities by seeking out relevant stories."*

In between the big-name commentators and the muckraking grunts come the middle ranks of ordinary hard-working journalists clocking their copy. The profession is well paid above the lowest ranks, [94% white (in 2016)](#)[96], 86% university educated, and over 50% privately educated. Although older generations of tabloid journalists were often from working class backgrounds, this is less and less the case. Many may have no particular axe to grind with migrants. But, working and socialising with others of their kind, they are unlikely to have experienced migration themselves, or interact closely with those who have. Their attitudes, in general, are unlikely to differ greatly from the "public opinion" they may feel themselves to represent.

If they do have different views, they will find it tough to get these past editorial lines – even on "left-leaning" media, pro-migration stories are known as a hard sell. Where not a matter of deliberate policy, the fact is that few media outlets see much of a place for migrants in their own "target publics". And it may be simply that big media themselves absorb the world-view they help create. To quote another *Bad News* interview:

*"There's an assumption in the news desk that the readers will believe that there are not enough jobs, that there are simply too many people coming in, there are too many problems in our own country and it's difficult to put in sympathetic stories on asylum or refugees."*

## 6.5 Conclusion: propaganda spirals

Perhaps we can now revisit the big question about media influence. One thoughtful publication on the UK media and immigration is veteran journalist Roy Greenslade's 2005 essay "[Seeking Scapegoats: the coverage of asylum in the UK press](#)"[97]. Greenslade starts by reviewing the history of anti-migration reporting in the British media since the birth of the late nineteenth century "popular press". The Daily Mail took an early lead with anti-semitic and anti-Irish demonisation campaigns, notoriously leading to its support of Oswald Moseley and Adolf Hitler in the 1930s. Incidents of postwar anti-semitism, hyping of 1950's "race riots", through to media embrace of 1968 Enoch Powell's "rivers of blood" speech, all show very similar dynamics to recent scares.

Throughout this timeline, "popular" media have argued that they are simply speaking the established views of their mass audiences: "a xenophobic press for a xenophobic people". Greenslade argues that this is partially correct:

*"Popular papers rarely, if ever, publish material that is diametrically opposed to the views of their readers. There is a reciprocal relationship between newspaper and audience. In general, papers reflect what people think or, to be more specific, they reflect what they think people think."*

But, he continues:

*"the press is not a simple mirror when it seeks to reflect existing public attitudes. Publication endorses and reinforces those attitudes, lending them credibility. At the same time, papers select material which underpins their editorial viewpoint and reject material which undermines it, providing their readers with only a partial (and usually simplistic) view of events. The reflecting mirror is therefore distorted [...]."*

Greenslade presents a "spiralling" dynamic, a dance between media and audience involving two "vicious circles":

*"the press both reflects and enhances public attitudes and thereby sets off a chain reaction in which the reflection and enhancement go on escalating until reality is buried under layers of myth and prejudice".*

We could fit Greenslade's observations within a rough framework informed by classic theorists of propaganda such as Edward Bernays[98] and Jacques Ellul[99]. We need to distinguish two kinds of propaganda:

- *short-term activating propaganda*: messages or actions that "activate" or trigger existing deep-seated attitudes.

Newspaper campaigns are classic examples, alongside election stunts or other political spectacles. As Bernays, the great twentieth century PR guru, writes: "The public has its own standards and demands and habits. You may modify them, but you dare not run counter to them." "There has to be fertile ground for the leader and the idea to fall on." So when The Sun launches an attacking "asylum week", it is stirring a well of existing hatred. But, however consciously, it is simultaneously doing something else.

- *long-term accumulating propaganda*: actions and messages that help form attitudes, customs and "fixed ideas", through a slow drip of repeated messages.

This is what Ellul calls "strategic propaganda". It may involve deliberate long-term campaigns  by states and other powerful actors, or more diffuse "sociological propaganda" in which many actors contribute, often without any coordinated plan. The deep-seated attitudes of a "xenophobic people" have been built up over years and generations.

The media is certainly not alone in repeating and reinforcing xeno-racism[100]: politicians, teachers, academics, advertisers, and all of us in our everyday communication can play our part. But the "populist" media's endlessly repeated threat stories and hate speech makes a major contribution. As, too, does the more liberal media's accepting presentation of this hate speech as a valid part of "the public debate".

# 7. Corporate Power

Our discussion of politics so far has left out one big piece of the puzzle: the role of capital, and particularly "Big Business", in determining policies. Corporations and other business interests have massive power to shape policy through their control of wealth. So long as politicians, media, and the rest of us need money, those who have it have influence. More specifically, we can think of this power in terms of the three kinds of actors discussed so far:

**Business and politicians.** (1) *Funding*: politicians depend on business for donations and loans, without which they cannot run election campaigns. (2) *Kickbacks and revolving doors*: most politicians supplement their incomes with extra jobs as "consultants", etc.; or go on to well-paying jobs in business after their political careers end. This is without taking into account personal gifts, zero interest loans, and other legal or less legal payments that standardly flow from business elites to ambitious politicians. (3) *Lobbying*[101]: in return, business is given continual access to politicians, at the least being "consulted" on proposed policies. This involves both official recorded "lobbying" meetings and more informal wining and dining. Lobbying may be carried out directly by business leaders, or through specialist proxies such as think-tanks they fund. (4) *Shared culture*: from the "old boys networks" of the British establishment past, to today's global gangster capitalism, business leaders and politicians share alliances and friendships, ambitions and values, as they mingle in the same elite circles.

**Business and media.** (1) *Ownership and finance*: most media outlets are directly owned by profit-making businesses – whether families, or institutional investment funds managed by the big finance houses. And even non-profit making trusts like the one that owns the Guardian[102], still rely on financial markets for loans and other forms of credit, plus commercial deals such as the hugely profitable sale of Auto-Trader . (2) *Advertising*: all media are dependent on advertising sales. Explicit or implicit threats or offers over advertising have tremendous power to shape media coverage and framing. (3) *Making stories*: businesses, their PR departments and agencies, and the thinktanks, institutes, universities, associations and other bodies they set up or sponsor, are themselves major sources of news and ideas pumped into the media. (4) *"Flak"*: businesses closely monitor coverage and can respond with legal and other threats to reporting they see as harming their interests. In this way business can have an "anticipatory" influence on media, similar to that of media on politicians discussed above. (5) *Shared culture*: media owners, editors and senior journalists are part of the same elite circles as business and political bosses, and will be likely to share the same world-views. More junior journalists may aspire to get there.

