



“Immigration” - threat or opportunity? ¹

Ideas for leading a Conversation

*For general guidance in running these sessions see
'Planning a Conversation' also available at www.agoraspace.org*

Background

The subject of immigration touches a nerve. It is something that people have strong feelings about and almost every account of it in our media is obviously biased one way or another. This conversation aims to help us explore our own feelings about this emotive issue, to hear perspectives other than our own and together to seek what is both good and right in this area.

Starter questions for small group discussion

- 1. Do you know any people who have recently come to this country to live? What did it feel like? Why did they want to come?**
- 2. Reviewing the list of perceived opportunities and threats associated with immigration, what do you think is the most important of these factors to recognise?**
- 3. What do you think of the monarchy?**
- 4. What do you see as the essential ingredients of an effective policy on immigration?**

¹ These materials are produced by Project Agora, a company limited by guarantee, which is dedicated to creating new spaces in society for the highest possible quality of public conversation, the building of realistic trust and the seeking of vision. Contact Agora at www.agoraspace.org or email enquiries@agoraspace.org

One way through the conversation

Question one can be used as a means of letting people introduce themselves to one another.

Do you know any people who have recently come to this country to live? What did it feel like? Why did they want to come? (If people present have personal experiences of this make sure they are given particular priority in this discussion)

Hear the range of experiences present and known to the people in your group. The stories of real people will act to earth the discussion, rooting it in a proper understanding and feeling for others.

Then invite the whole group to brainstorm the range of attitudes that are present in a society such as ours about immigration. One way to do this is to list key phrases on a flip chart according to whether they are experienced as 'Threat' or 'Opportunity'.

This will generate a list under 'Threat' such as

- they will take our jobs
- too many people already
- a threat to British culture
- a failure of integration
- fear and suspicion of the unknown
- civil unrest

While under opportunity people may come up with

- Providing new labour resource particularly in low paid sector
- Making up for lack of skills in home job market eg nurses
- Stimulating economy
- Providing younger, working people to an ageing population and so
- ensuring long term viability of social systems, like pensions and health care
- profiting from cultural diversity, appreciating other customs and languages

Let people speak and think freely. We are not asking for their own view at this stage, just aiming for some idea of the very different perspectives out there. The resources section will enable you to give specific examples of some of the issues that are raised here.

Go to Question Two now to engage with their own views. **Reviewing the list of perceived opportunities and threats associated with immigration, what do you think is the most important of these factors to recognise?**

This will begin to reveal some of the range of views present. As facilitator try not to take sides, however difficult this might be. Only insist that all people are spoken about with respect.

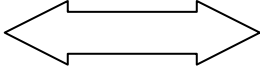
Explain that you are going to ask a slightly strange question for their next group discussion.

Go to Question Three

What do you think of the monarchy?

This can evoke considerable and unexpected passion! You will find that people naturally polarise between those who value the tradition of the monarchy and those who are more cynical and dismissive. Now refer back to the flip chart and you may find that those who are generally supportive of the monarchy tend toward the 'Threat' phrases whereas those who see the monarchy as less important tend to see the 'opportunity' presented by immigration. That is interesting.

Explain that in any society there is a tension between upholding the social order and accepting challenge and change.

Upholding social order  Accepting challenge and change

And people feel this tension at a very deep level. Every society has much that is good about it that people will naturally want to defend. People will also rightly fear the wholesale breakdown of order in a society. These things would tend to make people hold to the left hand side of this tension. On the other hand some people are aware of the need to challenge a society and promote change. Perhaps they have found themselves marginalised in some way in their own lives – or have come to particularly sympathise with another group of people who have suffered badly. Such people ask hard questions and are natural challengers. They would feel the need to support the challengers, in this case the immigrants.

It does not matter if this analysis does not work for everyone there. It may simply help as a way of setting up the problem. Some people want to defend their culture, which they value. Others naturally take the side of the challenger, here represented by the immigrant, who may provoke change.

There is no ready 'answer' to these different sensibilities. A society has to hold these things in tension. The resources section offers ideas for taking this further, assessing issues of justice and compassion and incorporating faith perspectives. Yet one thing that everyone can do is to try to understand the other position. This will make for a more creative approach to the final question.

Go to Question Four

What do you see as the essential ingredients of an effective policy on immigration?

Ask each group to come up with a list, share them together and see what measure of agreement there is.

The session might end on a reflective note by considering the need in any society to build trust between diverse people. How might these policies work to build trust in our society? Does the need to build trust with immigrant people suggest any other helpful approaches?

Resources

There are many issues raised by this conversation. Here are some more ideas and information that are intended to resource the conversation and offer alternative entry points.

Increasing migration and the global market

Modern communication is making the world a smaller place. It is also much easier to travel across the world. Many companies now work transnationally, outsourcing their labour to areas of the world where it is cheaper. Part of the vision of the free market that Adam Smith gave the world was not only about free movement of goods, but also free movement of labour. In a truly free market people can get up and move where the jobs are. It is strange that so few countries have adopted an open border policy if this is the way to create wealth on a world scale.

