



# Refugees, economic migration and the future of the world economy

**Nigel Harris**

**1 December 2009**

This lecture will discuss what has become of asylum policy, and locate this in the evolution of immigration policy in the developed countries; the strategic context of this change of direction in policy; and, finally why I believe this immigration policy posture - and thus, the dependent refugee policy - cannot be sustained, so that, despite the pessimistic current evidence, there are grounds for moderate optimism in the long-term (a time when, you might rightly note, we are all dead, so hardly consoling).

## **Asylum policy**

Can we say that in general we any longer have an asylum policy?

The situation in Britain for those in flight from tyranny or disaster seems worse now than before formal asylum policy existed. Before 1914, it was in principle relatively easy - provided you had income - to travel between countries. The UK accepted at different times waves of refugees without great disruption - the Huguenots, for example, from France and the Low countries, refugees from the Paris Commune in 1872, Russian and Polish Jews in the 1890s, and many other communities and individuals, whether fleeing terror or just choosing to resettle (the so-called Laskars and the Chinese, for example, who settled in London, Liverpool and Cardiff in the nineteenth century). Only the reluctant and tardy reaction to the 1930s flight of victims of Nazi-ism hinted at some of the future difficulties.

Now the picture is drastically different. So far, no one has tried to abrogate the Geneva Convention and the 1961 Protocol (though the idea has been floated at Ministerial level), but every obstacle has been put in the way of anyone seeking to claim refugee status - most frequently the spirit of compassion is dodged through shifty subterfuge, even if the letter of the commitments is obeyed.

Major efforts have gone into stopping people arriving.

You may recall Tony Blair's rejected 2003 proposal to set up reception centres for new arrivals outside the EU - in current language - to "warehouse" arrivals. In fact, now European border control has been outsourced - to the breakwaters (to employ the water imagery of migrant flows) of Morocco, Ukraine, Turkey, Libya, fortresses on the perimeter. Even now the Italian government, without EU protests, intercepts migrants in the Mediterranean and forces them back to Libya ("push back" - the policy stance of one of the new BNP MEPs) - Berlusconi's comment. (Note that Libya is not only not a signatory to the Geneva Convention, it has a notorious record on human rights. It seems Libyan police, in cahoots with the smugglers, hold returned migrants in appalling condition to force families to pay hostage money). It is good business. Now Libya has obtained from Italy a rumored half billion pound payment for this service (and help fortifying its southern border), and demands the EU pay another half billion). The EU does not seem to concern itself with detention conditions in Libya. On top, permission is granted for licensed brutality of border controls and coast guard interception - irregulars are invaders.

Italy is not alone: the US Coastguards aim to prevent Haitian migrants landing in Florida, the Australians seek to prevent landings of Afghans or Tamils, diverting those in flight to Christmas Island. Reminiscent of President Bush's Rendition policy- those who do not arrive have no rights.

## Stopping people leaving

Stopping people arriving is messy expensive and ineffective - and bad publicity (sinking boats)

So, I fear, the future direction of policy will be to stop them leaving - locking them up in their country of birth. At the moment, governments are restrained here since restricting the right to leave a country collides directly with the UN Declaration of Human Rights. But intergovernmental discussions take place, and UK immigration officers monitor passports at Mumbai and other major transport junctions to prevent people getting on UK-bound flights.

Can there then to be said to be an effective right to leave a country if people are either locked in (permitted to be "internally displaced persons" and of no concern to foreign governments) or way-laid and forced back in transit?

Instituting rigorous punishment for those who, nonetheless, succeed in arriving.

If people do escape and get into Britain, they fall into legal limbo, presumed guilty of illegality from the beginning (as they must be since there is no legal provision to enter the country). They join the queue to secure refugee status - and if they fled in terror, they may well lack any documentation to support their claim) - there were 450,000 in the UK queue in 2006 (some claims dating back to the 1990s).

The grounds for acceptance have become increasingly opaque. While refugees wait, they may not work, are sometimes held in detention (Sept.2009, 1300 children were held in detention - 200 per year held for over 28 days, with all the psychiatric and other misery that implies). As is now notorious, whole families are driven into destitution if not suicidal despair. At the end, if their claim fails, they may again be held indefinitely in detention or expelled by force.

The only saving grace is that expulsion is relatively rare because of the cost - the 44 Iraqis recently deported to Baghdad (but refused entry) were accompanied by 80 policemen and officials. To expel the existing 725,000 irregular entrants, one estimate has it, would cost £8 billion and take 30 years. And note here the extraordinary costs, with only the shallowest effort to evaluate value for money.