**NB:** the seminal reference on how capital shapes media coverage, which studies these points and more, remains Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky's *Manufacturing Consent*[103]. The points above correspond to what they call the "five filters" of editorial bias.

**Business and people.** Much of capital's influence on our attitudes goes through the two channels of politics and media. But business elites also make other interventions into our "ecologies of ideas", e.g., the *advertising* that immerses us everywhere; sponsoring large parts of *education* systems; funding thinktanks, charities, and many other *organisations* that we interact with every day.

Do capitalists use these channels of influence to promote ideas about immigration? If so, what ideas: do business interests align or conflict here? And how are they using different channels? In-depth research on these questions is needed – but here we'll only note a few initial thoughts.

## 7.1. status quo

Wealthy elites are also human beings with a range of values and attitudes. A few consider themselves progressives and donate portions of their money to good causes, including helping migrants. A few are outright fascists or psychopaths. A few want to overturn governments or economies because they see profit in it, or because they enjoy the thrill of great power. But probably most wealthy people, and perhaps even more so most large corporations and financial institutions, have a more "middle of the road" conservative position. Their main political interest is stability: a reasonably well-functioning state and legal system, reasonably transparent mechanisms for managing trade, investment, and labour, with few shocks.

For example, by far the bulk of political donations in the UK go to the two main parties, and within them to "centrist" politicians more than "extremists" of either left or right. E.g., in 2015[104], UKIP found a few notable rich backers such as Arron Banks – but still only managed to raise £5.8 million, compared to the Conservatives' £41.9 million, or Labour's (largely union-funded) £51.2 million. (NB: you can see all official donations and loans to parties and candidates registered on the Electoral Commission website[105].)

On the whole, business is happy with things as they are – the free market capitalist status quo. Business groupings promote reforms to "liberalise" markets, lower taxes and "reduce red tape"; but many would be wary of pro-market reforms that go "too fast" and threaten overall stability. Certainly, very few would question the basic pillars of the current system – which include the nation-state, national identity, and the state's claim to control borders and "manage migration".

## 7.2 business demand for labour

But within those limits, big business in the UK is broadly "pro-immigration": that is, unlike the majority of the "British public", they favour reduced immigration controls. They want to be able to hire workers they need with minimal cost or bureaucratic meddling, and they believe significant numbers of these workers need to come from abroad. At the same time, they have no problem at all with attacks on "low value" migrant scapegoats such as asylum seekers or "illegals"

This is clear to see in the current consultations on a post-Brexit immigration system. The government's Migration Advisory Committee[106] is due to make an initial report in September 2018, with a White Paper for a post-Brexit immigration bill expected by the end of the year. All main business lobbying alliances have submitted position papers, and all take effectively the same line.

The Institute of Directors (IoD) proposes a 12 point plan[107] which includes scrapping the "ill-advised net migration target" altogether, significantly loosening work visa controls, and completely unrestricted access for foreign students. Public hostility should be assuaged with increased state support for integration measures such as the "Migration Impact Fund". The Institute agrees with the "hostile environment" approach, so long as this targets "illegals" rather than useful workers – however, they complain about business being expected to do police work for free, and call for increased funding of Immigration Enforcement.

The Confederation of British Industry (CBI)'s [submission](#)[108] includes setting out four "[Business priorities for a new migration system](#)"[109].

*"Clear priorities emerged when we asked businesses what they wanted to see from a future migration system. Access to labour to fill labour shortages, a system that is responsive to economic need and access to skilled workers topped the list [...] both labour and skills migration is required by business."*

And the CBI makes clear this is "not just a skills issue". With the unemployment rate in the UK at an 11 year low, many industries are struggling to recruit low wage "unskilled" workers too.

*"some areas of the labour market, such as the care sector, horticulture and construction are struggling to find and retain the volume of workers to fill current vacancies. The care sector is facing a shortfall of 200,000 workers by the end of this Parliament, while a survey conducted by the National Farmers Union indicated that employers in the horticulture sector were already facing a labour shortage that employers anticipate worsening by 2018."*

The other key area is foreign students, with the CBI also complaining about government moves in recent years to limit numbers. *"The UK university sector is a critical sector for national prosperity. The value of international students to the UK is estimated to be £7bn, supporting over 130,000 jobs."*

The CBI recognises public hostility, but suggests politicians can help overcoming this by dropping the headline emphasis on "net migration" levels. "Neither businesses nor the public consider migrants to the UK to be a homogenous group." And people are less hostile when migrants are framed as valuable workers – including carers and builders as well as highly skilled professionals.

But perhaps the clearest statement of all comes from London First, a lobby group representing big City banks and other London-centred businesses. Its [Immigration Proposal](#)[110] advocates a number of liberalising measures including: seasonal and short-term work visas for unskilled labour; lower salary thresholds for "skilled" migrant visas; students counted as "visitors" rather than migrants; and "unrestricted entry" for "exceptional talent". But the same document also calls for "robust enforcement to clampdown on illegal activity, overstaying and low value migration".

To sum up, the main business lobbies have a clear and united message on migration. They disapprove of the post-Blair moves by both parties to cut overall numbers. They want easier entry for economically valuable migrants. But they have no problems with a "clampdown" on "low value" migrants – although they don't want to pay for it.

### 7.3 profiting from illegality?

Beyond appeasing "public opinion", is there also a business case for chasing illegals?

First of all, there are some businesses who directly gain from the existence of a two tier workforce in which some workers' wages are pushed down by what [Shahram Khosravi](#)[111] calls the "illegal discount". However, these are not the big corporations who wield media-political power. Big corporations do widely use "illegal" labour, but only through chains of contracts and sub-contracts that keep their hands "clean".  As analysed in our [_"Snitches, Stings and Leaks" report_](#)[112] on

workplace raids, undocumented office cleaners or factory hands will be directly employed by gangmasters or fly-by-night agencies well down the chain – and these have little political clout.

