

Immigration and the division of power

OUR PARLIAMENT HAS LESS AND LESS POWER, WHILE THE JUSTICE SYSTEM GAINS INFLUENCE

Alp Mehmet signals deep-rooted reasons for the current political fissures in Europe and the UK: the lack of flexibility of the European Commission, the migration crisis, and an economic concept that encourages low-wage migration. Much more important than an increase in GDP is for Mehmet the GDP per capita. And here England falls behind in Europe.



Alp Mehmet is Chairman of the British think tank Migration Watch. He is a former diplomat and one of the United Kingdom's first two ethnic minority ambassadors. In his early years he worked in immigration issues. In 2004 he was appointed ambassador and served in Romania, Germany and Iceland. As Chairman of Migration Watch he is active in „lobbying government to change immigration policy so that it better reflects the will of the people“.

Dirk Bornschein: "Our main interest is in comparing immigration debates across different European countries — looking at their deep-rooted origins, internal dynamics, and consequences. But over time, we realized that these deep roots definitely deserve more attention. So today, we'd like to focus on them.

You are the Chairman of Migration Watch. In what context was your organization founded?

Alp Mehmet: Migration Watch was set up in 2001. It was started by Sir Andrew Green, a colleague of mine from the Foreign Office, who retired having served as ambassador to Syria and to Saudi Arabia and David Coleman, who was a professor of demography at St. John's College, Oxford. They agreed on fundamental issues of immigration and its impact on the country, for example that the public was not always kept aware of what was going on, what immigration there was and what the impact was.

Could we talk about these fundamental issues and their impact, please?

Mehmet: There are so many aspects. First of all, Coleman was looking at the demographic impact of migration and showing, just to put it simply: The population in the UK was growing because of immigration. Then they pointed to the impact of migration on the economy, the social impact, on employment and health service.

Migration Watch is known to critically accompany the immigration process. How was this finding received?

Mehmet: From the outset, we were criticised and attacked, especially by the left and left-wing media, newspapers such as The Guardian and The Independent, which described us at the time as a nasty little organisation with ulterior motives. They claimed that our forecasts and predictions were all wrong. In 2002, Andrew and David said that net immigration, i.e. the number of immigrants minus the number of emigrants, was really starting to get out of control.

The situation had indeed spiralled out of control at that point, but we said that this was clearly something we had no control over and that if net immigration continued at the level seen in 2001 and 2002, the population would grow by two million people every ten years. And that is precisely what drew criticism that we were wrong and simply spreading racist stereotypes. But ten years later, it is clear that we were actually absolutely right.

What direction were other organisations thinking in at that time?

Mehmet: There was nobody else, 20 years ago, and even 10 years ago, we used to be the only sort of acknowledged experts on the issue in the UK. But now there are many more: academics, politicians, think tanks, initially because of the wave that Merkel in Germany, to a certain extent, encouraged. I wouldn't blame her and say that she's entirely responsible. She wasn't. But I think she certainly gave a little boost to that wave of asylum migration. But then, you know, what is asylum? People who want a better life, people who want to escape poverty, they want to escape strife, but they're not, strictly speaking, the sort of people that the 1951 Convention, the ECHR, the Council of Europe, and European human rights have gradually been modified primarily by judicial overreach.

Before we get there, let us remain with these beginnings for now. Where do we start?

Mehmet: I mean, I touched on immigration as it became more politically salient. When the Blair government won its landslide election in 1997, net migration was around 40,000 to 50,000 a year. Before that, it had been either zero or negative, as far as Britain was concerned. For many years, that was the story. That changed for a number of reasons, and a lot of them had to do with the way that the Blair government sought to control immigration.

Could you explain some of these reasons for the drastic change in immigration dynamics in the United Kingdom?

Mehmet: We have to distinguish immigration for employment, immigration for studies and immigration of family members. Blair's administration was more accommodating in the migration issue. All the rules were loosened to the extent that by the time we got to the early 2000s, we suddenly had to face increased sort of normal net migration as well as asylum migration. And then, the Middle East was falling apart, or the Balkan wars which had been going on from sort of the mid 90s and all of a sudden there was a lot of migration being thrown up by the Balkans. So, in that time immigration to Britain was increasing, as it was elsewhere in Europe as well.