The logic appears impeccable - do not even think of trying to escape threats to your existence in your own country. The purpose of this horrendous regime is punitive - to deter people from seeking to be refugees. If you wished, even so, to secure sanctuary in Britain, you would be utterly foolish to try for refugee status - always use a tourist visa if you can and become an illegal immigrant (as Kurds in 90s) and disappear into the population. You may be insecure, but you have a little freedom and dignity left to work and pull the tattered threads of your family's life back into some coherence.

The policy is working. A policy inspired by compassion could never predict the numbers seeking protection - this depends on the unpredictable occurrence of catastrophe (invading Iraq or Afghanistan, for example). But quite independently of the occurrence of disaster, the numbers have come down and are broadly stable. Compassion has become a token, an administrative measure, unrelated to the immense fluctuations in misery. Since 2005, 77,000 refused asylum in the UK, were from countries officially classed as "dangerous and unstable".

The work of CARA is directly affected here. The "intelligentsia" creates a nation's self-perception. Inevitably, therefore, it is a prime target for a tyrannical regime to control, use as scapegoats or even liquidate - inevitably the intellectuals and professionals will bulk large in any mass flight.

As an aside, you might note, in this context, the irony of the recent celebration to mark the fall of the Berlin Wall. The overthrow of the iron curtain opened the national prisons that had locked up the populations of Eastern Europe, for an extraordinary forty years. Of course, there was no mention of the wall the US is building across its border with Mexico - and the other walls between Israel and the West Bank, India and Bangladesh, Morocco and Algeria and no doubt others. It is supposed, locking people out is legitimate, locking them in is not - though, as we noted earlier, the right to leave without the right to arrive, makes no sense without global free lands.

To return to the question of the intelligentsia. When it comes to highly skilled refugees, the national case seems to become completely irrational and mysterious. As you know, every developed country is trying to recruit highly skilled workers (the rationale of the Points system just introduced in Britain), in order to secure its political and economic domination in the future - in polite terms, it is called ensuring the nation is competitive. Now, you might think that the UK government, faced with a rival State so stupid or incompetent as to lose or drive out its highly skilled workers, would rejoice and greet them with open arms,

offering all facilities for them to settle. They might have to move quickly since other States would be so eager to grab them. You might equally think the government would seek to ensure the skills of the migrants were fully utilized - physicists don't work as cleaners. But no, punishment overrides such considerations.

The waste of skills is prodigious. You may recall a vivid example - in 2005, the BMA calculated that the number of refugee physicians, forbidden to work while their application for asylum were determined was roughly equivalent to the number of unfilled vacancies for doctors in the NHS. Could not all those doctors be diverted from demoralization at kicking their heels into caring for those, the native-born, who needed them?

One should not underestimate the capacity of governments to subordinate economic commonsense and patient-care to immediate political dogmatism. Those who travel without a licence - the "illegal" or Daily Mail's "bogus asylum-seeker" - must be given exemplary punishment, without any legal right to challenge to discourage any others seeking to flee. The refugee - to put it in feudal terms, has rejected his lord, his national fealty, without securing another lord. In terms Japanese terms, ronin, and therefore a threat, undermining an order where we all necessarily belong to some State. They have become unnatural, out of consonance with nature until they are "naturalized" to a new national Lord - or expelled.

I am reminded, in this context, of the visceral horror expressed in the past about people who might claim dual nationality. An American ambassador writing to Lord Palmerston, then British PM, in 1859, declared:

"States could as soon tolerate a man with two wives as a man with two countries, as soon bear with polygamy as that state of double allegiance which common sense so repudiates that it has not even coined a word to express it". Or, to put it more succinctly, in our feudal order, no man can serve two masters. If he doesn't have one, he risks his life.

### **The strategic context of immigration policy**

In a single global economy - capital, information and goods move freely across the world. But not labour - indeed, the modern world is here characterized not by global integration, but a stubborn exaggerated and growing separation into national patches. Never before, with a few exceptions, has it been so difficult for people to move freely between national domains - and be protected. Human rights are effective insofar as they are enforced, and at the moment enforcement is the exclusive prerogative of States. We have a shadowy ghost of a world morality, of universal human rights. But the national policeman draws a sharp line between those within and those without the frontier who have no right to be in my backyard.

So we have a paradox - everyone speaks of globalization, but the political reality in terms of people, is an unprecedented growth in nationalism. Could we say the one is the product of the other? Has economic globalization so undermined the autonomy of the national State, it is increasingly seeking to shore up its political hold on those it claims as its own, and as a consequence more strongly reject all others?

