

International Affairs Forum Interview

November 8, 2006

By Jason Miks

International Affairs Forum discusses immigration issues with Philippe Legrain - journalist, economist and author of 'Open World - The Truth About Globalization' and 'Immigrants: Your Country Needs Them.'



International Affairs Forum: Your new book is entitled 'Immigrants: Your country needs them.' Why?

Why do we need immigrants? We need immigrants to do the jobs that people in rich countries no longer want to do - a whole range of dirty and difficult jobs that still need doing in a knowledge based economy but which native workers, even those with no qualifications, don't want to do, such as picking fruit and cleaning offices.

The second thing is to do the jobs that not enough local workers can do, where there are shortages of labor. In Britain's case for example, there is a shortage of doctors and nurses in the NHS.

Thirdly, in advanced economies economic growth comes principally through innovation, and there are strong cases to suggest that innovation and creativity are stimulated by greater diversity. If you think about it for example, if you have 10 heads that all think the same, they are not much better than one. But if you have ten thinking differently then that leads to new ways of solving problems and economic growth. You just have to look at Silicon Valley where Intel and Yahoo and Google and eBay etc were all set up by immigrant entrepreneurs. You can see in the future that diversity will be an increasingly important factor in economic growth.

There's also the work of Richard Florida who wrote 'The Rise of the Creative Class' that shows it is not only skilled immigrants who bring this diversity, but that greater diversity itself attracts talented people. That is obvious in cities like London or New York, where one of the big reasons people want to live there, despite the high costs, is that they want to live in a vibrant, cosmopolitan city.

IA-Forum: Some people argue that certain countries are more suited than others to immigration. Do you agree?

Even countries that don't conceive of themselves as countries of immigration now are. Britain doesn't see itself as a country of immigration, yet nearly one in ten people here was foreign born. The proportion in France is 10 percent and the proportion in Spain is rising rapidly towards that.

I would say that in a globalizing world there are increasingly going to emerge cosmopolitan cities all over the world, and we see those emerging not only in traditional countries of immigration, but elsewhere too. It's true of Sao Paulo and Amsterdam for example. So you will see a divide happen within countries, where certain areas are much less diverse than others. Inner cities for example are more diverse than the suburbs are.

IA-Forum: Should governments place any restrictions on immigration?

In the conclusion to my book I say it would be best if borders were open. If that's not possible they should at least be more open. And if even that's not acceptable, then they should be better regulated.

The striking thing about every single country's immigration controls is that they apply a kind of Soviet-style manpower planning, which if you applied within an economy would be rightly ridiculed as unworkable.

Imagine if the US government stipulated rules on who could move from Oklahoma to California or that fast food workers could only work in the state where they were born - you would say this is ludicrous. Yet this is precisely how countries try to manage international migration. Even if you are in favor of immigration controls, the way we regulate them now makes no sense whatsoever.

A better way of doing it, as in international trade, would be to move away from quotas to tariffs and to move from rules that discriminate arbitrarily between different types of worker to ones that are non-discriminatory. For example, you could say that foreigners would pay an extra payroll tax to come work in the country, and depending on how high or how low it is set it would regulate the flow of migration and also provide money that could be used to retrain domestic workers. It could also pay for a program to encourage workers to go home after a few years if you think that is a problem. It would also undercut the people smugglers. Who would pay thousands of dollars to be smuggled into the EU or risk exploitation or deportation for overstaying their visa if they could work legally just by paying extra tax?

IA-Forum: Why do you think the public in so many countries are suspicious of immigration?

Because we see it from a narrow and nationalistic and negative perspective - the barbarians at the gate. What is actually going on is that international migration is part and parcel of a wider process of globalization.

We also tend to categorize people in different ways - we think it is perfectly normal to have American investment bankers in London for example, or German car executives in the States. But suddenly if it is about Mexican workers crossing the border or Polish workers in Britain people suddenly see it as a threat. But they are no different - they are people crossing borders temporarily, in most cases, to work. Their labor is needed and the benefits are the same or just as great as with international trade.

IA-Forum: If governments believe immigration is in the best interests of the country, what can they do to persuade a sceptical public?

I think clearly at a quite basic level - and I'm not an evolutionary psychologist - there is a fear of foreigners, and this explains all kinds of social phenomena. Having said that, this does not mean that this can't be overcome.

You just have to look at cities I have mentioned like New York or London. Their diversity is not seen as something you have to tolerate or live with, it is seen as precisely the reason you want to live there. In Canada for example, they specifically make a virtue of its diversity as a feature of what Canadianess means.

In terms of reassuring people, clearly I would hope that my book would contribute to a wider, more sensible debate because there is a lot of scare-mongering, whether it is from politicians or newspapers. In Britain for example, we're always being told we're being swamped with asylum seekers. But in fact there were 25,000 applicants for asylum last year. There were 15,000 deportations and more than 80 percent of asylum applications were refused. So the notion that Britain is being flooded with asylum seekers is completely false. Yet if you pick up nearly any British newspaper you get the impression that it is being swamped. So a lot of it has to do with correcting people's misapprehensions.

IA-Forum: What do you think about fears of immigrants not learning the host country language?

It's in the interests of both immigrants and society to learn the local language. But I don't think in terms of language there is much of an issue. I find it

fanciful for example that Samuel Huntington is so worried about immigrant Mexicans in the United States not learning English. The whole of the world is rushing to learn English. It would be truly astonishing if the only people who weren't learning English were in the United States itself. And sure enough if you look at the statistics, they show that the kids of Mexican immigrants virtually all speak English and by the third generation they speak English almost exclusively. So his fears are nonsense.

IA-Forum: Some have raised fears about a possible brain drain from developing to developed countries. Do you think there is a danger of this?

I think the fears about a brain drain are exaggerated in most cases. One study for example, shows that it's only if you lose about 20 percent of your skilled workers that you are in trouble, and very few countries have done so.

Clearly in certain cases there is a problem. For example, African doctors coming to work in the US and EU when their countries are being ravaged by AIDS and other diseases when they are needed at home. Having said that, it is a fundamental right that you have the right to emigrate, and it is only the nastiest countries that try to prevent their citizens trying to do so.

So if there is an issue, then what should we be doing? Well, one use for the payroll tax that I mentioned earlier could be to compensate developing country governments for the money they have invested in training doctors who have moved overseas. Clearly part of what we give in overseas aid should also be spent on training new doctors.

And there are also NGOs such as Medecins Sans Frontieres who send doctors to replace some of the local ones who have left. There is anyway globally a need to train more doctors, but I don't think imposing emigration restrictions on doctors from Africa would be the right way forward.

IA-Forum: Thank you.

Comments? Please send them to editor@ia-forum.org

Mr. Legrain's blog is www.phillipelegrain.com