Do the much more powerful ultimate employers gain from the existence of a second-tier illegal workforce? No doubt. But we expect such gains are not significantl in the scale of these corporates' accounts, and so will not play a major role in decisions about immigration lobbying.

In short, what these bosses are aware of is that their need for relatively open labour marks runs against "public hostility". For them, again, Immigration Enforcement is a necessary spectacle. So long as it only bothers "low value" migrants, it makes no real business difference either way.

### 7.4 goods flows

There are some more specific business segments whose profits are directly bound up with border control. One is the transport industry. For example, as the Calais Research Network has documented, [Eurotunnel](113), the Boulogne-Calais [Port company](114), and [freight industry](115) alliances have all been major players in the recent escalation of security at the UK-France border.

For transport business, immigration control presents a certain dilemma. On the one hand, their whole business is based on goods containers flowing fast and with minimal interruption. They are not interested in free movement of humans, only of goods – but it isn't easy to keep the two separate. Every security check holds up traffic and so costs money. The ideal solution would be fully open borders, or at least minimum controls.

On the other hand, companies of course know that they don't exist in a borderless world. If humans are being blocked, this blockage should be as effective as possible – while interfering as little as possible with the flow of transport. In Calais, transport businesses lobbied for ever tougher measures to build fences, station police, and clear migrant camps, and for government funding of private security.

### 7.5 border profiteers

Another group of businesses directly profit by winning contracts to provide security guards, run the detention centres, sell the drones and tear gas and x-ray scanners, maintain ID databases, etc. There is no doubt that these "border profiteers" have gained substantially from the escalation of anti-migrant policies. But have they actually influenced these policies?

Firstly, this interest group is considerably smaller than the general business interest in labour migration. While the industry is growing, it is much smaller than the use of migrant labour by finance, agriculture, construction, education and other major industries.

However, as we have been arguing, immigration control isn't about "controlling" the overall flows of immigrants at all, but at making spectacles of control directed at small scapegoat groups. In this context, the two interests are not at odds. There is no reason why corporations can't profit both ways: from a cheap migrant labour supply overall; and from helping target a few scapegoats in particular. In fact, this is exactly what we see where companies like G4S, Mitie or Serco win contracts to lock up "illegal" migrants in detention – then hire other migrants to work as their guards.

In the UK, we are doubtful that active lobbying by border profiteers exerts significant influence on the overall direction of immigration enforcement. One clear example of – unsuccessful – pro-detention contractor lobbying involves the charity Barnardo's. In 2016, the government closed down Cedars, its small detention centre for families with children, as the family units were "under-used". Barnardo's lobbied MPs for Cedar's to be kept open, including issuing a report[116] arguing that Cedars was "an example of good practice" which "should not be lost".

There are more signs of contractor influence in EU border policy – particularly around the militarised responses to the "refugee crisis". The 2016 report Border Wars[117] by Mark Akkerman documented the scale of the industry being built to securitise "Fortress Europe", including the role of major arms companies who see this as a valuable new market. Akkerman argues that these corporations are also pro-active in shaping EU-wide political agenda:

*"The arms and security industry helps shape European border security policy through lobbying, through its regular interactions with EU's boder institutions and through its shaping of research policy. The European Organisation for Security (EOS), which includes Thales, Finmecannica and Airbus has been most active in lobbying for increased border security. Many of its proposals, such as its push to set up a cross European border security agency have eventually ended up as policy – see for example the transformation of Frontex into the European Border and Coastguard Agency (EBCG)."*

### 7.6 campaigning media

As we noted in the last section, some of the UK's most influential media outlets actively campaign for anti-migrant policies. Why do the media barons push these positions against other business interests – and perhaps even against their own personal views, as may be the case for Murdoch himself? In the last section, we argued that media barons may gain not only in audience, but also in political leverage, by adopting sensationalist and populist positions. And again, if the resulting policies are limited to affect just "low value" scapegoats, there is not too much threat to broader business interests.

### 7.7 agitators

While many Big Business leaders are "pro-immigration", this is certainly not true of all. Not all rely on migrant labour. And business leaders are not driven only by the profit motive: some may be strongly anti-migrant out of personal conviction. So just as there are billionaires who give their money to liberal charities, there are others who use their wealth and power to back right-wing causes – the "bad boys of Brexit"[118] being a notable recent example. We will look at the role of the "populist" voices they back in the next section.

### Summary

Overall, Big Business is "pro immigration" – in the sense of desiring minimal bureaucratic interference with the ability to import labour. This is clearly evident in lobbying reports from major business associations such as the CBI, IoD, or London First. Some business sectors clearly profit from immigration controls – including those using discounted "illegal" labour, as well as Border Profiteers who provide the staff and infrastructure to harass migrants. But these are minority interests.

At the same time, Big Business is well aware of "public hostility" to free movement. It thus happily encourages politicians to launch spectacular attacks on "low value" scapegoat groups. These attacks are profitable for some corporations, and don't hurt the major labour flows relied on by many others.

# 8. Agitators

So far we have looked at the "mainstream" – big parties, big press, big business behind them. But we've also kept bumping into a cast of smaller players with more extreme anti-migrant views. Sometimes these can punch far above their weight in terms of power to influence immigration politics.

We will look at two main kinds of "agitators", or actors who promote and spread more extreme views. The first are political parties, from the National Front to UKIP. The second are propaganda outlets which don't compete for votes themselves, but produce and spread ideas. Under this category we include right-wing think tanks such as Migration Watch, and "new media" platforms such as Breitbart. Although in the UK, the loudest demagogues are housed in the bosom of the "mainstream" press.

## 8.1 far-right parties and mainstreaming

Over decades of UK politics, anti-migrant policies have often begun as fringe positions advocated by small right-wing parties, before becoming adopted by centrist politicians.