Protecting our culture

What Adam Smith did not take account of is that there are lots of things in a culture that people value that cannot be exchanged or even considered in terms of trade. There are traditions, stories of the past, customs, manners, legal systems, all of which go to make up a society. These things people get used to and even love. And people can all too easily fear that these will be lost if there is great or sudden change – as perhaps might be caused by an influx of immigrants.

So what is happening?

There is clearly an increase in the movement of people from one country to another.

Applications for asylum in this country, for example, have risen 20 fold in the past 15 years. Around 40% of these are judged to be genuine asylum seekers fleeing from some of the most vicious societies in the world. The rest may be economic migrants who claim asylum because this is the most effective way to gain entry.

The rest are officially told to return to the country they came from. Actual returnees are currently running at 21,600 per year. This is a much higher figure than previously due to a new 'get tough' government policy. This policy has also halved the number of asylum applicants, which was officially 84,000 in 2002.

Yet many have 'disappeared' at various stages of the asylum process leaving unknown numbers of failed asylum seekers in the population and amnesties have been offered to these people as a means of encouraging people to take a recognised place in society and so not act as fuel for underworld activity. More amnesties might be necessary in the future.

Is Britain a soft touch?

Britain has had the most applicants for asylum of any European Country, but government officials say that these figures should be considered per capita of population, in which case we are 10th or 11th.

Wotjek's Story

Wotjek is 27 and has studied English at a London language school for the last three years. The only problem is that he has never been there and does wonder whether it really exists. This particular language school is known throughout the North of Poland as the best way to get a certificate saying that you are in full time study. It costs just £250 per semester. Then you can get a student visa, allowing you to work for 20 hours a week. In fact Wotjek already has a degree in English and history from Szczecin University, but there is 20% unemployment in his home town so he came here and took his chances. His cousins found him some cheap housing and helped him set up a bank account. He has a job in the kitchen of a bar in Mayfair. (Independent On Sunday, Feb 8th 2004)

Some employment statistics

Britain has had near full employment for the last seven years. It is estimated that there are currently about 500,000 vacancies in the South East alone. Around 175,000 work permits were issued last year. These were mainly for highly skilled workers. There are currently no permits for low skilled, low paid jobs.

Slaves of the gangmaster

The details are only just now emerging. 19 people of Chinese origin were recently drowned in Morecambe bay. It seems that they were collecting cockles for one of the new breed of gangmaster. They may have worked nine hour shifts for as little as £1. They lived several to a room. They may have been here illegally. Illegal immigrants are not protected by the law. They cannot appeal against harsh treatment, unsafe working conditions, or poor pay. Some have called them modern slaves. Yet this problem is growing. There has been a call to construct a register of gangmasters.

Are they all terrorists?

Very few immigrants are terrorists, but with the present concerns about international terrorism, you only need one or two suspects to provoke serious public anxiety. Intelligence officials believe that terrorists targeting Europe come particularly from North Africa. During a counter-terrorism raid in North London associated with the poison ricin, a policeman, D.C. Oakes was stabbed to death. All three of those arrested were asylum seekers. It is clear that some terrorist suspects weave long trails of asylum seeking and rejection. One 36 year old man is now in custody in Belmarsh top security prison. He is thought to be a member of the GIA (Armed Islamic Group) and the Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat which is fighting for an Islamic state in Algeria. He has been identified through an undercover operation in Algeria. He first arrived in Britain in the summer of 1989 saying he had come on holiday. He then applied to extend his visa to study and also because he had married. The Home Office ruled that the marriage was for convenience and he should have been deported in 1992. Instead he appealed. The deportation order was upheld. He moved to Sweden and claimed asylum but they returned him to Britain where he claimed asylum again. By the time his case was heard, he had disappeared. In 1996 he was arrested for using a bogus French identity card, but he escaped. He was arrested again in Feb 2001 for fraud and made another claim to remain here. His claim was rejected in December 2001. His appeal to be freed was dismissed last year. Such is the tortuous history of some of those now suspected of planning terrorism.

Media Bias

It is hard to find balanced reporting.

On the extreme end for example there is the Daily Star report 'Asylum Seekers eat our donkeys'.(Aug 21st 2003) Nine donkeys had gone missing. Without a shred of evidence and only the surmise that Africans are partial to donkey meat, the paper runs this shamelessly scaremongering story.

Slightly more informed but still polemical is the Daily Express story 'Secret Plans to halt the gypsies – economic disaster looms as 40,000 head for Britain.' (Jan 22nd 2004). The paper is commenting on the new EU regulations which will allow people from Eastern Europe to gain work permits in the UK. Yet the paper fixes on *gypsies* in order to bring the most emotive response. Gypsies were one of Hitler's targets. The paper ran a survey around the question 'Should we let gypsies invade Britain' and reported defiantly that 98% said no. There are a significant number of Roma people in Eastern Europe but it is hard not to conclude that the focus on gypsies and the language *invade* betray the intention of the paper to inflame public opinion.

Find your own recent stories about immigrants and use them to illustrate bias in the reporting.

