

CHALLENGES TO WELFARE

Immigration, social class and politics

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Introduction

During the 2010 National Election campaign Gordon Brown, the then Prime Minister, bumped into Gillian Duffy, a member of the electorate, on a constituency visit to Rochdale. His subsequent comments were caught on a Sky News microphone on his lapel and made public. The two crucial phrases were as follows:

Gillian Duffy 'You can't say anything about the immigrants because they're saying that you're a a a ... but all these Eastern Europeans coming in ...'

Gordon Brown 'That was a disaster. You should've never put me with that woman ... She's just the sort of bigoted woman that said she used to be Labour ... it's just ridiculous' 28th April 2010.

Ignoring Gordon Brown's well noted lack of personal warmth when confronted with the electorate this particular, seemingly disastrous interaction highlights not just his but the mainstream political classes' apparent inability to discuss immigration. A more recent example shows an ongoing uneasiness with discussing this issue – Labour MPs were briefed to avoid discussing immigration on the doorstep during the 2015 campaign – practically an impossible task. This article hopes to shed some light on the impact this vacuum has had on the social and political context of the forthcoming election and, in particular, accusations of racism and the rise of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP).

Post-imperial modernisation and immigration

As Haylett (2001) has suggested there was a fundamental shift in the parliamentary Labour Party from the party of the working classes to that of the middle classes under the leadership of Tony Blair. To some extent it was in response to the erosion of working class communities which had been decimated under Thatcher and a consequent fragmentation in the types of work done by the working class. However, it also reflected a move towards a metropolitan elite that was seen in the most senior roles held in the Labour Party and a desire to create a post-imperial, modernist and multi cultural society. As a consequence the old 'working class culture' became an embarrassment – culture-less. It was a culture which was increasingly seen to represent impoverishment – not just poverty, not being poor but 'a poverty of identity based on outdated ways of thinking and *being*' (Haylett 2001:352).

Whiteness as indicative of racial characteristics comes with its own burdens and impediments which have been created through socialisation, economic relationships and psychological processes. Therefore not all white groups are equal – this can be seen particularly when considering the Irish immigration of the 1930s -1960s and then more recently of Eastern Europeans. Indeed, the white working class has also been perceived as 'embarrassingly, excessively white' (Haylett, 2001: 355). As the culture of the white working class is divested and devalued their political value has also been ignored. They have been successfully rebranded as the underclass – stuck in the past, 'reliant on welfare', unable to accept change or move forward. In association,

their experience of multiculturalism has been vastly different from that of the middle classes.

The working class have seen incursions into their communities and a seeming diminution in services and opportunities. Whereas '... middle class people are more likely to be observed performing "multiculturalism" in their tastes, manners and conversations. Not only does the dominant discourse of multiculturalism not threaten the economic basis of their own hegemonic citizenship it allows them to extend their cultural capital by cultivating liberal views on "ethnic" others and purchasing appropriate ethnic furnishings and foodstuffs as markers of how far they have come' (Haylett, 2001: 365). In contrast increasing insecurity and precariousness of working class lives has not left this option open to them.

As Blair noted in 2012 'I think most sensible people in Britain can see immigrants have made a great contribution to our country', (Winnett, 2012). Meaning those who do not see immigration as a 'great contribution' are not sensible.

The impact of immigration on the (unsensible) white working class

Broadly the impact of immigration seems largely positive for the host country due to the increase in flexible labour force, an increase in GDP and a positive impact on the dependency ratio (Pettinger, 2015). Indeed politicians and academics will highlight the contradictions inherent within the anti-immigration debate, noting that the UK has enjoyed the benefits of migration for decades – in particular the use of labour force in institutions such as the National Health Service – which would not function without medical professionals from across the world (Dorling, 2009).

Until relatively recently the debate around immigration has been largely polarised – either spoken of in glowing terms or negative stories which are then labelled racist and 'un-British' lacking both generosity and tolerance.

The problem with this is two-fold, firstly there is a negative impact on the working class population from immigration both directly and indi-

rectly and secondly the 'problem' of immigration is being used as a scapegoat for other problems. This far more complicated and granular picture has left politicians at a loss as to how to respond to this issue with the electorate. Parties that largely wished to be seen as post-imperial and modern. Of course the white working class know about scapegoating having become a target for similar treatment within their own country as Haylett (2001) and Anderson (2014) note.

Blair said yes to immigration pre the world banking crisis of 2007/08. In 2004 when the first wave of Polish migrants came to UK there were more opportunities, and more services, however this was not unproblematic. A flexible labour force is a good thing for some (employers) but isn't if you are already a member of that labour force. An incursion of workers who are willing to work for fewer money, less rights, and more insecurity will have a detrimental impact on the host population. This is especially likely in areas with high unemployment or underemployment.

