

# Stumbling and Mumbling

An extremist, not a fanatic

May 17, 2006

## For free immigration

The UK has a de facto open borders policy. That's one inference from the Home Office's admission that it "hasn't the faintest idea" how many illegal immigrants there are in Britain, following its inability to follow judges' recommendations that some criminals be deported.

So, here's my proposal. Why not make a virtue out of necessity, and have free migration? Here, in order of their power, are four reasons for doing so.

1. Rights. If there are such things as universal human rights, these surely encompass the right to live where you want, and to work for any employer who'd hire you. If I have a right to live in London, why should that right be denied to someone else, merely because they had the bad luck to be born elsewhere?
2. Utility. Immigration is good for us. Every time you buy a newspaper from a Pakistani, or hire a Polish plumber, you are admitting this much. Of course, in theory it's possible that this gain is mitigated by the downwards pressure on wages and job opportunities caused by the increased supply of labour. But this doesn't seem to happen in practice. This paper (pdf) by Christian Dustmann concludes:

We find little evidence of overall adverse effects of immigration on native [labour market] outcomes. If there is evidence of negative effects on employment in any group, then it is for those with intermediate education levels, but this is offset in the aggregate by positive effects on employment among the better qualified. Estimated wage effects...are if anything positive but statistically poorly determined.

There's other evidence corroborating this.

Net, then, immigration is a boon. As for its small adverse impact on the lower qualified, this is a case for either redistributive taxes or for better education - not for restricting immigration.

3. Practicality. The idea of managed immigration is just impractical - the Home Office is too incompetent. Existing policy just allows in criminals and deters the law-abiding. In abolishing the Immigration and Nationality Department, we'd save £1.5bn a year and allow in law-abiding people.

4. Culture. Free immigration would send beneficial signals. It would signal that there are some things - "controlling our borders" - that government just cannot do, and it would get away from the contemptible macho posturing to the contrary. Second, it would signal that government believes in a common humanity - that the (considerable) benefits of living in Britain should be free to all humankind.

Now, I'm not saying here that immigrants should have rights to welfare benefits. They have a liberty right to live where they like, not a claim right upon our money (ta, Norm). I suspect most hostility to immigration is based upon the failure to see this distinction.

May 17, 2006 in [Labour](#) | [Permalink](#)

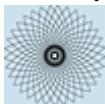
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## Comments



Abolish the Home Office. You know it makes sense.

Posted by: [Alex](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 01:50 PM](#)



The Home Office is a big and multi-faceted thing, so I was trying to think of a bit of it you ought not to abolish. I couldn't.

Posted by: [chris y](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 02:17 PM](#)



"They have a liberty right to live where they like, not a claim right upon our money. I suspect most hostility to immigration is based upon the failure to see this distinction." Nope: some of the hostility is surely based on the knowledge that vote-grubbing politicians will refrain from enforcing the distinction? Anyway, why don't they have a "claim right" on my money? The Left seems to believe that lots of people other than me have: why not furriners too?

Posted by: [dearieme](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 02:50 PM](#)



Assuming that we do not have de facto open borders, and that despite the Home Office's lack of data the existing immigration enforcement system does deter many would-be immigrants from entering the UK, how great an increase in immigration would you expect if the borders were opened to all?

Because there is a possibility that we would see a very sharp increase - one which the labour market could not absorb, and one that might cause a period of misery (both to the immigrants and natives) during an adjustment period.

I'm not sure that I agree with you that the idea of universal human rights entails the right to live anywhere, but I do buy a lot of what you say in principle - I am just worried about unanticipated consequences of putting your ideas into practise.

Say we did open the borders. Presumably immigration levels would rise (if not, what's the problem with the current arrangements?). But that couldn't go on for ever because eventually the population of the UK would start to butt up against constraints of various sorts. As the attractiveness of the UK as a destination falls, immigration rates would fall until we reached some sort of an equilibrium. But how much fun would that be? Do we really want that to happen? Given how God awful many parts of the world still are, would this imply living conditions for immigrants to the UK deteriorating to the extent that the incentive to immigrate fall, if immigration levels are ever to stabilise? I don't like the sound of this argument, but where's my mistake?\*

\*I'm giving myself 5 seconds after hitting post to spot it.

Posted by: [Luis Enrique](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 04:21 PM](#)



hmm - my mistake might involve long run and short run effects. The increased flow of immigration might be sufficiently small that the capacity of the UK would not butt up against any sorts of constraints in the short run, and in the long run other factors (perhaps economic growth in poor countries, a meteorite hitting London, or humans colonising Mars) would make the issue go away.

Posted by: [Luis Enrique](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 04:25 PM](#)



I'm guessing the hostility to immigration in the U.K. is being brought on by seeing the immigration problems in the U.S. Here, they are demanding to not only live and work here, but to become citizens and receive all the benefits and privileges that go with it; although with the exception of voting and some Welfare benefits they do receive all the benefits of a citizen without having to actually contribute to pay for them.

Posted by: [Publius](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 08:49 PM](#)



I don't recognise the existence of universal human rights; instead I recognise the right of peoples to make their own laws within their own nations.

The mere act of buying a newspaper from a Pakistani proves absolutely nothing one way or the other about the newspaper buyer's opinion of immigration - the Pakistani might have undercut everyone else on the block, or the Brits might have retired from shopkeeping when their children became solicitors.

You write that "The idea of managed immigration is just impractical - the Home Office is too incompetent"; an interesting if highly amoral argument. Can we not make the Home Office more efficient? Is that not a possibility?

