



**Public Attitudes on Immigration: The United Kingdom  
in an International Context**

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## I. Introduction

For the past decade, the Barrow Cadbury Trust has been committed to promoting a constructive and evidence-based debate on migration.<sup>1</sup> Most recently, the Trust contributed to *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration*, an internationally comparative poll on attitudes to immigration and integration.<sup>2</sup> This short paper seeks to capture some of its key findings and the potential implications for the policy debate in the United Kingdom, drawing on so-far unpublished research from the inaugural 2008 poll.

## II. Public Attitudes

Public opinion on migration remains complex, paradoxical, and varied, as highlighted by the vast array of research and polling that has been undertaken on the subject to date. By most accounts, immigration has become a key public concern in the United States, United Kingdom, and throughout Europe in recent years and this trend shows little sign of abating.

Conclusive evidence on UK attitudes comes from the *British Social Attitudes Survey*, which has tracked public attitudes since 1983. The trend over the course of the Labour Party's administration is one of rising resentment: in 1995 approximately two-thirds of the population believed the numbers of immigrants should be reduced, a proportion that rose to three-quarters by 2003, and has remained more or less constant ever since.<sup>3</sup> Other surveys confirm widespread hostility<sup>4</sup> and the *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* poll appears to show that immigration concerns the British more than other Europeans or Americans.

It is important to note that coverage of migration-related issues is not a recent phenomenon. Indeed, immigration has been a media staple in the United Kingdom for decades, with sharp increases in the level of interest occurring periodically. However, as Ipsos MORI's work on British attitudes toward immigration highlights, anxiety in the United Kingdom has become inextricably linked to both increased inflows in recent years and a greater media focus on immigration.

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<sup>1</sup> The Barrow Cadbury Trust, as part of its migration work, has supported a wide range of voluntary and community groups. It has also funded advocacy work and research as well as various policy and academic exchanges.

<sup>2</sup> The *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* project was launched in 2008 in partnership with the German Marshall Fund of the United States, Compagnia di San Paolo, and the Lynde and Harry Bradley Foundation. One thousand respondents were surveyed in each country by TNS Opinion between August-September 2008. The views expressed in this paper are solely those of the author and do not represent those of the other funders of *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration*.

<sup>3</sup> See Lauren M. McLaren and Mark Johnson, "Understanding the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment," *British Social Attitudes* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 172; Lauren M. McLaren, "One of Us? Understanding Public Perceptions on Labour Migration in Europe" (paper for the Policy Network in partnership with the Barrow Cadbury Trust, London, May 13, 2008).

<sup>4</sup> See Shamit Sagar and Joanne Drean, *British Public Attitudes and Ethnic Minorities*. (London: Cabinet Office, 2001).

Research also indicates that the general public has a limited understanding of the issues and numbers involved.<sup>5</sup> Notions of fairness, multiculturalism, and tolerance are broadly appealing but the current debate is framed in such a way that immigration is often presented as a phenomenon which has led to rapid, unexpected change and widespread uncertainty.

Ipsos MORI's findings in relation to the influence of the print media are striking. While correlation should not be confused with causation, the fact that public perceptions are significantly influenced by "negative" tabloid coverage is of particular concern in light of the reality that newspaper readership is high in the United Kingdom in comparison with other European countries and the United States. In addition, newspapers tend to have more of an agenda-setting function than television and radio programs.<sup>6</sup>

This is perhaps compounded by the fact that national newspapers are more popular in the United Kingdom than elsewhere in Europe, where regional publications are more widely read. These variables may partly explain why Ipsos MORI's polling indicates that immigration is generally viewed as a problem nationally but that only a small percentage of the British public considers that immigration has done more to create problems in their local neighborhoods.

It would be overly simplistic to argue that public perceptions are wholly shaped by the media, particularly in disadvantaged communities directly affected by the arrival of immigrants. However, emotive media coverage of the British government's alleged inability to control immigration certainly plays a role in reinforcing the dominant attitude that inward migration is a burden to the United Kingdom and undoubtedly underlies Ipsos MORI's findings that there is overwhelming support for tougher immigration policies.

An additional complexity is that — given the well-documented deficiencies of immigration statistics — it is difficult to ascertain whether the British government is actually controlling the borders adequately and hence to determine the extent to which the media is accurately informing the debate on the alleged laxity of border controls.