A direct impact on work and local housing markets has been the active recruitment from European job markets of employees who will work for the minimum wage. These workers are often housed by the employer at rents which are above the market value. Salaries are regulated although largely unenforced but the housing market is unregulated and so an employer can recoup large proportions of wages through housing costs, sometimes up to two thirds of monthly income. This is common amongst carers, farm workers and hotel workers. This means that UK workers become increasingly unattractive to UK employers with their expectations of set hours, liveable incomes and employment rights.

Moreover this has had an indirect impact on local housing markets where employers buy up accommodation for these new European workers to live in – a respondent interview suggests that a single room in a house in the south east can cost up to £600 for these workers whereas other European workers had lived in garages and converted cupboards in care homes.

In 2010 the Government's austerity regime led to stretched GP services, larger classes in schools,

longer waits in hospitals, lack of housing provision, increase in fear of crime and cuts to welfare provision. The austerity programme occurred at a time of increased job insecurity and a growth in what is now known as the 'precariat', along with ongoing and increasing immigration. A combination of these issues has led to problems of austerity to be conflated with 'the problem of immigration'. Immigration has had an impact but that impact is diverse and complex.

Inability to discuss immigration

'It is notable that while class has largely disappeared from public discourse it has re-emerged in a critique of multiculturalism and immigration through the claim that there has been a prioritization of race over class ... While the whiteness of the middle class and policy makers is empty except in so far as it makes visible other ethnicities the whiteness of the working class is worthy of note. Their whiteness and the whiteness of Eastern Europeans is racialised' (Anderson, 2013:46).

During the 2010 election it became apparent that immigration was becoming an issue. During the leader debates David Cameron made a pledge to reduce immigration over the course of the parliament. At the time the leader of the Labour Party, Gordon Brown, noted that it was an impossible promise to meet because the majority of immigration into Britain was through the European Union's 'Free Movement of People' and as such not under domestic control and this has been proven to be the case. Immigration has continued to rise in association with swingeing cuts to public services.

As we saw from Gordon Brown's deeply uncomfortable reaction to Mrs Duffy's comments and the subsequent impact on the Labour Party it was clear that the electorate wanted to discuss immigration but felt accusations of racism would quickly follow. What if Mrs Duffy wasn't bigoted but had genuine concerns and fears over incursions into her community that had not been met with sufficient increases in infrastructure and that problems that were already there would only be exacerbated by more people regardless of their background or nationality?

The inability to address these in a thoughtful and open manner has led to a political vacuum where more extreme interpretations can find a home.

Immigration uncomfortably foregrounded by mainstream political parties – too little too late?

Although we can acknowledge that the 'foreigner' has always been a convenient receptacle for national anxieties, it is apparent that immigration has become the catch all answer to all social problems that now face Britain. For the Conservative Party it was initially a stick to poke the Labour Party with, and it has increasingly become a bone of contention and a reminder within their party of the uneasy relationship they maintain with Europe. For the Labour Party it is a reminder of how out of touch they look, with Milliband recently admitting that the relaxation of immigration controls in 2004 was a mistake and had undermined living standards for some working class households. This discomfiture and hotchpotch of policies and talk has left room for the rise of UKIP. UKIP's policy seems simple and extreme: to close borders, encourage repatriation, leave Europe. However, regardless of the policy, their power surely lies in their ability to talk about immigration without fear or embarrassment and their refusal to accept that this talk is racist.

Nigel Horne (2014) notes that the rise of UKIP is down to Cameron, Milliband and Brown and their inability to respond to the electorate's fears around immigration which are according to Ipsos-mori (2014) and Katwala et al. (2014) far more nuanced than sound-bite politics allows. As 'British Future' highlights when talking about immigration there is a pattern of falling trust in every political party.

Conclusion

As Dorling (2009) and Brand (2014) would highlight, these issues are more complex than simply 'the problem of immigration' allows and by utilising this trope we allow for many others to get off lightly. As Dorling notes, there is enough housing for everyone, it is just in the

wrong hands, for example rich overseas buyers who are buying London's mansion houses and turning them back into single dwellings from flats – meaning London is quickly losing housing capacity. Undoubtedly this is happening but it fails to address the day-to-day issues people face in employment, waiting times and classroom sizes – the total lack of investment in infrastructure. The deep problem here seems to be in the complete failure to communicate ideas and, as 'British Future' – a think tank – note, a concurrent problem of assuming that the working class is too 'thick' to understand (Katwala et al., 2014). This assumption stems from the categorisation of this class as cultureless and a political distancing from it. This has been a huge mistake, allowing UKIP to capitalise on what has almost become a caricature of working class culture, an extremist version of what it once was and now seems disregarded. Immigration needs to be openly discussed without embarrassment and our political leaders need to take note of the electorate including women like Mrs Duffy if we are to move forward.

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