

Putting our Values Centre Stage: Next Steps for the Government's Immigration Reform

Speech by Liam Byrne MP

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My friend Shahid Malik is a superb MP for Dewsbury and tells a funny story about a radio phone-in where he was once the guest.

A caller rings in and starts haranguing him about the vexed question of English identity.

'Isn't it outrageous' splutters the caller 'that the Welsh and the Scots get all this attention to celebrate their identity and the English don't'.

'Well' says Shahid 'what is it you'd like to celebrate - I'll celebrate it with you'.

A slightly stunned pause ensues, before the caller splutters back 'yeah but isn't outrageous that the Welsh and the Scots...'

Who wouldn't empathise with our caller's frustration?

Indeed, I want to argue today that this question of identity, local or British, is one of the most complicated and important in public life today.

Why?

Because it touches on the very question of the 'rules of the game', the standards, the values, the sense of fairness in the modern state.

Yesterday the Home Secretary in her first major speech on immigration policy set out the challenge:

That our migration system must be managed robustly and support Britain's national interests. That we can't have an argument about economics alone because people don't live alone in a marketplace.

I want to extend that analysis today to argue first that this debate about values is promising to become one of the most significant in the politics of the next decade, and that second, this Government has the chance to shape the terms of the argument in a uniquely progressive way.

Diversity in Britain today

Britain has perhaps never been as diverse as right now - not just ethnically or culturally of course, but it is in the real freedom and space that each of us has to pursue a life we have reason to value in our own way and with as much verve and imagination and eccentricity that we care to muster.

Three cheers for that. As Bill Clinton once said, it's the differences between us that make life interesting.

For those who believe in the British tradition of liberty and freedom, the right to live one's life or pursue one's own interests or follow one's own star is perhaps one of the things we are proudest of.

The differences between us today, are nothing more than the fruits of the freedom that millions of our forefathers died to protect.

But no single cause explains this.

Robert Putnam argued for at least eleven.

The way we work is different. Our families look different. The baby boomers today outnumber an older generation with different values. Our movements are faster in the real world and on-line - and yes global migration means many

of our communities look different to ten or twenty years ago.

Values and Trust

So are we happy?

Perhaps not completely.

And alongside today's new diversity is a revived tradition of thought that might explain why.

From the once neo-conservative Francis Fukuyama's 1995 review of how trust underpins successful market economies to the rather more liberal Robert Putnam's summary of social capital and how it seems to keep us 'healthy, housed, hired and happy', we have heard an analysis of why, not difference, but shared values are vital to successful societies.

None of this is totally new. Robert Putnam makes the point that social capital is an idea that has been invented at least 5 different times since 1914.

Francis Fukuyama's argument about trust in the transactions of the market place can be detected in Adam Smith.

But the importance of the things we hold in common has been articulated with a new force in the last 10 years.

This, I believe, is why the debate about citizenship inaugurated by the Prime Minister before the summer is so important.

Citizenship, de facto, is one of the most important things that we have in common. It is not simply about the rights we have - but as Quentin Skinner and others have made clear, it has since the times of the Greeks and Romans required contribution from each of us - a contribution which in par defines what it means to be free.

The Political Imperative

So why is this politically so important?

For the simple reason that around the world, it is not the left but the right that's seizing this debate.

The challenge for New Labour is that unless we define this ground on our own terms, it will be attacked by - and potentially won - by the Right, just as it has in parts of Europe and the US.

The Right has deep roots on which to draw. The right owns an intellectual tradition dating back to de Tocqueville and Burke.

In nineteenth century industrial America de Tocqueville marvelled at the heights to which civic association - imported, as he acknowledged, from England - had taken the new country. 'In no country' he said, 'has greater advantage been derived from association...than in America'.

A century and a half later, it has been the neo-cons in the US who have co-opted and dominated this argument and fashioned from it the basis of an attack on the modern welfare state, attacking what they saw as disruption to organic social relationships on the one hand; and unintended consequences on the other.

So, the risk for the left is quite clear. The right's interpretation of the answers to this debate will be a long way from our interpretation of what is needed in a progressive and diverse society.

Parts of the left will find this a difficult argument - but often for the right reasons. What is absolutely critical for the left, is that while we strengthen a framework of common rules, we stand up for the right to be different.

The conservative argument is simple (and wrong). Shared values, argue the neo-cons, are best preserved in tradition. And tradition is pickled best in 'traditional institutions'. So rollback the state and let what de Tocqueville called 'the art of association' flourish.

But the Right is wrong. Traditional institutions alone are just not enough to reaffirm the 'ties that bind us'.

They simply don't command the trust they once did. They are simply no longer regarded as the unambiguously good beacons they were amongst even the sceptical baby boomers, never mind anyone any younger - and remember over 50% of Britain is under 40.

That is why writers like Robert Putnam are right to argue that we need a different course; a new burst of civic inventiveness to match the energy and organisation of the pre war progressive era.