And the enlargement of the European Union?

Mehmet: That was, of course, another important aspect of immigration. Eastern Europe, Cyprus, Malta – suddenly we opened up to all these countries. At that time, these countries were poor, Poland was struggling economically. And we knew that they would all go to Germany, Britain, France or wherever as soon as we told them they could. But Tony Blair's government was advised that enlargement would not lead to massive population movements from Eastern Europe.

And there were academics, whom I still regularly encounter in debates, who said that around 5,000 to 13,000 migrants would come to the UK each year. And we said it would be many, many more, around 70.000.

I was in a debate with the Romanian ambassador at the Houses of Parliament, where he said to me, you're wrong, my people will not come here. And I'll bet you a magnum of champagne, he said. In fact, it turned out to be around 90,000.

... And you were criticised for this forecast...

Mehmet: Right. What was supposed to be 5,000 or 13,000 led to a million within a very short time. But then it was that sort of massive movement of people that really caused concerns. And the perception of many people was that they were ultimately being given preferential treatment because employers rather like them, because they were prepared to work for lower wages.

Poles were always people that Britain took to its heart, and yet the speed of the increase—and I think this was really as much the problem—the speed with which migration took place, the increasing dependence on the young, strong, willing Eastern European workers, that prompted resentment.

In any case, does immigration make the economy more flexible?

Mehmet: I mean, capitalism is all about the market, and it's all about the freedom to enter or leave the market. But the framework that we've set up encourages low-skill, low-pay migration. But that in itself actually helps higher profits and expansion.

But isn't it a fact that migration promotes economic growth?

Mehmet: People work, people pay taxes, people buy goods. With a larger population, more people work and GDP and the economy grow. Terrific, but that doesn't mean a lot. When you look at GDP per head, per capita, in Britain, it hasn't actually moved very much in the last 15 years. It has fallen behind other comparable countries. It has not increased in the way that some European countries, and certainly the United States, have grown since 2007, since the Great Recession.

At least jobs were created.

Mehmet: With regard to Britain, a lot of jobs were created, primarily because of cheap labor, though cheap to us. You know, if you're looking at an average income of 40,000 a year per person in Britain, compared to India or anywhere in Africa, you're talking about an income that is a minuscule part of what it is here.

Of course, this is exactly what happened after 2005 with low-income, often unemployed people from Poland, Lithuania and other Baltic states, Slovakia, even Hungary and the Czech Republic. These people came to the United Kingdom or Germany. And that led to resentment. In the eyes of people who were struggling themselves, many people came into the country who were willing to take low-skilled and poorly paid jobs because they could live in a room or a shared flat, while the average Brits had many more obligations to pay for. But this was really the perception, rightly or wrongly, that people had. In that time already we said, look, if we don't get a grip on immigration, if we don't bring it under control now, ultimately you'll find that the more extreme elements in our society would eventually begin to have much more influence, and certainly that's what happened.

Could you please explain the idea you mentioned, this “increasing dependence” on immigration?

Mehmet: I think it has a lot to do with the fact that with increasing immigration, there are companies set up, with quite labour-intensive procedures, that require a lot of unskilled, manual labour. And with a new market increasing, there will be space for other people.

For example, there are Brits like saying, “Well, okay, you want me to work this hard for you to hire and fire me at any point that you wish, but you pay me very little for me to pay my rent, pay my mortgage and look after my family.” “If I am able to secure benefits without actually working, why the hell should I work for you, work my guts off, so that you can make huge profits?”

And then there is our National Health Service, which, in my experience, is appalling. It needs to be fundamentally reformed. Nevertheless, the health service employs a large number of medical staff who were not trained in the UK, many times more than in Germany, France or the Netherlands – because when it comes to doctors, we have deliberately limited the number of trained doctors.

Astonishing. Why is that?

Mehmet: Well, it probably has its roots in the days when the profession felt threatened, and the British Medical Council, which is essentially responsible for the training of doctors, had limits on the numbers of doctors that can be trained each year.

On the other side our population has grown exponentially, by 8 million people, between 1991 and 2021. And seven million was due to immigration, migrants, and children born to migrants.