In turn, policy responses frequently appear to be predicated upon poll findings that a sizable proportion of the British public is hostile to the current level of immigration — prompting politicians to tout increasingly restrictive measures which in themselves reinforce the perception that immigration is a problem for the country. This vicious circle stigmatizes migrants of all types and also engenders an approach to migration policy which is reactive and overly narrow in focus. The results of *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* and Ipsos MORI's polling, both showing relatively high levels of skepticism in the United Kingdom, should be seen within this context.

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<sup>5</sup> See Miranda Lewis, *Asylum: Understanding Public Attitudes* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 2005); and Heaven Crawley, *Understanding and Changing Public Attitudes: A Review of Existing Evidence from Public Information and Communication Campaigns* (London, Diana, Princess of Wales Memorial Trust, Barrow Cadbury Trust, The Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, City Parochial Foundation, and Paul Hamlyn Foundation, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> As Ron Kaye notes: "Television news coverage tends to be fragmented and devoid of much thematic content." In "Redefining the Refugee: The UK Media Portrayal Of Asylum Seekers," *The New Migration in Europe: Social Constructions and Social Realities*, eds. Khalid Koser and Helma Lutz, p.179.

### III. Transatlantic Trends: Immigration

The results from the *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* survey confirm many of the findings from other polls, including the Ipsos MORI survey evidence presented in the paper elsewhere in this book authored by Ben Page. However, *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* differs from other surveys in some important ways. To ensure comparability, the survey posed questions rather differently from national surveys. More importantly, *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* compares attitudes in the United States and six European countries (France, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, and the United Kingdom), which allows us to consider how British public attitudes differ from those in other countries.

The following analysis of the UK results provides unpublished analysis not fully explored in the *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2008* key findings report.<sup>7</sup> It will highlight some notable particularities of the British case as well as evidence of the United Kingdom's greater convergence with the United States than its European neighbors on some issues.

A cursory glance at the topline results indicates that immigration is more divisive an issue in the United Kingdom than elsewhere — with the highest percentage of respondents (62 percent against an average of 46 percent overall) deeming immigration “more of a problem” and the lowest percentage (24 percent versus an average of 35 percent overall) viewing it as “more of an opportunity” for the country.

Immigration's political salience is also striking, with 61 percent of UK respondents saying migration policy would influence their vote, again the highest out of all the countries surveyed. In the United Kingdom, 34 percent noted that a political party's platform on immigration would influence their vote “a lot.” Only 25 percent of Americans and 9 percent of Germans responded similarly. At least four key themes emerged that are useful to policymakers:

#### Perceptions of Illegality

One crucial and underexplored variable relates to perceptions of the legality or otherwise of a country's immigrant population. Indeed, throughout the survey there appeared to be a correlation between views on the size of the unauthorized population and skepticism towards immigration more generally.

For example, respondents in France and the Netherlands were the most likely to see immigration as “an opportunity” for the country and they were also the countries where a high percentage of respondents considered that the majority of immigrants are legally entitled to stay (68 percent in the Netherlands and 60 percent in France). In contrast, slightly more than a third of those surveyed in the United Kingdom considered that *most* immigrants in the country are here *illegally* — a gross distortion of the actual situation in which less than one-sixth of Britain's immigrant population is not legally entitled to stay.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration 2008* was published in November 2008, [http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/TTI\\_2008\\_Final.pdf](http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/TTI_2008_Final.pdf).

<sup>8</sup> The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) International Migration Outlook 2008 (data for 2006) estimated the immigrant population of the United Kingdom to be 6,116,400. The number

Interestingly, respondents in all countries surveyed did not express high levels of concern about *legal* immigration, including countries often characterized as predominantly hostile to current inflows. For example, 64 percent of British respondents indicated that they were not worried about legal migration. This is lower than the 76 percent in the United States and 69 percent in Germany but nevertheless reinforces the idea that misconceptions about the extent of irregular migration in the United Kingdom underlie some skepticism towards migration more generally.

### **Permanence of Immigration**

As the global recession deepens, the issue of temporary or circular migration will undoubtedly gain prominence. Therefore it is interesting to note that against a backdrop of often emotive media coverage, toughening citizenship criteria, and an increasing emphasis on border controls and enforcement, 57 percent of British respondents considered that legal immigrants should be given the opportunity to stay permanently. In the majority of the other countries surveyed, levels of support for granting permanent residence to legal migrants were even higher — 62 percent in the United States, 66 percent in Germany, and 71 and 72 percent in Italy and France respectively.

*Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* was conducted prior to recent resurgence in protectionist sentiments, as exemplified by the January 2009 unofficial strikes in protest against the alleged displacement of British workers by an Italian contractor at the Lindsey oil refinery in Lincolnshire. The results are nonetheless surprising. They challenge the prevailing attitude within policy circles that immigration might become more palatable if somehow the general public are persuaded that immigrants are not here to stay — a wholly unrealistic assertion even if labor migration diminishes in the short term.

### **Access to Benefits and Political Participation**

*Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* also addressed what is often argued to be the most toxic of all immigration-related issues: access to social benefits. Hostility towards immigration often appears motivated by concerns over the perceived impact on public services. In the British case this is particularly true in relation to the arrival of migrants from post-accession European Union (EU) Member States in 2005.

Respondents were asked whether they would support guaranteeing legal immigrants and their families equal access to social benefits as citizens. Interestingly, in European countries with relatively generous welfare systems there was strong support for equal access to benefits: 81 percent in France, 90 percent in Italy, and 65 percent in Germany. British and American respondents were more ambivalent on this issue with 57 percent in the United Kingdom and 63 percent in the United States responding in favor of such a policy.

Further analysis of the British results shows that, surprisingly, 28 percent of respondents indicated strong support for giving access to social benefits, slightly more than the 26 percent strongly opposed. It is also relevant to note that in the United Kingdom there was higher-than-

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of irregular migrants in the United Kingdom is contested, with estimates varying between 500,000 and 1 million people.

average support for granting immigrants limited voting rights:<sup>9</sup> 68 percent compared to the poll's overall average of 64 percent.

These results should be of interest to policymakers seeking to mitigate an expected increase in community tensions during the economic downturn. Frequently, resentment towards immigrants is posited as indicative of xenophobia. However, as *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* indicates, skewed perceptions regarding the legal entitlements of migrants and the size of the unauthorized population partly underpin current hostility to recent migrants.

## Ranking Concerns

Much has been written about the impact of migration upon the economy and wider society. *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* contained a range of questions exploring public attitudes on this subject. What emerged is that those in the United Kingdom and the United States expressed the most concern about the impact of immigration upon the labor market. British and American respondents did hold some positive views regarding migrant workers. For example, only 17 percent in the United Kingdom and 9 percent in the United States disagreed with the statement that immigrants are hard workers: respondents in other European countries were much more ambivalent on this issue. However in the United Kingdom and the United States respondents were also much more likely to agree that immigrants take jobs from native workers: 52 percent of British respondents and 51 percent in the United States against an average of 37 percent overall.

In contrast — with the notable exception of France — countries in continental Europe were less concerned with economic impacts than their Anglo-American counterparts but more likely to consider that immigration would lead to an increase in crime. This means that the impact of worsening global economic conditions on the immigration debate might be more pronounced in the United States and the United Kingdom, where, arguably, the migration debate is most associated with employment and the economy. In the United Kingdom the matter is not helped by the fact that employment statistics, as compiled by the Office for National Statistics (ONS), do not disclose how many foreign-born workers are in fact British citizens who may have lived and worked in the country for decades.

This misleading distinction between “British” and foreign-born workers may have a detrimental impact upon the public debate about the United Kingdom’s workforce during the economic downturn. For example, the dominant images of the aforementioned unofficial strikes at the Lindsey oil refinery were of the Union Jack and banners bearing Prime Minister Gordon Brown’s oft-cited pledge to provide “British jobs for British workers.” However, it would be inaccurate to claim that the overall tone of the protests was overwhelmingly xenophobic. Instead much of the debate focused on the implementation of European Union (EU) directives and job insecurity more generally in light of the recession. In addition, many of those involved clearly stated that British workers should be given *equal* but not preferential treatment to their European

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<sup>9</sup> The survey asked about granting legal immigrants the right to vote in local elections.

counterparts. In one case, the BBC was compelled to apologize to one of the protesters for broadcasting his comments in a manner that made them seem racist.<sup>10</sup>

The fact that *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* shows that the British were most concerned about the impact of immigration upon the economy is certainly important in light of the recession and the risk that migrant workers will be scapegoated as unemployment rises. However, these findings should perhaps be seen within the wider context of the country's flexible labor market. In the United Kingdom there are approximately 1.2 million temporary or agency workers, a large proportion of the 3 million in the European Union overall.<sup>11</sup> The consequences of working on a temporary contract were highlighted following the news in February 2009 that 850 workers at the BMW Mini car production plant in Oxfordshire would lose their jobs. Many of the employees involved were reportedly given an hour's notice and were not entitled to redundancy pay despite having worked at the plant for years.

