

I have been meaning for some time to write a bit about the political and social tides which are currently roiling the UK. I finally made time to do so.

Ever since I got here I have been hearing and reading about the impact of immigration on the country. Now as someone who's here precisely to see if repatriation is the right move for me, this is a topic of great interest. First a little background.

The UK has very liberal immigration policies at the present time, especially for citizens of other European Union (EU) countries. In the EU, one country's passport is pretty much as good as any other's is. When I received my UK passport, the first thing I noticed is that it says "European Union" above "United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland" on the cover and the first page. With this passport I am a citizen of pretty much the entire continent, and may travel, live and work fairly freely about it.

This may sound simple enough, but the economic integration of Europe, the "Eurozone" is incomplete. There are many countries being integrated, but they still have their own economic ups and downs, and different standards of living. The free and open borders created by the EU, and the freedom of movement integral to the "Four Freedoms" upon which it was formed, has allowed people from the poorer countries to migrate to and get jobs in the richer ones. Thus a massive influx of Polish workers have taken most of the entry level jobs in the service industry.

This has led to some bridling by traditionalists. Recently there was a row when it was proposed that Chinese, Indian and other ethnic restaurants be required to actually have some members of those ethnicities on their kitchen staff; so many are the Poles.

The complaints are not just nationalistic, though. Culture plays a large role as well. There have been a huge immigration, too, of illegals from Muslim countries such as Jordan, Algeria, Palestine. Many of these recent immigrants have not integrated into the British society, but have constituted their own insular communities alongside that of the majority. The same has been true for years in portions of the Indian, Bangladeshi, Pakistani and other former commonwealth populations.

A recent Vanity Fair article outlined the effect of this insular world upon one man and the struggle he is now locked in with the state over allegations (as yet unsupported) of terrorism. These struggles are not unique to the UK - most European countries, especially in the north of the continent, The Netherlands, Germany, France, Belgium, have had to contend with similar problems. The failure to integrate, is achingly troubling to these liberal, open, socially supportive nations. What is different about the UK, however, is that as the colonial power over the former commonwealth, and with the national sense of commitment to the citizens of that commonwealth, it does face unique struggles.

This was reflected in the conversation I had last Saturday, the 16th, with a shopkeep in Church Street. She admonished me to stay in America and not think of repatriation. "Immigration is ruining this country!" she exclaimed. "I am not racist, it is an economic issue. The dole is too generous. A family on the dole gets £100 per child*, so a Bangladeshi woman has five kids, that's £500! She can just have another if they need some more. What am I supposed to do? My taxes are paying that. I can't have any more kids, I'm not getting anything for free." and on.

That was on Saturday. Interestingly enough, just a few days later, on Tuesday, 19th Feb., PM Gordon Brown announced "As people are ever more mobile, it also becomes ever more important to develop a new approach to managed migration...I stand for a British way of life where we, the people, are protected from crime but in return we obey the law." New immigrants are "actively entering into a contract through which, by virtue of responsibilities accepted, the right of citizenship is earned."

"We will introduce a new English language requirement for those applying for a marriage visa and planning to settle in the UK - both as part of our determination that everyone who comes here to live should be able to speak English and to make sure they cannot be exploited" said

his home secretary, Jacqui Smith. "This is a country of liberty and tolerance, opportunity and diversity, and these values are reinforced by the expectation that all who live here should learn our language, play by the rules, obey the law and contribute to the community." "Foreigners will also have to demonstrate fluency in English and knowledge of the British way of life. After five years in the country, they will have to choose to apply to become a citizen or a permanent resident. Those refusing to take either option will be ordered to leave," according to press reports.

Well, I am here at the cusp aren't I.

All around me in the paper, on the wireless and in the streets a drama is playing out in the life of a country struggling to cope with the essence of what it means to be a country. This is the tenor of debate on the topic, and the tension is palpable. People complain openly that the neighbourhood pub now serves Thai cuisine instead of bangers and pies (okay, no English food jokes here). There is open distrust on the streets, especially in places like Finsbury Park, home of the controversial Mosque where many recent terrorists and terrorism suspects, such as Richard Reid and Zacarias Moussaoui, the shoe bomber and the "20th" 9/11 hijacker, have studied and where Imam Adu Hamza gave fiery hate filled sermons.

There are calls afoot to review the nation's much vaunted approach to a multicultural society. Deborah Orr, whom I quoted in a recent posting, makes reference to this in another column [here](#).

I do not know where this will lead, but it is hot right now, and there is no election or other event looming in the near future to force the issues. It will be interesting to see where things go.

Ta!

*I am not clear if this is per month or per week. In England many rates are commonly posted and calculated per week.

Note: As I sit writing this, sitting on the patio, I have been listening to the family who lives in the home above me having tea. The window to their kitchen is open, and I hear the sounds of dining and their easy conversation. I understand very little of it as they easily slip between French and Arabic. Not much in English. I would venture a guess that they are Algerian, but that is only a guess.