And that growth in population, that growth in demand, and also the openness of our health sector... It's the demand on the services by a growing population, and an increased and greater number of people who are here temporarily as well.

May I add another aspect here that has to do with demographics?

Of course, demography is one of the areas we have to talk about. Go ahead.

Mehmet: In the 1950s, when my father first came, the ethnic minority proportion of the United Kingdom's population was around three percent, under four percent. It was still only five percent in the 1991 census. In 2021, it suddenly rose to 25 percent. It's now probably 30 percent.

So in the space of 30 years, we've seen a shrinking of the native population, if you like, and an increase of roughly fivefold in the ethnic minority share of the population. If this continues—and immigration has surged even more since the 2021 census—we're now looking at the ethnic minority portion of the population reaching around 50 percent by the late 2050s.

In the next 30, 35 years, you'll have ethnic minorities on the verge of becoming the majority within the lifetimes of certainly anyone born today. Now you might say, so what? People are people. But what that means is that the foundations and the fundamental basis of our societies, of European society, really, are going to change radically.

You mean, massive immigration as a threat to questions of identity and one's own culture?

Mehmet: That's what I think we need to be concerned about, because it also implies a lot of fracturing of the cohesion we've enjoyed in my country for millennia. It's something that is now featuring more in people's thinking. It worries them, because older people see it as bringing huge uncertainty to the future of their children and grandchildren.

This sounds as if you were talking about one of the reasons for Brexit.

Mehmet: Absolutely! You know, it wasn't Farage who was behind Brexit. Farage, I think, had a very sharp sense of where our life, our politics, and our economy were headed, and he could see what that direction of change would mean for ordinary people in this country. The other thing he saw was, as a member of the European Parliament, for twenty years how Brussels behaved.

I mean, we're not bosom buddies, we're not friends. I know him, he knows me, but Farage isn't anti anyone in Europe. He's not someone who's hostile to foreigners, or to the Germans, or the French, or anyone else in Europe, but he was vehemently opposed to the way the EU, Brussels, and the Commission operated.

And that was what drove him to believe Britain had to leave, because looking ahead at what was likely to happen, the path Europe was on, driven from Brussels, would ultimately lead to a Britain that ordinary Brits would find alien, an evolution that would feel wrong to them.

Do you consider Brussels to be partly responsible for Brexit?

Mehmet: Of course. There is a speech that John Major gave in Berlin. I believe it was in November 2014, but I could be mistaken. David Cameron, the Prime Minister at the time, wanted to reshape our relationship, as Keir Starmer is doing now, but he wanted certain changes to our agreements, particularly with regard to the free movement of people, and that was, of course, anathema to Brussels and other capitals.

But in some capitals, it was thought possible that we could change our relationship and our agreements on free movement if Brussels would relax its stance on this issue, which had led to a massive shift, a massive demographic shift from other parts of the continent to the UK.

And John Major, who is strongly opposed to Brexit, or at least was, travelled to Berlin at Cameron's behest, gave this speech, and said that they needed to be more accommodating, more flexible on this issue.

... With regard to immigration?

Mehmet: I think what he was hinting at was that we should all be able to resist the flow of unskilled labor. Schengen made actual movement much easier, and there was no question of ending Schengen, though gradually it's being stymied, I think. But I believe Major's intention was to persuade Berlin to come on side and say, yes, we've got to place some restrictions. And he was given short shrift, as we might say, told to go away and just get on with it. That was a mistake.

And I think if Brussels, if the Commission, and if our friends in Europe had been a little more farsighted and granted that wish, I don't think we would have ended up leaving the EU. But it was clear—many people felt that rebuff, that pushback to say, go away, that in itself was an indication of what would come in the years ahead.

I do wonder sometimes whether the whole construct of the European Union doesn't need a bit of easing, a bit more flexibility.

But that means you also attribute some responsibility to the German government.

Mehmet: The truth is that the period between 1945 and 1990 was about reshaping and reordering Europe so that it would no longer pose a threat to any of us. After 1990, Germany was starting to become more self-confident, while France, to some extent, was weakening—not necessarily in strength, but the hold France had over Europe was weakening too, mainly because of developments inside France. Now, I know Berlin didn't want Britain to leave. No question about it. Part of why Germany wanted us to stay was that we would help them act as a kind of balancing force between Germany and France.