This is Labour territory.

If we were to survey Anthony Crosland's original twelve point check-list of the Labour's intellectual antecedents, we can see ideas of community and cooperation in at least seven of them.

Shared Values & Immigration Reform

Across government, there will be many stages on which these arguments about citizenship and shared values are enlarged. Reinforcing traditional institutions will be part of the deal. My point is there must be other fronts too.

Immigration policy is one of them and needless to say, Britain won't be labouring on this alone.

The Debate Abroad

This debate is now at large in advanced countries across the west and the trigger has often been that combination of concerns about extremism on the one hand, and immigration on the other.

This shouldn't be a surprise; global migration has doubled since the 1960s.

The US and Germany have accounted for 70% of this increase since 1990. Britain, which has about 2.8% of global migration, only just comes into the top ten nations.

So it is not an accident that so many western nations are starting to put values - standards, national interpretations of the rules of the game - at the heart of their immigration systems.

France made it compulsory for foreigners to sign a welcome and integration contract in July 2006. President Sarkozy is now introducing French tests abroad before issuing residence visas.

Spain has just issued its first 'Strategic Plan for Citizenship and Integration 2007-2010', including aspirations 'to foster knowledge... [of] the social norms and habits in Spanish society'.

In Berlin last July, Chancellor Merkel started development of a draft national integration plan covering courses for newcomers and knowledge of German.

The reform act now in the Italian parliament will modernise the 1992 Citizenship Act including the introduction of a language and social integration test.

Holland introduced civic integration exams as part of their requirements for a residency visa.

Sweden which rejected language exams five years ago as 'fascist, xenophobic and shameful' is now discussing ceremonies for new citizens.

The Finns are merging their departments for migration and citizenship from January 2008, and the Czech's are discussing citizenship reform.

Even countries with a long tradition of structured integration are making changes.

The Australians introduced citizenship tests like the UK's in September 2007 and from mid-October, sign-up to a Values Statement is mandatory for getting a visa.

And in the US, the Office of Citizenship created by the Homeland Security Act of 2002 is upgrading its naturalisation tests too. Applicants will have about a year to prepare for the exams which will be introduced in 2008.

As the Home Secretary said yesterday we must commit to doing the same.

Over the last month, I've been travelling across the UK seeking a good old fashioned bit of British common sense about what are the things we expect migrants to sign up to?

How do we expect to see this sign-up on show? And how do we support newcomers on this fascinating journey?

How do we begin to answer the question posed by my friend and colleague Shahid Malik?

You get a sense of what we still hold dear by asking about what we would miss if they left. The NHS is mentioned over and over again. So is the monarchy. So are our values of tolerance and fairness, of a healthy disrespect for authority yet a keen sense of order.

And so are the little things that sometimes mean everything; a cup of tea; pubs, cider, the BBC, queuing, proper chocolate; fish and chips, darts, fashion, the seasons and the countryside, walks and clubbing.

But what emerges from the debate I've listened to is British reason at its finest. Sophisticated, intelligent views and a profound sense of fairness and tolerance for a Britain in which we live and let live and actually try a bit harder to be a bit more welcoming, and a bit less shy about saying hello. We are not a nation of Alf Garnetts.

But the deal we want to put on the table is not unconditional.

On the contrary.

The rules are unambiguous; speak the language, obey the law, and make sure you're paying your taxes like the rest of us. It is a very British tough-minded fairness.

And there is a sense in the public mind, that the sooner newcomers start on the type of journey we have in mind, the better.

That's why we want to explore whether to extend a requirement to speak English from economic migrants to those coming here to marry.

That is why the Home Secretary's speech yesterday about how migrants need to absorb our language and our laws and to pay a price for failing to observe either is so important.

Here then is where I see significant next steps for immigration reform.

Because we can overhaul the rules about who we let in - as our points system will soon accomplish.

We can transform the way we police our borders as we will with our single border force.

But the vital third piece of the puzzle is the journey a newcomer might take once they are here. When we publish our proposals for a complete overhaul of immigration laws next year these ideas must inspire the measures we propose - and so I am today publishing the

results of our first consultation on the principles for reform in the future.

The journey for many newcomers will be to go home. Record numbers left Britain this year - half, in fact of the emigrants from Britain were foreign nationals.

But in the system for those who stay, our values must sit at the heart of a new programme of reform.

A sense of purpose, wider than just a desire to reduce numbers, rather a desire to combine our loyalty to our country and traditions with an acceptance of the need for change.

Conclusion

As I've travelled around Britain the overwhelming sense I've had is of the market for these ideas.

Perhaps it was different to a few years ago, but today people are looking for new ways to strengthen our national identity in the world.

But it is not an exclusive world-view. More an ambition to assert again with new force and distinction and edge the standards we all salute.

Along with the debates that are to come on the economy and on public services, my prediction is the debate about values and identity; and standards; and codes and norms is about to move closer to the centre of the stage.