Migration Watch sets itself up as a thinktank on immigration issues. It provides some very helpful information, but is also evidently a narrative seeking to minimise immigration. For example it closes a section on whether immigrants bring economic benefits with the line

'Among all ethnic groups there is a feeling that there are too many immigrants in Britain. 61% of the overall population agree with this statement as well as 46% of ethnic minority groups.'

Campaigning on the other side are the liberal papers. The Guardian, for example, has devoted serious time and energy to collecting stories from asylum seekers confirming the very difficult circumstances of their homes, their traumatic travelogues and harsh treatment while here. They seek out stories of injustice, cry out against infringements of civil liberties and bring them to our attention. But some might accuse them of opposing every effort at effective regulation of immigration.

Film Clips

View a clip from Rabbit Proof Fence. This story is about the reverse side of immigration, whereby immigrant people entered Australia and systematically attempted to dominate another culture. It is based on the story of Molly Kelly an aboriginal woman who as a 'mixed race' child was taken away from her parents to be educated in the white community in the hope of 'breeding out' her Aboriginality. At her school she was beaten for speaking her own language. She undertook a vast trek of 1500 miles to return to her family.

When does cultural confidence become dangerous cultural arrogance?

Historical Perspectives

Large scale people movements are not new. In the past the people of this country have emigrated on a massive scale. At one stage most of the map was pink as we settled in lands across the world, taking our culture and language with us. Many of us were economic migrants. Some fled religious persecution. Others were 'transported'. America took eleven million British people from 1815 to 1930. In fact immigration into this country, apart from that from Ireland, has been relatively minor in scale since William the Conqueror. In the 1950s immigration was opened up to people from the Commonwealth. This flow was tightened in the 1970s and roughly balanced the number of other people emigrating. The ex- Commonwealth population now accounts for about 7% of the population of England and Wales.

Demographic changes and the economy

There is no doubt that with the decline in birth rate this country faces a problem in the future in terms of providing services to an ageing population. There may be too few people of working age compared to those who are retired to make a balanced economy. Some argue that a controlled immigration policy might stimulate the economy and make for a better age balance in the population. Some sectors of our society are in serious need of labour. Nursing, for example, has been recruiting extensively from the Far East. It may be possible to target immigration so as to provide for specific labour and skill shortages. Some argue that immigration can also stimulate the production of new jobs, boosting the economy.

Solidarity vs Diversity

David Goodhart, editor of Prospect Magazine recently wrote a superb summary of the key issues about immigration in which he worked with the idea that a society had to keep a balance between upholding its social order and allowing challenge and change through immigration. He writes for example, 'Negotiating the tension between solidarity and diversity is at the heart of politics'. 'We need to be reassured that strangers, especially those from other countries, have the same idea of reciprocity as we do'. (Prospect Magazine Feb 2004)

Faith Perspectives

The communities of faith in the biblical period worked hard to defend the purity of their culture and faith. Keeping the faith distinctive appeared to necessitate separation from other peoples and cultures. Their rules for sacrifice, hygiene and their regular meetings all served to reinforce the sense of corporate identity and maintain the character of the faith. Prophets such as Elijah would contend for national purity. Founding stories told of the merciless destruction of other peoples. Attempts to reform the nation after exile involved the rigorous 'putting away of foreign wives' in order to re-establish the religious and social identity of the people. Yet there were also narratives that worked the other way.

The experience in Egypt was understood to have made them particular sensitive to those who were oppressed. 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt' was the phrase that began many of the more merciful laws. As they were taken into exile in Babylon so they began to

appreciate people of other cultures. The great hymn of creation was written. A tale was told of a Moabitess called Ruth whose love was an example to all. The biblical vision of faith began to open up to people of other cultures.

Study the book of Jonah. What was this story really about? Was it an expression of God's concern even for the hated Ninevites?

Invite people to study the concerns of Ezra as he commanded the people to 'put away their foreign wives' as compared to Ruth who *was* a foreign wife and became an example of devotion and an ancestor of Christ. These two perspectives are powerful examples of the basic tension behind the immigration issue. There are those whose chief concern is to uphold all that is good and right in the culture (Ezra) and there are those who feel for the outsider (Ruth)

Ultimately this tension in the biblical narratives come to a new watershed in Christ and a faith that breaks out of the confines of a geography, a nation and a culture. Much of the New Testament is given over to struggles about how to build a faith that is genuinely for all, what parts of the old law should be respected and what had been superceded etc. This is the subtext of a book such as Romans. The vision of Revelation looked to a faith that was for 'every tribe and nation and people and language'.

And yet the danger of scapegoating others remained. It is clearly integral to human nature that in forming groups we necessarily identify 'outsiders' and define ourselves over against them. The history of Christianity is littered with anti-Semitism, which some argue goes right back to the gospel accounts of Jesus life. For example the terrible phrase 'His blood be on our heads and on our children' recorded as of the crowd at Jesus trial have always been a major spur to anti-Semitic feeling.

Christian people, who came here from Commonwealth countries in the 1950s and 60s, reported that they did not find a welcome in the churches of this country. Why do you think that was?

On building trust in a diverse society

Review the various outcast people of Jesus' day and the reasons that suspicion and guilt may have been heaped upon them. How can his actions be said to have built trust between people? What would this look like in terms of action toward today's immigrants?