In summary, regarding Brexit and the role of immigration, you see the sudden rise in immigration and the fear of being overwhelmed, but also the role of Germany and the European Union.

Mehmet: Well, I've only mentioned a few aspects of the dynamics here that aren't always adequately appreciated.

What role does academia play in the migration discussion in the UK?

Mehmet: Some recent polling showed that something like 85%, or maybe more, of academics are liberal progressives. The vast majority of them would have voted remain. They regard themselves as progressives on the left politically—that's simply a fact, a very high proportion.

Influential think tanks, even those on the economic right of centre, were all for Remain, and it's only recently, over almost this past year, that a number of them have come out in favor of less migration.

Pre-Brexit, everybody argued that migration was good for the economy and that we should have it, that it was all about the free market and the market functioning properly. Therefore, we needed lots of people coming from different countries. Well, many of them are changing their tune now.

According to you, how should your country, the UK, deal with migration now, and why?

Mehmet: Immigration has been a feature of this country for millennia. It's not immigration per se that I or my small organization are against. We're not. I think the issue is the scale of immigration and the mix—the kind of people who are coming here. That whole process is really out of control now, and it's way, way too much for what is sustainable.

The way the population is increasing, and migration being fuelled by the desire to grow small businesses with cheap labor, is going to prove disastrous. It's already a big problem. I would call for zero net migration, as far as that's possible. That doesn't mean no migration. It means balancing the number of people coming in with the number leaving, and having a system in place to make that happen.

But zero net migration is not easy at all.

Mehmet: It isn't easy, because there are so many different categories involved. And firstly, we mustn't forget that illegal migration and asylum are only a small part of the legal flow. Three years ago, immigration reached net of 906,000, nearly a million. That is clearly absurd. So I would tackle three main areas immigration derives from. There are those coming for work, those coming to join family or as dependents, and thirdly, those who come here to study for higher education.

What's the problem with the students? Do they come here, study, pay lots of money, and then leave and go back to their countries, using the skills they learned? Well, if that were true, I'd have no problem with it. I spent many years of my professional career giving scholarships to very bright young people to come and study in my country.

Higher education is a good way of helping the wider world to become more intertwined with the rest of us, particularly the poorer developing world, but that doesn't happen if, say, you have half a dozen young Nigerians or Mali nationals coming here, becoming doctors and engineers, and then staying on here. This is a brain drain.

How many students are we talking about?

Mehmet: We recently published a report on this. Over a period of three years, around 2.1 million students come to us to complete a university education. Only about half of them will leave the UK again, as things stand at present.

That is an enormous influx in this category alone. Added to this are those who come here to work and are allowed to work for four or five years, as well as the relatives of those who come here. Added to this is the number of asylum seekers. Not all of them, 40,000 to 50,000 this year, will arrive in small boats. There will be more who arrive in lorries or containers. I estimate that probably around 50,000 to 60,000 will enter illegally.

But what we are also seeing now is that those who enter legally, for example to study, to work, to come for a short period of time and to leave again when it is time to leave, will apply for asylum.

People claiming asylum after studying in the UK?

Mehmet: I mean, something like 45% of Pakistani students who ended their time claimed asylum when they were required to leave. This student paper is the first of three papers that we're doing on studies, work, and family visas, that's sort of the bulk of migration.

You've got to have some sort of limit to the numbers that come in.

But as you mentioned, immigration policy is not responding to the relaxation of regulations, is it?

Mehmet: Certainly. One reason for the massive influx was the lifting of this restriction on the number of entrants and also the control, because permission to enter this country always lay with a government official like me, who worked as a visa officer abroad. Our law was framed in such a way that the immigration officer on the point of entry had the final say on who could enter the country.

That is no longer the case. We have pretty much lifted that. We have also closed our operation around the world, our visa operation, where individuals were interviewed before their visa was issued if they were coming here.

But is it realistic to interview every person who applies right now?