In 1968, after Conservative minister Enoch Powell made his infamous "rivers of blood speech"[119], he was condemned by the party's leadership and thrown out of the shadow cabinet. Ten years on, Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher in a 1978 ITV interview[120] opined: "people are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture." As Daniel Trilling[121] recounts, "Thatcher brought Powell's ideas back into the heart of Conservative politics, as part of a wider nationalist project that grasped the narrative of imperial decline [...] and turned it around, promising voters that she would make Britain "great" again."

Here we have a classic example of what writers such as Aristotle Kallis[122] and Paul Stocker[123] call the "mainstreaming" of ideas initially pushed by the far-right. What had happened between 1968 and 1978 was the rise of the fascist National Front, with growing electoral successes in the early 1970s as well as a notable street presence. After Thatcher's Conservative leadership victory in 1975, the party adopted much more open anti-migrant policies. Soon after the "swamping" interview, the Conservatives jumped to a poll lead over Labour, and won the 1979 election with a landslide. The NF vote share collapsed to 1.3%[124] (from 3.4% in 1974), and the party became an irrelevance.

In 2002, Labour home secretary David Blunkett was the one talking of "swamping"[125] – this time by asylum-seekers. As discussed above, Labour's asylum clampdown was tied closely to media campaigns. But the growth of the NF's successor, the far-right British National Party, was another intertwined factor. Daniel Trilling documents how all main parties, including the Labour government, adopted BNP language and positioning in the early 2000s, after the BNP capitalised on the 2001 race riots[126] with local election successes.

Labour's line of response was set at a meeting a month after the May 2002 local elections, according to Nigel Copsey and David Renton[127], where senior strategists including pollster Philip Gould warned Blair that thousands of "angry young working-class men" could switch to the BNP.

Further warning signs came from the success of Jörg Haider's Freedom Party in Austria, and the continuing rise of the Front National in France. Trilling writes:

*"New Labour was in thrall to triangulation, the strategy which had helped the party defeat the Conservatives by occupying the political space normally held by the right, pushing them further away from the centre. What would it mean to "occupy" the space held by fascists? […] This time, Gould advised, the party should embrace voters' concerns on immigration and asylum."*

The BNP's electoral challenge peaked in 2009, when it won nearly one million votes in European elections. That same year, Gordon Brown was campaigning on British Jobs for British workers[128] – a slogan that can be traced back to Oswald Moseley in 1937[129].

However, BNP support collapsed shortly after, until within a few years it was no longer even registered as a political party. While infighting played a part, the main reason for its decline was mass switching of support to UKIP – in 2014, Nigel Farage proclaimed proudly that his party had taken a third of BNP votes[130]. Less partisan research[131] confirms substantial overlap between UKIP and BNP support bases. UKIP managed to pick up much of the BNP's anxious "white working class" demographic, whilst also adding a more middle class Mail-reader segment the BNP couldn't reach.

Perhaps the ultimate example of "mainstreaming", of course, is the Brexit referendum itself. In 1997, multi-millionaire James Goldsmith's Referendum Party[132] was a laughing stock; in 2015, UKIP picked up 3.9 million votes. More significantly, it had pushed the Conservative Party into adopting its landmark policy as an election pledge, leading to the referendum vote. Meanwhile, as internet commenters[133] have pointed out, much of Teresa May's 2017 Conservative manifesto seems to lift point-by-point from the BNP's in 2005.

Of course, not all far-right policies become "mainstreamed". What explains why some are? Here are three factors to consider:

**(i) electoral challenge**

Ideas may be promoted by far-right parties fighting elections. If centrist parties start to feel that these extremists represent a threat, they may adopt versions of their policies in order to "neutralise" the threat – reducing the challenger's "differentiation". We looked at how this works in Section 3 above, discussing Labour's response to UKIP ahead of 2015. Labour was pushed to act when it identified a UKIP threat to significant numbers of seats. This doesn't have to mean the challenger threatens to actually win seats – just that they could do well enough to "split the vote". Thus even a small party threatening to win, say, 10% of the vote in certain key marginal seats, can be a significant danger and require neutralisation.

**(ii) threat of unrest**

Another possible factor pushing mainstream parties, particularly those in government, is fear of unrest on the streets. The National Front in the 1970s combined both an electoral programme and street mobilisation, with a strategy involving mass demonstrations often held in inner city areas then at the frontline of demographic change. These demonstrations deliberately provoked clashes and riots, which helped create media hysteria surrounding not only the Front but at the immigration issue more generally. Similarly in the early 2000s, BNP organisers both politically positioned

around, and sought to instigate, street unrest in areas such as Oldham and Burnley. In the 2010s, far-right street mobilisation was roused again by the English Defence League.

Throughout history, riot and insurrection – or the threat of them –  have been paramount causes of political and social change. Although the UK is one of the world's least unruly places, even now politicians can still panic at the thought of unrest – as, e.g., Gordon Brown considering "troops on the streets"[134] following the Credit Crunch. Have governments reacted not only to the threat of losing votes, but also to the possibility of riots escalating into "race war"? We haven't seen evidence of this, but wouldn't write off the idea out of hand.

**(iii) media amplification**

Finally, there is a long tradition in the UK of "mainstream" media picking up and spreading views from the far-right – both by reporting on far-right politicians' statements and actions, and also just making using the same ideas and rhetorics in their own voices. We will look at this point more below.

**8.2 culture shift: hate preachers and think-tanks**

Far-right political parties are certainly not the only actors pushing extreme anti-migrant views. They also come from propagandists unattached to electoral or "street" parties. A few notable types include:

- **Think tanks.** In the US, there is a legion of well-funded think tanks and "institutes" dedicated to developing and spreading anti-migration arguments. In the UK, while a number of generalist right-wing think tanks occasionally work on migration, there is one pre-eminent player: Migration Watch[135]. This is a small research outfit founded in 2001 by Lord (Andrew) Green of Deddington, a former ambassador to Saudi Arabia, and eugenicist professor David Coleman[136]. It has strong parliamentary connections, managing an outfit called the "Cross Party Group on Balanced Migration"[137], which unites mainly Tory and DUP right-wing MPs with a few "blue Labour" fellow travellers. It presents itself as "independent", and publishes regular reports about the damaging effects of migration, which are widely quoted and used by media and politicians.

