

## Introduction

# Migration Isn't Just for the Birds

*It's time for fresh thinking about  
immigration*

Migration is the oldest action against poverty. It selects those who most want help. It is good for the country to which they go; it helps break the equilibrium of poverty in the country from which they come. What is the perversity in the human soul that causes people to resist so obvious a good?

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Wednesday 6 July 2005 was a day for celebration in London. As the crowds in Trafalgar Square noisily cheered the news that the city would host the 2012 Olympics, a much smaller and more subdued ceremony was taking place a few miles away at Westminster Register Office. Standing beside a framed photograph of Queen Elizabeth II and a large Union Jack, a

grey-haired man in a bright red, fur-trimmed robe decked in white gloves and a big gold chain was addressing a room of some forty people of all ages and colours – an old man with a walking stick, a young man in a black fitted shirt, a schoolgirl in her blue-and-yellow uniform, a toddler in his mother's arms, a baby in a cot, one man in a suit and tie.

'Today is a very important day in your lives,' said the Deputy Lord Mayor of Westminster, after apologising for the absence of the Lord Mayor, who was busy touring TV studios welcoming the Olympic decision. 'You are now British citizens and are entitled to vote in this country.' He paused. 'I will try to be as informal as possible. In fact, ceremonies like these have only been going for just over a year.' But almost despite himself, his words rose to the occasion: 'We welcome you here today into this nation and into this community of Westminster. You are now full members of the British family. As British citizens, we hold dear the values of tolerance and respect to others. I trust you will be loyal subjects and observe the law.'

The new British citizens then swore – or affirmed, in the case of non-believers – their allegiance to the Queen, pledged their commitment to the United Kingdom and queued up to be photographed receiving their certificate of citizenship from the Deputy Lord Mayor. Understated yet momentous, it was all over in less than half an hour. As we left, Adriano, my Brazilian – and now British – friend, was grinning from ear to ear. 'I'm like you now,' he beamed.

On 7 July London's joy turned to horror as four British Muslim suicide bombers blew themselves up on a bus and three Tube trains, killing fifty-two people. As Londoners reeled at this callous attack on their way of life, their mayor, Ken Livingstone, captured the public mood: 'This was not a terrorist attack against the mighty and the powerful. It was not aimed at presidents or prime ministers. It was aimed at ordinary, working-class Londoners, black and white, Muslim and Christian, Hindu and

Jew, young and old. It was an indiscriminate attempt to slaughter, irrespective of any considerations for age, for class, for religion, or whatever.’ Addressing would-be terrorists directly, he continued: ‘In the days that follow look at our airports, look at our sea ports and look at our railway stations and, even after your cowardly attack, you will see that people from the rest of Britain, people from around the world will arrive in London to become Londoners and to fulfil their dreams and achieve their potential.

‘They choose to come to London, as so many have come before, because they come to be free, they come to live the life they choose, they come to be able to be themselves. They flee you because you tell them how they should live. They don’t want that, and nothing you do, however many of us you kill, will stop that flight to our city where freedom is strong and where people can live in harmony with one another. Whatever you do, however many you kill, you will fail.’

The roll-call of the dead poignantly underscored Mayor Livingstone’s words. The fifty-two victims included many foreigners and Britons of foreign descent, whose varied backgrounds highlight London’s status as a cosmopolitan city of opportunity. These immigrants were not the lazy, dishonest scroungers of tabloid fare; they were the lifeblood of a diverse and dynamic global city. Among them were: three Polish women – a forty-three-year-old cleaner and a twenty-nine-year-old assistant manager at a postgraduate residential college, both of whom had been living in London for three years, and a recently arrived twenty-four-year-old administrative assistant who had planned to stay in London for only four months while learning English; a forty-six-year-old Romanian dental technician who described London as ‘the best place in the world’; a thirty-one-year-old Italian business analyst who had come to London ten years earlier as an au pair and was due to marry her British Muslim fiancé on 11 September 2005;

a twenty-six-year-old Nigerian oil executive; a fifty-year-old cleaner of Ghanaian origin who had spent half her life in London; a thirty-nine-year-old Israeli charity worker who had come to London when she was twenty-one; a twenty-six-year-old New Zealander with dual Irish nationality who had lived in London for three years; a recently arrived thirty-seven-year-old Vietnamese-American; a twenty-seven-year-old accountant from Mauritius who had been in Britain for three years; a twenty-eight-year-old Vietnamese-born Australian working in computing who had lived in London for two years; a thirty-year-old Sri Lankan-born assistant buyer for the Royal Mail, who had come to Britain when she was one; a sixty-year-old retired policeman born in Grenada, who had come to London to retire; a radiographer of Indian origin at Great Ormond Street Hospital for Sick Children; a fifty-six-year-old social worker of Nigerian descent; a twenty-two-year-old shop assistant of Irish origin; a twenty-eight-year-old advertising salesman with Jamaican grandparents; and a thirty-seven-year-old IT manager of Indian descent.

