

Britain is the best place in Europe to be an immigrant

What other countries can learn from its example



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The idea of Britain as a nation of immigration might seem counterintuitive. Its citizens voted to leave the European Union in 2016 after they were promised a tighter chokehold on inflows of people from Europe. This week politicians in Parliament tussled over a bill that will make it easier to ship asylum-seekers to Rwanda without hearing their pleas—the latest in a string of illiberal laws designed to “stop the boats”.

Neither does the country crow about the migrants it has. Other places have grand immigration museums; the one in New York harbour draws millions of tourists each year. Britain’s small Migration Museum, which was founded not by the state but by some worthies, sits in Lewisham Shopping Centre in south London, between a discount store and a shoe shop.

Yet Britain now has a larger share of foreign-born residents than America. One in six of its inhabitants began life in another country. The share is rising because, even as it strains to stop the boats, the Conservative government has opened the door to workers, students and selected victims of authoritarianism such as Hong Kongers and Ukrainians. Asylum is a sideshow in terms of the numbers. Fewer than 30,000 people floated across the English Channel last year. Long-term immigration in the year to June 2023 stood at 1.2m.

More surprising still is the fact that the country is so good at assimilating immigrants. Angry politicians gripe that Britain is letting in people from poor countries to do menial jobs, and weak students who want visas only so they can deliver pizzas. Multiculturalism has failed, they say: too many immigrants live parallel lives in segregated neighbourhoods. Nonsense: Britain excels at getting foreigners up to speed economically, socially and culturally. It is (in this respect, at least) a model for the rest of the world.

In many countries even skilled immigrants struggle to find jobs. In the eu foreign-born adults with degrees who are not still in education have an employment rate ten percentage points lower than natives with degrees. In Britain the gap is a trivial two points, and scantily educated foreign-born people are 12 points more likely to work than their British-born peers.

Even immigrants stuck in dull jobs know that their children tend to fare well in school. In England teenagers who do not speak English as their first language are more likely to obtain good grades in maths and English in national gcse exams than native English-speakers. The pisa tests run by the oecd, a rich-country club, show that immigrants and their children perform badly in much of Europe. In Germany immigrants' children scored 436 points in the latest maths test, against 495 for natives. In Britain they did slightly better than natives.

The idea that Britain is dividing into ghettos is a myth. Every ethnic group has consistently become less segregated since the census started keeping track in 1991. The foreign-born population is growing fastest not in traditional melting-pots such as Birmingham and inner London but in staid suburbs and smallish towns. Even within those towns, foreigners do not cluster together.

It is true that immigration remains the subject of furious political debate. But that is probably because the people who really dislike it are prepared to base their voting decisions on this issue

alone. Britons as a whole have become more relaxed, especially since the Brexit vote. They seem unfussed by one remarkable recent development. The top political jobs in Britain, Scotland and London are all held by the children of immigrants, all of South Asian descent. The first ministers of Northern Ireland and Wales were born abroad (although Michelle O'Neill only moved north from Ireland).

Britain cannot turn every migrant and every migrant's child into well-educated, productive members of society. It struggles with imported prejudices and aggressive Islamism, although that problem is sadly often home-grown. Asylum-seekers do not adjust as well as others, possibly because the government crams them into hotels and prevents them from working while it sluggishly gets round to hearing their cases. Nor is the state good at bureaucracy. The Home Office is famously incompetent. It actually retards assimilation by charging so much for naturalisation—in real terms the cost has increased by six times since 2000.

Moreover, Britain has a couple of advantages that other countries cannot replicate. It is a long way from a war zone, so it gets relatively few uninvited refugees, and it happens to use a language that lots of people speak a little. But two other explanations for its success are easier for others to copy.

The first is Britain's flexible labour market. Compared with the rest of Europe, hiring and firing is straightforward, even for people who are employed under regular contracts. That helps immigrants find an economic foothold, which makes everything else easier. Xenophobic credentialism is weaker. One unusual thing about Britain is that immigrants with foreign qualifications have almost exactly the same employment rate as those with domestic qualifications. In most European countries the gap is large; in Greece it is an amazing 25 percentage points.

Ghetto fabulists

The country's other advantage is the attitude of its people. Britons are open-minded. Just 5% told the World Values Survey that they would object to living next to an immigrant (and migrants'



children report being bullied at school less often than natives' children). Britons combine an intolerance for discrimination with high expectations. Compared with other Europeans, they are

keen for migrants to learn the language, obtain qualifications, adopt the culture and become citizens. It probably helps that Britain never had guest workers. But politicians elsewhere would be wise not to predict that newcomers it has accepted will one day go home, as Angela Merkel, then Germany's chancellor, said of refugees in 2016.

Britain has not been an obvious country to copy recently. Its major service to the rest of Europe has been to show the costs of leaving the eu. But on integration it is the place to beat. ■

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