

Escaping the Bell Jar

There is a deficit of meaningful dialogue in the immigration debate. Despite unprecedented access to countless news sources, rich information, and varied points of view, we often tend to only consume our favourite flavour of opinion.

In part, due to the explosion of online media and the self-learning algorithms of search engines, it is now easier than ever to segregate oneself, willingly or not, to a tribalism of sorts in which we encounter only those ideas with which we already agree. Within the confines of these hermetic environs it becomes second nature to be outraged at, while simultaneously oblivious to the content of, the other side's position. Rather than seeking to understand the merits of differing beliefs, we prefer to digress into ad homonym attacks, misplaced anger, and deafness.

On the political stage, this absence of discussion and information isolationism plays itself out through the crafting of policies that are more focused on beating the opposition, towing a party line, or gaining ephemeral political capital than arriving at coherent, practical solutions. Responses are often more ideological than logical.

Nowhere, in recent weeks, has this been more apparent than with the debate concerning Romania and Bulgaria.

A2 Countries

Bulgaria and Romania, also known as the A2 nations, joined the European Union in 2007. At the time of their accession, transitional arrangements were put in place to restrict A2 nationals' access to the job market. With these interim measures set to expire in early 2014, reactions have been predictably drawn down familiar party lines, with neither side paying particular attention to the other.

In the past several months, a host of politicians, media outlets, and organizations have begun to circle the wagons and sound the alarm that a fresh wave of immigrants will soon flood the UK. This influx of more immigrants, critics claim, will further strain the social, economic, and cultural well being of the UK.¹ As one headline warned, '30 million Bulgarians and Romanians are set to gain unrestricted access to UK as EU regulations are lifted'.²

As would be expected, many of the direst warnings are either dangerously misleading or objectively false. By way of example, the combined populations of Bulgaria and Romania total approximately 30 million.³ It is therefore doubtful, as is implied in the above headline, that all 30 million citizens of both nations will leave hearth and home to hang a shingle in the UK. Indeed, it could also be pointed out that 60 million British citizens have unrestricted access to Romania and Bulgaria – double the population of both countries.

Similarly, a number of news sources have made comparisons to 2004 when A8 workers (including the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia,

¹ <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201213/cmhansrd/cm121031/debtext/121031-0001.htm#12103160000001> at column 237

² <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2224386/Fears-new-immigration-surge-Bulgarians-Romanians-Britain-borders-open.html>

³ [Romania's population](#) is currently listed at 21.39 million and [Bulgaria's population](#) at 7.476 million.

Malta, and Cyprus) were granted permission to work.⁴ This, too, is in large part a specious analogy. At that time, unrestricted access was granted only to the labour markets of three countries – the UK, Sweden, and Ireland⁵ - not 25 countries, as is the number lifting restrictions now.⁶ Moreover, the economy in the UK, as with the rest of Europe, has weakened since 2004. In a time when the UK is potentially facing a triple-dip recession,⁷ and where many of the jobs previously occupied by earlier immigrants no longer exist, it is unlikely that the draw will be as dramatic or the impact as dire as many would suggest.

Most recently, there have been reports that the Government is considering launching an anti-UK ad campaign to dampen Romanian and Bulgarian enthusiasm for migrating to the UK. These ads, in theory, would highlight the perceived negative aspects of life in the UK, such as poor weather, low pay, and scarcity of work.⁸

Beyond the expected and justified shock, this has led some to counter with similarly negative, though ironic, adverts. Gandul, a Romanian newspaper, ran mock ads asking why anyone would want to leave Romania where half the women look like Kate Middleton and the other half like her sister.⁹ Similarly, the Guardian held a contest to come up with the catchiest anti-ad, generating such taglines as:

- UK? YUK!
- Come Here and Clean the Loo (a play on the WWII poster 'Keep Calm and Carry On')
- Summertime and the Living Ain't Easy. Britain: Don't bother we're closed
- The sky in the UK is this colour for 8 months of the year. Try Miami instead (set on a solid dark gray background)

The idea of a consciously negative ad, aside from being counter-productive and offensive, is even more astonishing in light of the very recent public relations push surrounding the London 2012 Olympic games which promoted the UK to the world.¹⁰ It is also indicative of how far the immigration debate has strayed from a meaningful exchange of ideas.

Discussing the issues

It is often too easy to live within the vacuum of our own bell jar, safely tucked away from the tumultuous, bouncing collisions of external ideas.¹¹ However, honest debate and informed discourse demand much more of us. This can only come from experiencing the jarring impact of conflicting ideas that exist outside of a vacuum.

⁴ <http://www.publicserviceeurope.com/article/2686/uk-cannot-afford-eu-open-borders-any-longer>; see also <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2252675/Were-way-Britain-In-year-29-million-Romanians-Bulgarians-right-settle-Britain-claim-benefits-And-gipsy-community-hardly-wait-here.html#axzz2JsKRYzpF>

⁵ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2013/jan/15/bulgarian-romanian-migration-uk-restrictions> (paras 7-11)

⁶ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/jan/27/uk-immigration-romania-bulgaria-ministers> (para 7-11); see also <http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldconaf/82/8220.htm>

⁷ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2013/jan/25/uk-triple-dip-recession-gdp>

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/jan/27/uk-immigration-romania-bulgaria-ministers> (paras 1-2)

⁹ <http://www.gandul.info/news/campania-gandul-info-why-don-t-you-come-over-provoaca-dezbateri-in-presa-internationala-associated-press-in-spatele-campaniei-ironice-se-afila-un-mesaj-serios-pentru-marea-britanie-10536390>

¹⁰ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2013/jan/28/campaign-deter-romanian-bulgarian-immigrants-farcical> (last para)

¹¹ This is very loosely based on a quote from a letter from William F. Buckley Jr. to Henry Kissinger as described by Kissinger in his eulogy for Buckley on April 4, 2008 <http://www.henrykissinger.com/eulogies/040408.html>. The quote is "We must do what we can," he wrote to me, "to bring hammer blows against the bell jar that protects the dreamers from reality. The ideal scenario is that pounding from without we can effect resonances, which will one day crack through to the latent impulses of those who dream within bringing to life a circuit that will spare the republic."

The proposed anti-UK ad response to the lifting of A2 nation employment restrictions is illustrative of how a lack of meaningful dialogue can lead to poor policy (or at least poor proposals). Unfortunately, this is not an isolated event. As former Home Secretary Jacqui Smith noted in her response to the Institute for Public Policy Research's recent report entitled *Fair and democratic migration policy: A principled framework for the UK*,¹² "Debate on immigration policy and election pledges in this area are too often based on broad statements verging on prejudice on the one hand tied to very specific process proposals. It is unusual for any party to put forward a set of values and principles on which to base their approach."¹³

Clearly, it is necessary to discuss and debate the approaching changes and potential effects that will occur upon lifting the A2 employment restrictions in 2014. Indeed, there are valid concerns and questions to be raised. But this, as well as all other political discourse, must be guided by shared values and conscious decisions rather than empty rhetoric and kneejerk reactions.

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¹² <http://www.ippr.org/publication/55/10188/fair-and-democratic-migration-policy-a-principled-framework-for-the-uk>

¹³ <http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2013/01/22/a-principled-migration-policy/>