The symbol of this anti-globalization in terms of people is the extraordinary unilateral character of immigration policy. In almost areas of international policy, consultation between governments is the norm. But here, the UK, like all other national governments, shoots from the hip on a take it or leave it basis, without any attempt to consult the States from which migrants come. It fires as from a position of exclusive control of a scarce privilege, an entry visa.

Yet immigration controls affect key issues of the world's scarce resources. It is now becoming increasingly clear that immigration controls in the developed countries are the biggest international constraint on the reduction of world poverty.

Migration has always been the biggest mechanism available to poor people to escape poverty and the appalling injustice of a world where life chances are distributed according to the extraordinary accident of where you were born. That initial injustice is now steadily reinforced by locking up people in the places where they were born, regardless of opportunity. In a world without borders, people would, as they have for thousands of years migrate, redistributing themselves, to where the economic prospects are most promising. (As they still do internally, for example with urbanisation in developing countries.)

The one resource developing countries have in abundance is low-skilled labour, but immigration controls block the exploitation of that resource, lock up the poverty where it is. At the same time, the developed countries seek to pull in the world's most skilled workers (and recruit their best students, then induced to settle there) which intensifies the problem of poverty, stripping Malawi, for example, of its nurses and

doctors, bringing them to countries which already have an abundant mass of skills. Thus, the States of the developed world doubly sacrifice the world at large to reinforce their own political position.

## The future

The developed world needs workers

The domestic labour force in the developed countries is no longer self-sufficient, large or skilled enough to man, their economies. As it were, the economies have become too large for the size of workforce. Either they must reduce their size or go global, operating like global corporations in many different countries (where the workers are available and eager to work). Of course, it is already happening surreptitiously: the real labour force for Britain's economy is scattered throughout the world, far beyond the authority or even the knowledge of a British government, limited to this little geographical patch.

Because of this imbalance between the national and global economies, the developing countries are going to have growing leverage, forcing the developed countries to end unilateralism and negotiate on the terms for the redistribution of the world's stock of workers: first, the shortage of skills in the developed countries affects their capacity to produce what they supply the world. In principle, it does not matter if the world labour force is trained in London, Lagos, Calcutta or Bogota, provided they have the freedom to circulate and the costs of training the world's workers are born equitably; second, demographic ageing. What I call the "who will care for granny (or grandpa)" question. It is clear the native born, even the unskilled are becoming far too skilled to do that. The welfare of the aged of the developed countries depends upon the availability of a vast supply of relatively low skilled workers in occupations peculiarly resistant to productivity improvements (unlike manufacturing, say or IT services) - what Lant Pritchett calls -productivity-resistant low skill hard core non-tradable services.

Of course, the elderly could emigrate to where the workers are (and some are already doing so). But if they prefer not to, Governments will have to design systems for the perpetual recruitment of low skill workers, whether permanently resident ("immigrants") or circulating, that is, on the assumption that they care about the welfare of their inhabitants. In sum, unlocking the labour reserves of the developing countries bids fair to begin the sustained move to world full employment and the radical reduction of global poverty.

Recruiting the skilled while forcing the unskilled to remain tied to the soil of their birth place, produces an immensely unjust system of apartheid in international migration - the skilled whites may move freely, the unskilled blacks are permanently excluded, trapped permanently in zombie States.

You may think I have wandered far too far from the preoccupations that concern CARA and for that I apologise. Immigration, and the transition to a global economy, has destroyed the simplicities of the principle of compassion for those in flight, leaving a policy posture which is immoral, economically irrational, cruel, and ineffective - with no link to compassion.

Since governments cannot - at acceptable political and economic cost, control the movement across their borders, draconian controls will vastly expand irregular movement, the global black economy, with all its attendant horrors in terms of inhuman and exploitative conditions. A major chunk of the world and national economies slips below statistical threshold - is this the direction of the world is taking? Policy is achieving what it is designed to prevent.

It seems most difficult in current political circumstances to see how compassion can be restored to policy. While it is vital to mobilise unremitting pressure to preserve what is left of it - and here the media exposure of the oppressive torment in many countries gives some hope - the springs of compassion have by no means entirely run dry. However, without an orderly system in which all, in principle, have the right to move and to be protected while they do so, it is difficult to see how we can re-establish the principle of compassion. The policies of growing nationalism collide directly with economics of globalisation.

We are - in the long-drawn-out transition to a global order - in the most difficult position. The old national order is dying without the benefits of a global order in which all are equal citizens becomes effective. On the other hand, any easing in the restrictions on circulation, ease the possibility of refugees being able to find security.

© Nigel Harris, 2009