Sorry, why should the world be entitled to live in my country? Why? Because it would make a politician look good? That would be real posturing, unlike the government's discharge of its duties to secure the boundaries of the nation, that most hated entity without which the culture cannot exist.

Posted by: [Martin](#) | [May 17, 2006 at 11:57 PM](#)



"why should the world be entitled to live in my country? Why?"

Tain't yours. Or mine. My ancestors sweated & bled to make this place fairly wealthy & comfortable, but all I do is goof at the office for a bit, pay a bit of tax, and not get caught breaking laws. I've not really contributed anything to the country and I don't think I can justify claim of ownership. And I don't think many other people have, either.

Sadly, though, unlimited immigration would encourage every rival government to "do a Castro" and empty all their prisons and loony bins on our doorstep.

Posted by: [dave heasman](#) | [May 18, 2006 at 10:23 AM](#)



I'm greatly attracted by the idea of unlimited immigration, not least because it would mean the Free Market enthusiasts actually being faced with the consequences of what they preach (free movement of goods, services and labour). I have two reservations about it -- apart of course from the knowledge that it's politically equivalent to recommending that foreign offenders should be deported to the moon:

(1) I don't see how in practice immigrants allowed to enter, settle, and work in this or any other country could be prohibited from drawing welfare benefits. Would you really see their children starve than allow them to draw unemployment benefit, for example? Or allow them to die of the first disease they caught rather than let them use the NHS (UK only!)? What would happen to them when they retire or become too old to work? No state pension? Come off it, Priestley. Anyway, on what principle is this mean-minded prohibition to be based? Countless studies, including one I conducted myself years ago when on a mid-career economics course at Oxford, have shown that even allowing for their consumption of social service benefits, immigrants are net contributors to the economy on a substantial scale, partly of course because we don't have to pay for their education or, often, their training, nor for their health care as children, and because on average they are healthier and able to work harder than the average of the native-born population.

(2) I'm not convinced that Britain could absorb a massive increase in immigration without huge social disruption and a lot of human misery unless all or most other western developed countries were to open their borders to uncontrolled immigration at roughly the same time too. Back to the moon, alas.

Brian

<http://www.barder.com/ephems/>

Posted by: [BrianB](#) | [May 18, 2006 at 04:59 PM](#)



Hello Chris,

I agree with the principle, but in practice, given the enormous potential for screw-ups, even this seemingly simple solution can turn into an animal. Needless to say that the current system is indeed deterring law-abiding, hard working people and allowing for hard criminals because only they have the will to become illegal immigrants. Your suggestion is far better than the current system.

As usual on this topic, someone manages to say something completely arbitrary (ignorance is quite pervasive). By this I refer to Dave Heasman. He said:

"Why should the world be entitled to live in my country?" and he boldly adds "My ancestors sweated & bled to make this place fairly wealthy & comfortable, but all I do is goof at the office for a bit, pay a bit of tax, and not get caught breaking laws".

To this I say, which ancestors? Somewhere along the line, EVERYONE has an ancestor that has sweated blood for the "economy".

...And secondly, only chavs that have built livelihoods out of playing the system exhibit a sort of nationalism that lingers on insecurity about what it means for the welfare system. The rest of us hard working people couldn't give a damn because I don't see and will not see a welfare system that justifies the taxes that I pay.

Posted by: [Curious](#) | [May 18, 2006 at 05:31 PM](#)



I have been moved away from the "unlimited immigration" idea by actually observing the effects of the mass migration that we currently have. Not every culture in the world is compatible. Not every human being has the same values. This is (like so many "too clever by half" solutions) not an economic problem, but one of human culture. Mass migration leads us to the Balkans, and not to a utopia.

Posted by: Steve Masonry | [May 20, 2006 at 07:49 AM](#)



I think others have noted the problems with this idea. Without international agreement and reductions in inequality worldwide, a single country opening its borders would be impractical. I want to see free movement of people, it is a wonderful principle. But like reducing greenhouse gases it needs international co-operation to be achieved and to be fair.

I agree that levels of current UK immigration are fine and could even be increased, but without every developed country playing the same game, it would mean millions coming in too short a period. This would be beyond our infrastructure to withstand.

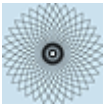
The other problem I have is this idea of second class citizens. Any person who lives here should enjoy FULL rights. In a way it is the indigenous people who deserve less support, they have already cost taxpayers a fortune to educate through their childhood.

Posted by: [Neil Harding](#) | [May 23, 2006 at 03:15 AM](#)



I want a immigration in your contry

Posted by: mohammed Salim | [May 25, 2006 at 12:20 PM](#)



am uganda born in uganda ,am astudent from acertain university in uganda ,all my parents died and are servived with two person ,me and my elder sister ,our father was aRwandese ,so am requesting if there is free chance of coming to uk sothat i can continue with abachelor ,s degree in business admistration i wanted but iam financialy not stable,i will be grateful for your possitive response  
God bless your decision

kasajja Gastavas Benard

Posted by: kasajja Gastavas Benard | [December 13, 2006 at 11:26 AM](#)



I AM DAVID MASIH S/O YOUSAF MASIH

I,M CHRISTIAN,WANT TO GET UK IMMGRATION,PLZ HELP ME.I,M FRM PAKISTAN

Posted by: DAVID MASIH S/O YOUSAF MASIH | [September 25, 2007 at 04:07 PM](#)

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