Mehmet: You are right, but even if you don't go back to requiring everyone to submit to an interview, that's probably unrealistic given the numbers now, I think we should certainly revert to interviewing those who are coming here for long stays, be it to study, be it to work, or to migrate.

With regard to work, what we have said is: given the authority to employers to recruit people, and with no real oversight on who's coming in or whether they leave, the government—the people—should have the final say on who enters their country, the elected government and its officials. I want to restore that.

Also, regarding employment, I would remove the free hand we have given to universities and employers to recruit whomever they want. So if someone applies to come here to study at a recognised university—even if that university isn't very good, or the course seems to have little merit, and they call it a degree and charge much higher fees. No one ever checks whether this person realistically has the prospect of actually completing a degree.

Education is a business too...

Mehmet: It's become a business, and that's wrong. These are the sort of areas where I would exert greater control and limit the numbers. There has to be a cap. We did that. The present government says that previous Conservative governments tried it and it didn't work.

Is that true, and if so, what experiences have been made with the caps?

Mehmet: Well yes, they did try it. In 2011, the Conservative government, when Theresa May was Home Secretary and David Cameron was Prime Minister, they introduced a cap of 20,700 skilled visas. And skilled visas were visas that you generally had to have a degree-level qualification for, and you had to take a job that paid above a certain amount.

Of course, this was a time when we were still in the European Union, and a number of EU nationals could come over. But nevertheless, it worked very well for four years. In the fifth year, the numbers began to reach the ceiling and employers complained.

They said, well, we can't manage, we can't exist without these people coming in. And the government, listening to the powerful employer lobby, did away with the cap rather than raising it, because it had shown to work. They removed it, which was a mistake. So caps do work; Australians use them, and I would reintroduce one for each area, and possibly an overall one.

We all know that European countries differ in terms of their geographical location, social and economic conditions, and historical experiences. Despite these differences, I would like to ask you whether you have any recommendations for other European countries, i.e. lessons we can learn from the British example.

Mehmet: I think you're right—every country is different. We're all approaching this issue from slightly different perspectives, to put it mildly. Regarding the mistakes I see, others may not view them as mistakes, but our big errors were tied to the gradual withdrawal of control.

Sorry to interrupt, but a few years ago there was talk that the state itself should reduce its range of influence. How do you view the lack of control in this regard?

Mehmet: I think that our parliaments clearly have less and less authority. In the United Kingdom, we were brought up to believe that Parliament was sovereign, that it could legislate as it saw fit and that it was superior to all others. That has changed significantly, and the EU has a lot to do with it, because we as governments and parliaments have gradually abdicated our duty and responsibility to govern and enact laws that the people have agreed to.

That was a democracy in which we had a choice: governments would draft laws based on what we had been promised. Once we had transferred more and more authority from ourselves to others, it became very difficult to get it back in any way. And Brexit, from the point of view of those who voted to leave, was an attempt to move in precisely that direction.

You see more a lack of democratic control.

Mehmet: So, yes, I partly agree with you that the status of government is weakened, but I think this wound has been self-inflicted. In addition to shifting responsibility and authority onto others, the judiciary has taken on an increasing role in the implementation of our laws. So questioning the measures our politicians have put in place.

I think that governments nowadays are generally less and less prepared to accept responsibility because they're afraid of being blamed for mistakes.

You mentioned the increasing role of the justice system in the current political system.

Mehmet: Indeed, our increasing reliance on the courts to make decisions is ridiculous. Yesterday, there was an appeal in court where the government lawyer presenting the appeal to the appeal judges said that international law and human rights take precedence over the rights and wishes of our population.

I mean, it's not something that you've ever heard before from a government. I mean, it's extraordinary. And that really is symptomatic of the fact that our politicians, you know, they go around in fancy cars and lots of people listen to them, but in the end, what they're doing is achieving nothing because they're not accepting responsibility. But that is Alp Mehmet speaking. That's the way I feel strongly about that. Having worked for politicians for half my working life, working in the Foreign Office with all sorts of people, I've seen politics from the inside, and I know that politicians, ministers, have changed. Their attitudes have changed. And they're much less willing now than they were.

Alp Mehmet, thank you very much for this reflection.