Although in this case migrant workers were not mentioned specifically, the reality of growing job insecurity in the United Kingdom coupled with policymakers' calls for immigration to be reduced during the recession means that concerns that immigrants will undercut "British" workers are likely to increase in the coming months, regardless of evidence that migrant workers will be the most adversely affected by downturn.<sup>12</sup>

#### **IV. Policy and Advocacy: Local Impacts and Local Solutions**

It is also crucial to consider *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* in the context of recent developments in the United Kingdom. The impact of rapid demographic changes over the past few years upon disadvantaged communities has not been fully explored or understood. Some voluntary and community groups the Barrow Cadbury Trust supports frequently voice concerns that migration and integration policy is often based on assumptions rather than realities. This is clearly reflected in some of the contradictory and at times negative results of polling by both *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* and Ipsos MORI.

Innovative solutions to the challenges facing both migrants and receiving communities can often be found at grassroots level. For this reason it is important that those most likely to be adversely affected by migration policies receiving communities in disadvantaged areas and migrants themselves — are given opportunities to contribute to the wider public and policy debate on migration. Although merely exposing the erroneous basis on which attitudes are formed will not be enough to dispel often deeply held antipathies, especially as unemployment steadily rises, it could eventually lead to a more constructive, less divisive debate.

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<sup>10</sup> Leigh Holmwood, "BBC apologises for misleading edit of striking worker," *The Guardian*, February 6, 2009.

<sup>11</sup> European Parliament, "European Parliament ensures temporary agency workers gain equal rights – UK workers after 12 weeks" (press release, October 22, 2008), <http://www.europarl.europa.eu/sides/getDoc.do?type=IM-PRESS&reference=20081021IPR40236&language=EN>.

<sup>12</sup> Demetrios G. Papademetriou, Madeleine Sumption, and Will Somerville, *Migration and the Economic Downturn: What to Expect in the European Union*, (Washington: Migration Policy Institute, 2009).



## V. Conclusion

As an analysis of this international poll has shown, it would be misleading to conclude that the British public are somehow more hostile to immigration than Americans or other Europeans. The results of *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* and Ipsos MORI's polling highlight that the reasons underlying popular opposition to the current level of immigration in the United Kingdom merit further examination. For example, widespread concerns among the British public were counter-balanced by the fact that the majority of respondents stated that they were *not* worried about legal migration.

An in-depth consideration of public attitudes shows that the apparent mistrust of immigration in the United Kingdom is more complex and nuanced than it initially appears. In many ways migration can be seen as a touchstone issue signifying a broad range of concerns pertaining to overburdened public services, pace of change, job insecurity, and the perceived laxity of border controls. To complicate matters, positive attitudes towards the United Kingdom's increasing diversity and the benefits and opportunities migrants can bring are often overshadowed by misperceptions regarding the scale of recent inflows, the impact of immigration upon the labor market, and alleged abuses of the immigration and asylum system. Furthermore, attitude formation is clearly a complex process, affected by a range of variables including media coverage, personal experience, age, education, socioeconomic status, and, in the case of migration, contact with people from different backgrounds.

To conclude, *Transatlantic Trends: Immigration* highlights a critical need for political leadership in the United Kingdom in order to address key concerns and mitigate a potential rise in anti-immigrant sentiment, particularly as the recession deepens and the elections approach. A useful starting point could be to tackle the contentious but widely misunderstood subject of irregular migration.

## VI. About the Author

**Ayesha Saran** works as Project Manager for Migration and Europe at the Barrow Cadbury Trust, a United Kingdom-based independent charitable foundation committed to funding and encouraging the promotion of social justice. Prior to joining the Trust, Ms. Saran worked for intergovernmental organizations for eight years, first at the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in London and then as a UK Foreign Office secondee to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) in Albania. She also worked as a freelance journalist in London.

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