- **Right wing media platforms.** Fascist magazines and websites come and go. More recently, we are also seeing a new generation of "alt right" platforms spreading from across the Atlantic, or inspired by their American counterparts. Breitbart UK is one of the most notable.

- **Individual commentators.** An assortment of rabid right shock jocks and scribblers have made their name ranting against migrants and other hate figures. Many of these have homes within the mainstream right-wing media, rather than "alt" outlets – until they go too far and may have to relocate, as with the sackings of[138] Katie Hopkins'

How do these agitators disseminate their ideas? We can think about a number of channels:

- **Local distribution.** The traditional methods of distributing local leaflets and news-sheets, as well as posters, graffiti, or actually talking to people, have not altogether died. These communication methods reach only reach small audiences – but they may be dense

"ecologies of ideas", and ones which are particularly susceptible. E.g., targeted far-right local propaganda in towns like Oldham was important in building anti-migrant attitudes there in the early 2000s, before national media paid attention. Effective local propaganda requires ongoing dedication; there are lone individuals who bash at it for years, but often it requires organisations such as political parties.

- **Web networks.** Dedicated "keyboard warriors" may reach well beyond their local areas on internet forums, social media, blogs, etc. More sophisticated outfits can spread ideas widely through internet channels. Often the challenge is to break out of relatively segregated "bubbles", micro-ecologies of web users who are already largely on side. Money certainly helps, e.g., by buying social media rankings. Internet propaganda may reach different, often younger, audiences than printed speech. The internet is increasingly the primary channel for the new waves of "alt right"-style propaganda.

- **Mass media amplification.** But for the moment, the main channel remains mainstream media. In the UK, to a greater degree than other European countries, there is a close symbiosis between far-right agitators and major media outfits.

As discussed in Section 6, Big Media generally support "centre right" establishment parties, and the bulk of their political outlooks do not stray from mainstream neoliberalism. None of them – yet – is "fascist". But, particularly on immigration, they help broadcast extreme right views and hate speech. Mainstream media typically present far-right sources in a number of different ways:

**Identified fascists – are given a platform but with condemnation.** These days recognised fascists are universally condemned, even by the right wing press. For example, one well-known Sun headline parsed the BNP as "Bloody Nasty People". But this doesn't stop them being given extensive coverage, their views quoted and discussed. Right wing campaigning media will typically argue that, while fascism is a historical throwback, their views on immigration are not all so wrong. More liberal media may abhor their views – but still, they need to be "listened to" because they express "genuine" popular feeling. The BBC first invited[139] Nick Griffin on the Today programme in 2001 to talk about the Oldham riots, and in 2009 he made a highly controversial Question Time appearance[140]. After 2010, UKIP became a regular feature[141] on the show. Although UKIP share many policies and rhetorics with the BNP, they do not have the baggage of a fascist past, and so are treated as a small mainstream party.

**"Unaligned" hate preachers – are given free rein.** Hopkins, Littlejohn, et al, are given leading column space and air time in right wing media. Their views are more extreme than their media outlets' general lines, but are printed unredacted. While their statements on migration are often indistinguishable from those made by recognised fascist groups, they can be presented as "unaligned" voices of "common sense", or as part of "mainstream conservatism".

**Think tanks and academics – are treated as independent sources.** Think tanks are usually presented as respectable information sources, without discussion of political agendas or financial backers. Migration Watch's self-description as "independent and non-political" is taken at face value. After all, it is headed by a Lord with numerous well-connected establishment patrons – and is also known for threatening law suits against anyone linking it to fascism. (The Mirror apologised and paid damages in 2007 for comparing Green and to the Nazi Party and the "Ku Klux Klan"[142]).

Research on [powerbase](#)[143] shows that by December 2017 Migration Watch had been directly cited in 2365 newspaper articles. In some cases, articles are just [direct cut and paste](#)[144] jobs from MW press releases.

More than half of citations were in the Mail and Sunday Mail, Express group papers, or Murdoch press. But the think tank is also a regular go-to [source for the BBC](#)[145], with Lord Green making numerous appearances on Newsnight and other programmes. BBC reports equally tend to present the group simply as "the think tank Migration Watch". As Ian Dunt of politics.co.uk says [writes](#)[146]:

*"The relationship between Migration Watch and the press is basically that of a conveyer belt. They release an alarming report about how many migrants are coming to the UK, or how much they cost UK taxpayers, and the press treats it like some respectable piece of academic research."*

## 8.3 Conclusion: shifting the window

What goals do far-right agitators pursue? No doubt many are largely driven by rage, resentment, craving for notoriety, and in some cases fantasies about a 21st century Fourth Reich. But rightist goals can also be framed in more realistic, strategic – and dangerous – ways.

Andrew Breitbart, founder of the [Breitbart News Network](#)[147], is credited with a key slogan of today's "alt-right": "[politics is downstream of culture](#)"[148]. "Culture" comes first: ideas, stories, values, beliefs, ways of life, developed and spread through textbooks, movies, songs, rumours, trends, internet "memes", and every other kind of human communication. "Politics", in the narrower sense of politicians competing for state power through elections or other means, always follows behind. As Lynton Crosby puts it, politics is about politicians trying to tell stories that "are in touch with what matters to you and relate to the life you lead or the hopes [or fears] you have for your life." So politicians have to draw on the stories and values that are "out there" in "the culture". The implication: if you can shift culture, you shift politics.

This point chimes particularly well in the world of newsfeeds and social media that spawns the alt-right. Previously, culture was something slow moving and intangible. Now you can watch culture wars unfold in speeded-up real time, as hashtags trend, memes evolve, users are herded to rally and attack on multiple tabs on the screen in front of you.

Of course, there is nothing new in the basic idea. For example, we can see a similar tendency of the right in the think tanks and research institutes that championed neoliberal economics. Alt right propagandists such as Breitbart's successor Steve Bannon boast of having prepared the cultural ground for Trump's political victory. Similarly, it is argued, the likes of Milton Friedman or the UK's Institute for Economic Affairs (IEA) cleared the way for the ultra-free market policies of Reagan and Thatcher. As Richard Cockett documents in the book *[Thinking the Unthinkable](#)[149]*, this "anti-collectivist counter-revolution" involved almost fifty years of committed propaganda and lobbying before it paid off in government. In the internet age, today's right wing propagandists probably expect faster returns.