Among the fifty-two victims were also five Muslims: a twenty-four-year-old French computer scientist of Tunisian origin who was working as a waiter in London over the summer while learning English; a twenty-four-year-old Turkish woman, also studying English; a forty-eight-year-old Iranian biomedical officer at Great Ormond Street Hospital; a twenty-four-year-old Afghan man who had come to Britain as a refugee from the Taliban; and a twenty-year-old bank cashier of Bangladeshi origin. The last of them, Shahara Islam, was described as ‘a thoroughly modern Muslim, a girl who loved her Burberry plaid handbag and fashionable clothes while at the same time respecting her family’s wishes that she sometimes wear traditional *shalwar kameez* at home. She went shopping in the West End of London with friends but would always be seen at the mosque for Friday prayers.’<sup>2</sup> Her short life was an

eloquent answer to those on both sides of the divide who claim that Islamic immigrants cannot successfully integrate into Western societies.

### **A microcosm of the debate**

It is a cruel irony that I began writing this book just as my city and everything it stands for came under attack from terrorists who were British-born but of foreign descent. But at the same time, the London bombings have helped crystallise the debate that is at the heart of this book: should we welcome or seek to prevent the unprecedented wave of international migration that is bringing ever greater numbers of people from poor countries to rich countries like Britain, Spain and the United States? Fear of foreigners versus the dynamism of multicultural London: a microcosm of the wider debate about immigration that is raging around the world.

As our societies age and many businesses complain they are short of workers, the pressure to let in immigrants grows, but many people in rich countries remain unconvinced. In the United States, President Bush has sent the National Guard to patrol the border with Mexico to keep out unwanted immigrants, while pundits warn that Hispanic immigration risks splitting America in two. The government tries to juggle its desire to attract talented foreign students and workers with heightened fears about national security since 9/11. As record numbers of Africans risk death on flimsy boats to reach its shores, Spain erects ever higher walls – six metres high at the last count – around its enclaves in North Africa to try to close off Europe's southern gateway. Until recently a country of emigration, Spain now receives more immigrants than any other country in Europe. France's largely immigrant suburbs erupt into riots to protest at poverty and discrimination, while rioters in Sydney launch violent attacks on

Lebanese immigrants. John Howard comes from behind in the polls to win Australia's general election in 2001 by declaring that 'we will decide, and nobody else, who comes to this country' and turning back a boat laden with Afghan refugees. Germans struggle to accept that the children and grandchildren of Turkish guest-workers are German too. The murder in Amsterdam of Theo van Gogh, a top filmmaker critical of Islam, by a Dutch-born Muslim extremist provokes a spate of tit-for-tat burnings of schools, churches and mosques. Meanwhile, the eastward enlargement of the European Union opens the door for Poles, Czechs and others to come to work in Britain, Ireland and Sweden (and more recently Finland, Greece, Portugal and Spain) – and one day the rest of western Europe too.

Do the new arrivals pose a threat to everything we cherish – jobs, the welfare state, our national identity and way of life, even our freedom and security – or does their diversity in fact enrich and invigorate the economy, culture and society of their adopted homes? Could we put a stop to immigration if we wanted to, or is it an inevitable consequence of a globalising world riven between rich and poor? And what should we do to help the immigrants and people of foreign descent who are already living among us fit in better? These questions are not only about Them, and their possible merits and faults, but also about Us – what kind of place, country and world we want to live in; how far our sense of solidarity and justice extends beyond national borders; how much we value diversity and to what extent we fear it clashes with other values we hold dear; and ultimately whether our concept of Us is broad and flexible enough to embrace Them too.

I hope that it is, not least because I feel like one of Them as well as one of Us. My grandparents fled Estonia in 1944 as the Red Army arrived and ended up half a world away building a new life in California. That's where my Estonian-American mother was raised, before moving to New York, where she met

and married my French father in 1969. They eventually ended up in London, where I was born in 1973 and grew up. Although the name on my birth certificate, Philippe Legrain, sounds quintessentially French, London is my home and my friends call me Phil. My family history isn't important as such (except to help explain my outlook); it is just one of the many different life stories that we lump together as 'immigration'.

