

# Migration and Multiculturalism : Birth Pains of a New Civic Nation

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**This article analyses the birth pains of a civic nation in the UK since 1997. The immediate backdrop is large-scale migration, but the deeper set of issues concern the future of the welfare state and the economic model that sustains it. The article shows how the focus on British values in a multinational state, with associated new ventures such as citizenship testing, are important but distract from the organizational resonance and power of work and welfare as the domains that centrally affect integration and the future shape and form of multicultural Britain.**

**This text is the original version of the article published in French in *Politique étrangère*, vol. 75, issue 2, Summer 2010, under the titre “Immigration et multiculturalisme en Grande-Bretagne : vers une nouvelle nation civique ?”.**

## **Introduction**

SINCE the election of New Labour in 1997 Britain has been witnessing the birth pains of a new civic nation. Before this time notions of citizenship and national identity were barely present in public debate. Now there is an at-times fervent debate about the meaning of Britishness in a multinational and multicultural state. This debate has occurred in the content – indeed, been strongly impelled – by large-scale migration. Around 5.6 million people moved to the United Kingdom (UK) in the 2000s. In turn, the debate about migration, citizenship, multiculturalism and integration has been powerfully shaped by a broader debate about the future of the British welfare state and the economic model that sustains it.

This article looks at how a cultural and ideological focus on the ‘conceptual’ boundaries of Britain and ‘Britishness’ both abstracts and distracts from the key arenas within which the dynamics of multicultural Britain are played out. Attention needs to be redirected away from oft-frustrating debates about ‘British values’ and similar nebulous ideas to the worlds of work and welfare that provide the more immediate setting for the lives of all in contemporary Britain. By doing so, and to borrow Favell’s evocative phrase, we explore the continuing pathologies of a progressive idiom of ‘race relations’ in the UK designed to secure integration of migrants, but that has had both unexpected effects and mutated over the years as the conditions that give this idiom its meaning have changed. [\[1\]](#)

## **Setting the scene**

To analyze international migration it is first necessary to identify the conditions that make it visible as a distinct social and political process. It’s a truism, but no less powerful for that, to note that international migration is defined by the presence of state borders. [\[2\]](#) Put simply, if there were no such things as states and their borders then there would be no such things as international migration. It is simply impossible to understand the contemporary politics of immigration and multiculturalism in the UK without thinking about the shape and character of the borders of contemporary that make it visible.

Where are these British borders ? They are most obviously territorial – those crossed at air, land and sea ports as migrants enter the UK. Borders are, however, more than simply territorial. Migrant newcomers also encounter powerful ‘organizational’ borders as they seek to negotiate access to the labour market and the welfare state. There are also nebulous but no

less powerful 'conceptual', i.e. they relate to nebulous but no less important notions of who belongs, who is deserving, who is entitled and, importantly, who is not. [3]

Much debate in the UK centers on these conceptual borders, but by raising migration and multiculturalism to this somewhat abstract cultural and ideological level can also be too abstract them from the more mundane – but absolutely essential – processes of inclusion and integration that occur through schools, colleges, universities, in the labour market, in communities, through housing associations, through voluntary and civic association and through political participation. It is in these contexts that identities are made, and remade, shaped, changed. To focus only on the cultural stuff renders issues around immigration and its effects far more difficult to resolve by transplanting them to the realm of 'identity politics' rather than to the allocative and distributive choices that are the stuff of 'normal politics'.

## Bigotgate

A constant lament through the 2010 general election campaign was that the political parties were not discussing immigration, but that this was an issue that concerned much of the electorate. A defining moment of the 2010 general election campaign occurred in the Lancashire town of Rochdale. The 'bigotgate' incident exploded when Prime Minister Gordon Brown encountered by chance on the street an elderly woman and life-long Labour voter, Gillian Duffy. They had what appeared to a civil and fairly friendly discussion about various issues. Ms Duffy referred at one point to 'flocks' of East European immigrants. Brown dealt with her questions and they actually seemed to part on good terms with Mrs Duffy offering Brown her congratulations on his education policies. Unbeknown to Brown the lapel microphone he was wearing, provided by a TV news organization, was still switched on. When he returned to his car, Brown declared the conversation a 'disaster' and labeled Mrs Duffy a 'bigoted woman'.