One popular formulation of this idea is the [Overton Window](#)[150], named after Joseph Overton of a US free market think tank called the Mackinac Center. There are many possible policies – for example, everything from "no borders" to "shoot all migrants on sight". But only a certain "window" of these are "politically acceptable options". As Mackinac's Joseph Lehman [explains](#)[151]: the window "is

primarily defined […] by what [politicians] believe they can support and still win re-election." And this is not defined by politicians themselves, but by what Breitbart would call culture.

*"Many believe that politicians move the window, but that's actually rare. In our understanding, politicians typically don't determine what is politically acceptable; more often they react to it and validate it. Generally speaking, policy change follows political change, which itself follows social change."*

The role of a think tank, then, is to "shift the window":

*"Since commonly held ideas, attitudes and presumptions frame what is politically possible and create the "window," a change in the opinions held by politicians and the people in general will shift it. Move the window of what is politically possible and those policies previously impractical can become the next great popular and legislative rage."*

Or as Friedman himself could [finally write in 1982](#)[152]: *"That, I believe, is our basic function: to develop alternatives to existing policies, to keep them alive and available until the politically impossible becomes politically inevitable."*

But just how do you shift the window? Here it may be worth noting some points of similarity, and of difference, between yesterday's think tank neoliberals and today's online alt right.

- **Commitment.** They may start out small, but they have passion and dedication, they keep at it. Our hunch is that, unlike many centrist politicians, people like Friedman or Breitbart actually believe in the ideas they espouse.

- **Beyond organisation.** Neither neoliberals or the alt-right seem to have loyalty to particular parties or other organisations. It is about power – but in terms of often unseen influence rather than winning formal positions.

- **Resonance.** There are audiences, if only small at first, with whom their ideas will resonate. They chime with people's hopes, fears, needs, identities.

- **Funding.** They have rich backers: both think tanks and big websites need funds.

- **Connections.** They may present themselves as "outsiders" going up against "liberal elites", but in fact they are very well connected to establishment figures.

- **Amplification.** They thrive when mainstream media "amplifies" their messages, giving them coverage and attention – even if this coverage is negatively labelled.

- **Channels.** Perhaps the key difference: the think tanks' target audience is largely mainstream media and political elites. They seek to spread their ideas into existing elite ecologies of ideas. The alt right, at least in part, takes a different tack, because the internet gives it new communication channels. It can bypass big media and spread ideas directly into different ecosystems, including those of "dispossessed" groups. This does not mean that it doesn't simultaneously thrive off mainstream media attention. But it signposts an important new development –  which deserves more attention than we can give it in this report.

# 9. Idea ecologies

At several points in this report we have found it useful to think about "ecologies of ideas". This concept emphasises that we are all creators, transmitters and receivers of ideas, which constantly shape the worlds around us – though certainly some people have much more power than others to spread their ideas. The term itself is adapted from Gregory Bateson[153], by way of Felix Guattari[154]: *"there is an ecology of bad ideas, just as there is an ecology of weeds."*

But there is not just one environment of ideas, there are many. Geography, technology, language, education, ideology, and more forces, create walls that separate our idea ecologies – and bridges that connect them. To help bring together the ideas of this report, we will mention a number of important idea ecologies. This is a gross oversimplification – but less of one than talking about "the public".

***Elite sphere.*** Politicians and media occupy a closely connected, dense micro-ecology, sharing ideas, values and projects. Their sphere also overlaps significantly with the world of business elites and the super-rich. This sphere involves less than 1% of the population.

***Anti-migrant target publics.*** We looked at two main target demographics of migration media-politics:

- Working class white people on the cutting edge of the precarious economy, often older, particularly in impoverished post-industrial areas. The traditional Labour voters targeted by UKIP.

- Middle class white people, particularly pensioners and older people who own their own homes, often living in more comfortable suburbs or towns. The traditional Conservative voters targeted by UKIP.

These groups are quite separate from the ruling elites. But their idea ecosystems are bridged through media (they are main consumers of newspapers and other mainstream media) and politics (they are important voters). These spheres involve maybe around 20% of the population.

***Liberal sphere***. Mainly urban middle class people, with leading roles played by NGOs, activist groups, academics and other commentators, circulating ideas through "quality" sections of mainstream media and internet. This sphere has strong overlapping connections with the elite sphere.

***Migrant communities.*** Mainly working class migrants, who may interact through dense interpersonal and community media networks, but are often separated from other ecologies, and from each other, by barriers of language and culture.

***Other worlds.*** Finally, many people, perhaps most people, are not strongly rooted in any of these eco-systems – though few of us can altogether escape their influence. Many people do not have strong anti-migrant or liberal views, and are not regular consumers of "popular", "quality", or "community" media. Many people are not engaged with politics at all. Others are, but do not view immigration as an important issue either way.

The elite sphere is where we find the lead actors of immigration media-politics. This is a game played by these politicians, business and media leaders, as they jostle for power and position. For example, politicians mobilise migration scares to compete for votes with other parties, or compete for attention and leadership positions against colleagues within their own party. Media bosses use anti-migrant campaigns to grab audience share from each other, or to wield influence over politicians.

But elites cannot play this game all alone. First of all, they need the target publics. Politicians and media bosses target these key demographics to win marginal seats, boost sales figures, or just position amongst themselves using the threat of doing so. These elites are far from the lives of the two target public groupings, and yet they have a strong and unusual relationship. The relationship is two-way. Media-politicians direct a lot of attention at these groups, actively working to shape their views. And media-politicians are anxiously focused on these groups, competing for their support as voters and audiences.

Secondly, media-politicians also interact with the liberal sphere. Indeed, the two ecologies have strong personal and cultural relations. Many business, political and media leaders emerge from, and remain close to, liberal worlds; while educated liberals are likely to believe in representative democracy and take an interest in political affairs. More strategically, mainstream politicians also need to keep their (small l) liberal voter bases on side. This does not stop them from bouts of liberal-bashing – as part of their messaging to target publics – but sets boundaries on acceptable rhetoric and policy.