I am in good company. With me are people like George Borjas, a Cuban refugee who has become a professor at Harvard University and an expert on the economics of immigration. Ironically, he advocates that the US should let in only skilled immigrants – a policy that would have denied his family entry to America. Or Stephan Petrusiak, a Polish-Ukrainian who recently returned to Warsaw to complete his medical studies after several years in London working as a nurse for Britain's state-funded National Health Service. He hopes to return to Britain as a fully fledged doctor in 2007. Or Lasso Kourouma, a refugee from the civil war in Côte d'Ivoire who almost drowned trying to get to Spain and spent two years sleeping rough in Malaga. He now has a job as a nightclub bouncer, as well as a lovely wife and a young daughter. Or Jander Lacerda, a Brazilian artist who does odd jobs while trying to establish himself in the New York art world. Or Inmer Omar Rivera, who has made his way illegally from Honduras to the US–Mexican border. He hopes to make it into America and work hard so that his son can afford to study and have a better life. Or Hanna, who was working as a cleaner in London illegally until Poland joined the EU in 2004 and she became entitled to work here. She has now officially registered her cleaning business, pays taxes, regularly sends money back to her mother in Poland and hopes to return there permanently once she has saved enough to secure a better future for her son. Or, for that matter, countless famous and illustrious people who may or may not be representative, but who have certainly made a difference.

Whenever people talk in the abstract about the pros and cons of immigration, one should not forget that immigrants are individual human beings whose lives happen not to fit neatly within national borders – and that like all human beings, they are all different.

How different, though? Different better, or different worse? Such basic questions underlie whether people are willing to accept outsiders in their midst. Are the newcomers perceived to be honest, hard-working people keen to fit in to their new country, or feckless, scrounging layabouts who make no effort to adapt to their adopted society – and might even harbour bad intentions towards it? Perceptions – or prejudice – matter more than reality, since foreigners are strangers and therefore largely unknown. The truth, of course, is that immigrants may be good, bad, or probably a mixture of both. Generally, though, I believe they have two big qualities: they are typically hard-working and enterprising. Why? Because every immigrant is also an emigrant, and it takes courage and enterprise to uproot yourself to a foreign land. You have to be particularly desperate or adventurous to leave behind your family, friends and homeland to take a leap into the unknown and try to start a new life in an alien and potentially hostile country. And once you have made that big leap, you have every incentive to try to better yourself and build a better future for yourself and your children.

Broader questions arise when immigrants arrive in sufficient numbers that they start to change their adopted society. Greens may be concerned that a rising population puts additional strain on the environment. Trade unionists may fear that the newcomers threaten the jobs and wages of marginal workers. Taxpayers may fret about the burden they might impose on the welfare state. Cultural conservatives may worry about their impact on national identity and social mores. Such concerns must be addressed, because even though freer international migration can bring huge economic and cultural benefits, it also requires polit-

ical consent. Already, as immigration has risen in recent years, it has sparked a backlash in America, Europe and elsewhere.

### **Fear of foreigners**

Around a million people migrate legally to the US each year, and maybe another half a million – nobody knows the exact figure – enter the country illegally.<sup>3</sup> Europe admits some 2.8 million foreigners each year, with another 800,000 or so – again, nobody knows for sure – entering illegally.<sup>4</sup> Canada, with a population of 32 million, admits around 235,000 permanent migrants a year; Australia, with a population of 19 million, around 150,000 (but around 60,000 foreigners leave each year).<sup>5</sup>

These are big numbers, but what makes them especially significant is that people in rich countries are having far fewer babies than ever before. Which means that immigrants account for a rising share of the workforce and population in rich countries – and an even larger share of the population increase. One in ten Europeans and one in eight Americans are now foreign-born. So are one in five Canadians and nearly one in four Australians.<sup>6</sup> Two in five Australians have a parent who was born overseas.<sup>7</sup> Even more strikingly, immigrants accounted for three-quarters of America's population growth in the second half of the 1990s, while Europe's population would have fallen by 4.4 million over the same period were it not for the arrival of 5 million immigrants.

Immigration has already changed the faces of many rich countries. Back in 1970, there were only 10 million foreign-born Americans; now, there are officially over 37 million – plus several million uncounted illegals – and the new faces are mostly Latin American and Asian.<sup>8</sup> In a country fractured by race and fragmented by the unintended consequences of 'affirmative action' (the well-meaning attempt to give blacks and later other