What lessons can we draw ? Leaving aside Brown's somewhat complex personal psychology, a key point here was that this casual reference to bigotry meant Brown condemned large numbers of traditional Labour voters harboring similar – albeit often somewhat dif-fuse – concerns and misgivings about immigration to those expressed by Mrs Duffy.

Mrs Duffy touched a raw nerve. She saw the immigration issue through a prism of concerns about the welfare state and the life chances of her grandchildren. In a powerful sense – although Brown did not seem to see this – Mrs Duffy was unknowingly echoing concerns expressed by liberal commentators about the continued capacity of the welfare state to maintain bonds of social solidarity as a basis for the kinds of redistributive politics that sustained the Labour Party and broader labour movement. The editor of liberal-left *Prospect* magazine David Goodhart phrased it in somewhat more sophisticated terms, but he too feared for the future of the solidaristic bonds that sustained the British welfare state in the face of large scale immigration. [4]

Once again this goes to show how the debate about national identity is nested within this debate about welfare as it is the welfare state and the economic model that sustains it that have been, are and will be at the heart of British political debate about immigration. A liberal welfare state and flexible labour markets provide the backdrop against which occurred large-scale migration to Britain in the first decade of the 21st century.

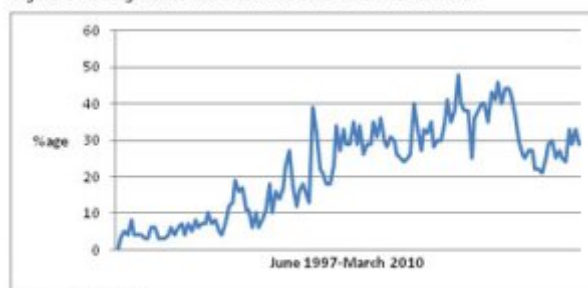
A key element of the rationale for immigration into the UK was precisely the idea that immigration was needed to sustain the welfare state in the face of population change. [5] Such changes are nowhere near as acute in the UK as they are in other European countries, but immigration was seen as part of the solution to an ageing population. Despite some allusions on the far right of British politics to some kind of multiculturalist conspiracy designed to 'dilute' British values – a favorite theme of the extreme-right British National Party (BNP) it seems plausible to argue that the government did not foresee the scale of immigration. In this the government was not helped by its own research forecasting an annual influx of 5,000-13,000 migrants from the A8 states that joined the EU in May 2004. While the UK labour market was good at absorbing many of these migrant workers into work, it was an indigenous native British working class that felt threatened by these immigrants 'taking our jobs', which has, of course, been the anti-immigration refrain throughout history.

## Echoes of the past

Even the most casual observer of British politics would know that the 2010 general election was not the first time that immigration bubbled-under as a salient concern. Back in the 1960s the Labour government cabinet minister Richard Crossman referred to immigration's 'powerful political undertow'. An undertow is a current beneath the surface flowing in a different direction to the water on the surface. The clear allusion is to a political élite out of touch with public opinion on immigration. In 2005, the Conservatives asked 'are you thinking what we're thinking' and noted in their manifesto that 'it's not racist to impose controls on immigration'. In 2010, immigration seemed once again to be exerting a powerful political undertow that actually did much to contribute to sweeping away Gordon Brown. The background to much debate at the 2010 general election was, of course, the MPs expenses scandal that rocked British politics in 2009. Politicians could not be trusted to fill in an expenses claim honestly and accurately so how could they be expected to run an immigration system ? [6]

Figure 1 shows the salience of immigration in IPSOS-MORI polling between June 1997 and March 2010. The great surge in immigration salience coincided with large scale migration from central and eastern Europe after the May 2004 enlargement. In March 2010, immigration was the second most salient issue, after the economy.