People active in the liberal sphere may often be subject to a kind of delusional shortsightedness, forgetting that there are whole other worlds of life and ideas beyond, and so mistaking liberal media as the forum for a general "public debate". But more realistically, we can perhaps best think of liberal debate as a backstop or limiting force on elites' interaction with target publics. Of course, the limits are always liable to shift.

There is much less interaction between elite interests and migrant communities. There are some clear exceptions – e.g., where established migrant communities provide voter bases, particularly for Labour. But in many contexts migrant voices can be ignored – unless they become angry enough to pose an actual threat to civil order.

Finally, we need to consider how migration media-politics relates to all those who are not immediately concerned with it. Here is one important way: voters who are not *now* worried about immigration may become so. The proportion of UK citizens seeing immigration as a major political issue jumped dramatically around the millennium. In other European countries, the growth of immigration as a political issue has happened even more rapidly, from a smaller starting point.

This is where we need to take account of the "agitators". In the UK, right-wing propagandists, proactively amplified by mainstream media platforms, have had rapid success in moving immigration from a fringe to a mainstream story. Anti-migrant propaganda does not only seek to mobilise those who already believe, but to spread its narratives of anxiety and control to wider audiences.

# 10. Anxiety Engine

In the post-industrialised countries, anxiety is the disease of our time. In [NHS England's mental health surveys](#)[155], "generalised anxiety disorder" is the most common mental health diagnosis, affecting some 6% of the population. The figures increase with each survey. With post traumatic stress disorders (PTSD), phobias, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) and "panic disorder", these conditions affect at least one in ten adults at any time. Perhaps many more people experience anxiety without fitting the medical diagnoses.

Anxiety is where the "fight or flight" mechanism, our basic mind-body response to danger, gets stuck in on mode. Muscles are tensed to hit or run, blood pumps fast, senses and thoughts scan the environment for threats, we are primed for action. But there is no action, no clash, just continual new stimuli, new triggers, and the tension is not released. Fear becomes a constant background.

Trying to grasp this uncanny state, to explain the sense of peril, the anxious mind seeks out and invents threats. You might worry that you're getting ill or going mad, that attackers hide behind the corner, your hair looks bad, your colleagues are laughing at you, your partner is cheating on you, you left the gas on and your house is burning down. It doesn't matter: as each worry is disproved, another one replaces it. Addressing particular worries doesn't remove the anxiety, and may even feed it, as we get caught in vicious circles chasing imaginary threats, like a dog chasing its own tail.

In some cases, we can trace anxiety back to clear histories of trauma, crushing moments when we got stuck in fear. For others, paths to anxiety may be quieter, e.g., perhaps a slow accumulation of social demands and judgements, humiliations, evasions, and self-doubts since childhood. Diagnosed anxiety disorders in our society are highest among young women, who are particularly likely to experience: often hidden everyday violence and abuse; along with intense pressure to conform to external standards; whilst being discouraged from "venting" the tension in aggressive action.

How to overcome trauma and anxiety? Once the alarm state is stuck, it's not easy to reset. Anxiety cuts us off from the world, from other people, and from ourselves, as everything around us seems hostile, a source of danger. We need to unlearn these fear patterns. We need to rebuild our relationships to the world – as a place of joy, possibility and wonder; to other people – as beings we can meet in love and solidarity; and to ourselves – as self-determining individuals with meaningful projects.

Contemporary capitalist society stands in our way. This system thrives off and feeds our anxiety. Thousands of years of civilisation have dispossessed human beings from our "natural" lives as hunter-gatherers amongst other animals and living beings. Hundreds of years of industrial capitalism and colonialism have dispossessed us from the land, traditional communities, the meaning and solidarity they held. Contemporary consumer capitalism fuels anxiety as the motor of economic growth: keep working, keep buying, keep distracting, because you are ugly, empty, unsuccessful, never good enough. Twenty-first century network capitalism plugs us into a 24/7 drip-feed of social pressure and surveillance, precarious existences built on fingerprint scans and like buttons.

**anxiety media-politics**

The economic power of anxiety was [well recognised by advertisers](#)[156] at the start of the 20th century. At the end of the 20th century, its political power came to the fore. In the UK, Tony Blair – learning lessons from Thatcher and other predecessors – was a master of anxiety politics, from manipulating panic over the Jamie Bulger case to creating fictions of "weapons of mass destruction" and the "war on terror". Anxiety politicians don't work alone, but in continual partnership with the media – as e.g., where Blair's government and The Sun coordinated in advance to plan an "asylum week" of scare stories followed by harsh policy announcements. Immigration in the UK is one of the main strands of an *anxiety media-politics*.

To actually tackle anxiety requires radical transforming our ways of thinking and living. Anxiety media-politics doesn't tackle anxiety, it feeds and directs it.

- First, it broadcasts threat-stories: tales of terror cells, paedophiles, rampaging asylum seekers, killer virus pandemics, etc. Media and politicians seek out news stories of the right kind and amplify them, or just invent stories themselves. These stories both keep anxiety aroused, and direct it onto particular targets.

- Second, it offers responses made to fail. Politicians, often working closely with media, propose measures to regain "control" of the situation. Clampdowns, tough new laws, police or soldiers on the street, extended surveillance, etc.

The control measures rarely achieve their goals. It is not actually possible for government to stop immigration. "Anti-terror" repression of local communities, or bombing campaigns abroad, only sew more anger. The "clampdown" measures are spectacles – displays of control addressed at target publics who are anxious about a particular issue. The issue returns, and the next Home Secretary will introduce a new even tougher clampdown. Even if an issue goes away – e.g., we haven't had a paedophile or virus pandemic scare for a while – others will take their place. Control measures – machine gun cops on the street, posters of shadowy brown terrorists, proliferating CCTV and fences – don't assuage but escalate the sense of threat, of a hostile environment.

