



Felipe Fernández-Armesto
Strangers know us best

The careless British pose a greater threat to Britishness than any number of willing migrants to their shores. Felipe Fernández-Armesto argues that Britishness is threatened not through migrants but through Britons themselves. He claims that Britain has become 'foreign' to its former self – but that this has other causes than the effects of immigration.

All history is the history of migrations. All of us got to where we are because we or our ancestors came from somewhere else. England's prehistoric "Cheddar Man", according to DNA tests, still has local ancestors, 10,000 years after his death; but even he and his own progenitors reached what is now Britain only in the course of a long process of migration 'out of Africa', which peopled the recesses of the Earth. Humans have occupied just about every habitable environment on the planet for about 14,000 years, but migrations did not stop when they reached their present limits. Some peoples doubled back on themselves; others launched new endeavours across continents and oceans. Some migrations were violent and destructive, exploiting or extinguishing incumbent peoples and ways of life. Others helped host communities, bringing new skills, new vigour, demographic infill and fresh ideas.

Britain has generated destructive migrations to other parts of the world; indeed, the British have been responsible for some of the most conspicuous and disruptive mass migrations of the last half-millennium, exporting elites, reshuffling workforces, transporting slaves and indentured labour. But population movements that have ended up in Britain – even when they came with conquerors – have nearly always been broadly benign in their long-term effects. It seems incredible that people who pride themselves on descent from "Saxon and Norman and Dane" should be unaware of the value of immigrants; or that zeal for barriers should thrive in a country so enriched in modern history by infusions, for instance, of Irish, Huguenots, Jews and black and Asian "counter-colonists" from the former empire. Yet racism and migrant-phobia are rife. British governments, with remarkable consistency since the 1960s, have behaved towards would-be migrants with a repugnant mixture of hypocrisy, faithlessness, demagoguery, moral indifference and outright cruelty. The present government is, by a clear margin, the worst of the lot, stimulating racism by means of insidious rhetoric, which turns refugees into "bogus asylum seekers" and demonises "economic migrants", who, in reality, are often the sort of go-ahead adventurers capitalism needs. Governments seem keener to appeal to that ineradicable British vice, xenophobia, than to that withering British virtue, a sense of fairplay. Opposition to immigration is historically ignorant.

Now I do not want to deny that there is a rational case for immigration to be controlled < or, at least, for governments to have power to control it when necessary. Freedom of access is not just the doctrine of liberals: it is also upheld by greedy employers who want to renew an exploitable labour-pool. Access policies – especially of the selective kind we have now but also those unregulated except by the market – can leech talent from the developing world via a "brain drain". Immigration controls foment racism – but so does immigration, if it exceeds a variable but always critical threshold. History has few lessons but one of them is that minorities get victimised when their numbers are seen to increase.

These arguments should make us hesitate to be dogmatic in favour of uncontrolled migration. But they are not sufficient to explain modern Britain's hostility to migrants, which greatly exceeds rationally intelligible limits. The real cause of xenophobic anxieties was revealed in David Blunkett's infamous gaffe about the potential "swamping" of public services. On the face of it, this disclosed nervousness about the scale and distribution of the "resources" that ministers always recall and often mention when they contemplate the escalating cost of a decent society. Underlying this apparently economic anxiety is a deeper cultural anxiety: people worry not just about the strain on resources but also about the attenuation of traditions – about Britain becoming a "foreign" country, to recall another politician's equally alarmist phrase. I suspect – though this is a difficult proposition to test – that most British xenophobes worry more about the potential self-alienation of British culture than about Britain becoming "coffee-coloured", if I may quote one last soundbite from the great tradition of British politicians' anti-immigration gaffes.

Now this is an irrational fear but not altogether an ignoble one. It is irrational because all cultures change all the time and the heroics of culture conservation are usually no more likely to succeed than those of species conservation or landscape conservation or the conservation of monumental buildings that have outlived their usefulness. Yet the conservationist aim is noble in all these cases. I weep for lost culture – dying religious traditions, vanished languages, unfashionable cuisines and clothes, bygone pastimes, decayed manners and discarded rites and customs – as I do for endangered animals, demolished mansions and despoiled countryside. I find it, however, odd – even outrageous – that the British blame immigrants for their present rate of cultural loss. There is no real doubt where the blame lies: with the British themselves – and more so with those Britons who were born British, with longstanding British ancestry, than with those recently ascribed to Britain. In my lifetime, the British, among whom I have lived happily and, on the whole, admiringly, have changed unrecognisably. All the characteristics that defined Britishness when I was born – and for many generations past – have dwindled or disappeared. We are well rid of some of its tics: insularity, haughtiness, snobbishness, obsessive self-repression. But much of the old Britishness was admirable. It was rooted in romantic attachment to an idealised "pleasant land", hedgerow-riven or heath-blasted and full of idiosyncratic species and varieties. Since then, the most ruthless, efficient, machine-intensive agriculture in Europe has raped the land. Meanwhile, trash-capitalism has made British cities drearily uniform. The famous reserve has crumbled, to be succeeded by extremes of amicability and aggression: the British abroad exhibit bare bellies, obese bums and bad manners. The stiff upper lip has gone wobbly: it slackened feebly in the mawkish reaction to the death of Diana, Princess of Wales. A new emotional candour has dissipated the pluck and coolness in crisis once felt along that reeling, rolling road from Plymouth Hoe, via Clifton Close, to the playing

fields of countless imitations of Eton. The old austerity has sold out to consumerism and trash-capitalism. Irony is in danger. Self-deprecation, which was once a gloriously British form of irony, has succumbed to feelgood-counselling. There is no more room for the deification of the amateur. The Corinthian spirit has departed from Wembley and Westminster. Of the traditional oddities of British morality, none seems to have survived, except the power of sex scandals. Britishness was once engagingly dissident: now the obituary columns mark the passing of the last great eccentrics. Service and selflessness, which were formerly the training and totem of the establishment, have succumbed to toadyism and cronyism. The business-school ethos reigns even in the public schools. The British now persecute their old anomalies: imperial measures, historic counties, hereditary legislators, hunting with hounds. Cool Britannia has replaced sangfroid, warm feelings have replaced warm beer. Cool Britannia is frosty about her past. Celebrity status has overtaken respectability as the standard of esteem. An "underclass" has replaced the "British worker" – the blessing and bane of a former age. Embourgeoisement has swallowed the traditional working class, to which not even the deputy prime minister will admit he belongs. Class configurations are rejigged, politics irremediably professionalised. Even the cooking has "gone foreign".

So Britain really has become a "foreign country" – foreign to its former self. Yet none of this has had anything to do with the effects of immigration. Immigrants are vectors of change, which sometimes seems to threaten indigenous culture; but you can't immunise culture by excluding immigrants. On the contrary, the balance of evidence suggests that immigrants help keep Britain British. Food feeds identity and British food survives thanks largely to Italian-owned cafés. Sport is characteristic British culture: many of Britain's best athletes are black, while her cricket and soccer depend on Asians and Swedes. The British abandon their historic religions – but immigrants from the old empire help keep up Anglicanism and peculiarly British forms of radical Protestantism. Vast sections of British society have abjured tolerance – the best of Britain's traditional virtues – but most immigrants, sensing the threat, cling to it faithfully. All the vanished and vanishing elements of British identity – good and bad alike – have been freely sacrificed by the British. The only really important help from outside has come from America, and the influence of American popular culture, which British people have received and relished with uncritical zeal.

Instead of targeting immigrants, people who want to "keep Britain British" should work at their own Britishness. It's not a matter of being white: there's plenty of white trash in other countries. It's not a matter of how you talk English: few of the British have ever spoken it well. It's not a matter of observing the Tebbit test or the Blunkett test – these are trivial and defensive. It's nothing as vulgar as declaring allegiance: there have been many thoroughly British traitors. It's positively celebrating and maintaining the most characteristic traditions the British have inherited from the past: eating the food and playing the games – if you like – but, more importantly, practising the tolerance, relishing the eccentricity, resisting conformism and retrieving the romance.