**anxious target publics**

Anxiety politics targets many different people, playing on their own recurring areas of anxiety. There are threat stories for old people scared of youth crimes, parents scared for their children, workers scared for their jobs, families anxious about getting a house, everyone scared about their health etc.

Immigration anxiety is particularly intense in the two broad demographic groupings we have identified as media-politicians' main "target publics". In terms of economic position, these two demographics are very different. In terms of personal economic situations, people in the first group have much more "reason" to be anxious, while those in the second are "comfortably off". But what unites many people in these two groups is more a sense of cultural identity, of a world made meaningful in terms of tradition, nation, language, and indeed race. And a sense that this identity and meaning is under threat.

**Shows and stories**

Anxiety media politics feeds and directs anxiety. This is not "evidence based" policy-making, it is story-telling.

Effective right-wing propagandists, whether working from the "radical" fringes or the "mainstream", understand this very well. As [Lynton Crosby](#)[157] puts it, effective politics involves telling "a story about yourself, a simple story that defines what you're trying to achieve"*:*

*"I don't think people vote for policies .. but they do vote for what policies say about a candidate or a party and their values and their beliefs, and whether … they are in touch with what matters to you and relate to the life you lead or the hopes you have for your life."*

Your hopes – or your fears. In any case, the point is "making an emotional connection with people". Crosby often quotes the US political strategist Drew Weston: "in politics when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins". As he expands in [an interview at the Oxford Union](#)[158]: "ultimately it's what your policies say about your values and your beliefs, because it's emotion that makes the motivating connection with people."

In anxiety politics, two key kinds of stories come to the fore: first, stories about threats; second, stories about leaders who will step in and re-establish control with tough measures. It is not important that either the threats or the responses are "real" – though there must be some *show* of response to display toughness.

And the two kinds of stories can combine, e.g., forming the "populist" right-wing narratives making much running today. For example, as Sun editor Tony Gallagher puts it in a [New York Times interview](#)[159], Brexit "was about a combination of migration, sovereignty under the broad umbrella of taking back control, and a sense that, as a country, we were no longer able to control our destiny." Migrants and trans-national forces threaten "our country", "our destiny", our home and place of meaning. Absent a strong leader to take back control, buffoonish ones like Farage or Johnson will have to do.

The Brexit fantasy will be betrayed. No government can go against the basic interests of capital for labour and trade, which will force some washed-out deal. In any case, "we" – the target publics of little England – will never get their country back, as of course they never had it in the first place. The anxiety will not be appeased, and the engine will go on fuelling new growth, new media outlets, and new political careers.

# 11. Conclusion: thoughts for resistance

The main points of this report can be summed up in three sentences.

- Immigration media-politics is not really about controlling immigration – it's an elite power game, in which a bubble of politicians and media court and influence "public opinion" as they jostle for power.

- "Public opinion" doesn't mean all of us – it means specific target publics, minority demographics who (i) worry about immigration and (ii) are important to media-politicians as voters and media consumers.

- Immigration media-politics doesn't work with facts and arguments – but with stories and spectacles that play to these target publics' anxieties and to myths of "taking back control".

To put it another way: there is no "public debate on immigration". The idea of a public debate is a charade that obscures the reality of how power works. Right-wing politicians and propagandists, at least the clever ones, are well aware of this. They understand who they need to talk to, and how they need to talk to them.

Migrants and their supporters have less resources and need to think even more cleverly and strategically. Just who are we trying to talk to? And how? Which at the same time means thinking clearly about: what, exactly, are we aiming to achieve?

**Who?**

For example, most pro-migrant propaganda reaches small, and already friendly, audiences. A default strategy involves getting positive messages – interview comments, opinion pieces, media-focused stunts, or reports like this one – into the liberal media and left-leaning parts of facebook. They are unlikely to make ripples beyond the liberal sphere, and particularly not to reach the hostile target publics of immigration policy. They thus have minimal impact. At best, firming up liberal opinion on immigration can help maintain a defensive backstop against right-wing policy going "too far".

What alternative strategies have been tried? One approach would turn away from "debating" on immigration altogether, and focus on building resistance amongst migrant communities, and their young urban neighbours of all races. For example, if direct opposition to immigration policies such as raids on the streets can grow, these policies may become too difficult to implement, or at least less of a burden on people's lives. There are many inspiring local solidarity initiatives. But – such resistance has not spread enough to begin to challenge the "hostile environment" overall.

Another approach is to directly take on right wing propaganda amongst its own target publics – more specifically, in abandoned white working class areas. This strategy has been advocated, and carried out, by radical groups particularly in the white anti-fascist left. Again, it has had local successes where campaigners have strong local presence and so can counteract the media's "air war" with grassroots activity – but such initiatives have not spread beyond very small pockets.

There is an obvious problem whenever attempts are made to try to reach out beyond our own "base" audiences: how to overcome the massive propaganda power of the mainstream media. That must

mean bypassing media control and finding other channels to get messages to people. Can the internet really become a liberatory force that will open new channels, or is it already shut down by corporate platforms? Can we find new energy, new ways, to spread different visions at street level?

**How?**

One common strand in pro-migrant debate makes factual arguments, e.g., to debunk inflated statistics, or show that migrants actually benefit the economy and welfare state. This is ineffective because – as we can learn from Lynton Crosby – "when reason and emotion collide, emotion invariably wins".  We have seen that anti-migrant sentiment has little to do with rational concerns, or even perceptions of personal interest. Rather, anti-migrant propaganda uses fear-stories to address, and exacerbate, people's anxiety and identity crises. This anxiety cannot be answered with facts.

Another common strand in pro-migration rhetoric does use emotion, making humanitarian appeals. Here migrants are typically presented as victims, calling for our sympathy. Again, though, this approach is largely ineffective. The famous images of Aylan Kurdi caught widespread sympathy, but only for a moment. Compassion is short-lived, soon fatigued, and often be followed by resentment. Humanitarian appeals play on our emotions, but do not make a lasting "emotional connection". They invoke sympathy for distant or unknown others, but fail to tell a story that connects migration to the "life you lead" – to your own hopes and fears.

To go up against anti-migrant stories, we will need to tell new stories that are more powerful, more convincing, more true, than their anxiety narratives.

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