Figure 1: Immigration's issue salience June 1997-March 2010

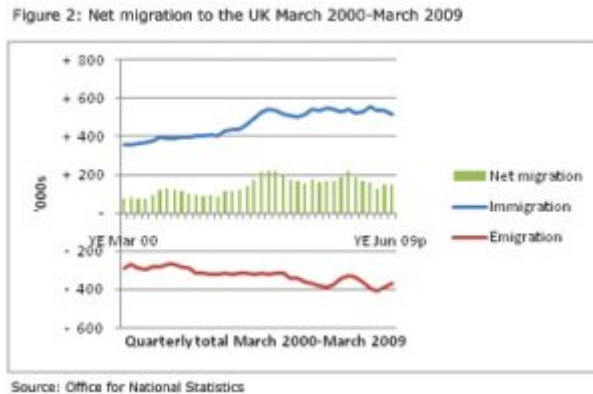


Source: IPSOS MORI  
 Q What would you say is the most important issue facing Britain today?  
 Q What do you see as other important issues facing Britain today?  
 Percentage answering: Race relations, immigration, immigrants

### UK : Immigration's issue salience June 1997-March 2010

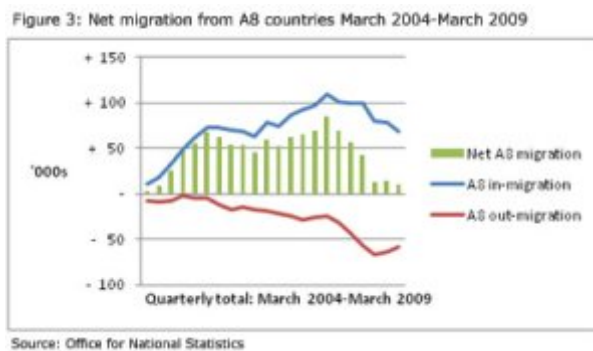
Figure 2 shows total migration flows with high net migration in the mid part of the decade, falling back as economic turbulence was encountered and emigration rose. Figure 2 shows

how high issue salience has coincided with a fall in levels of net migration, but with historically high levels in preceding years.



### Net migration to the UK March 2000-March 2009

Figure 3 shows migration from the A8 accession states that peaked in 2006-7 and fell back in response to the economic downturn.



### UK : Net migration from A8 countries March 2004-March 2009

An important aspect of much of this contemporary migration is that it is focused beyond the traditional migration destinations of the major urban centers, such as London or Birmingham. Migration is now much more dispersed process with sizable migrant populations in small town and rural England.

This change in focus from urban to rural Britain also reminds us that we tend to see migration as a general process, as migrants moving to a particular country. In reality, immigration is much more specific. It is, of course, the case that migrants move into countries, but, migration is experienced in much more circumscribed ways as movement into particular places, into communities, into neighborhoods and into particular types of activity, such as particular types of economic activity.

While we tend to see and understand international migration as a general process (thus the reference to 'national models' for immigration integration policies), there is also a need to account for its specificity. To provide a practical example, while politicians and academic fellow travelers may agonise about 'British values' in the abstract, headteachers in towns and cities with relatively large migrant populations are more likely to be concerned about the costs

of language support for pupils for whom English is a second language. The stresses and strains of migration make themselves manifest at local level.

These local dynamics can also defy the narrow cost-benefit analyses that have been key components of much debate about migration in the UK. While it may be possible to show an overall net economic gain from migration, it is also the case that migration has powerful distributive effects. These can be felt at the lower end of the labour market as British workers are out-competed by migrants seen by employers as brighter, flexible, industrious, more hard-working migrants. There are also very specific interactions between the welfare state and labour market. Many migrant workers have moved into sectors such as agriculture, horticulture and food processing where there has been a traditional reliance on temporary labour provided by 'gangmasters' (temporary labour providers. Much of this work is also seasonal, which means means that it can be hard for a British person living on welfare state benefits to de-register a claim take on short-term work and reregister. [7]

These interactions between work and welfare are specific in nature and type but strongly influence perceptions of migrant workers on the part of employers and on the part of those who may see themselves out-competed in the labour market. In a very clumsily phrased section of his speech to the 2007 Labour Party conference Brown called for 'British jobs for British workers'. This was then picked up by workers who protested about the use of workers from other EU member states at an oil refinery in East Lindsey in eastern England. It is, of course, the case that many British citizens that live and work outside the UK (5.5 million according to the IPPR think tank), but it is those that don't move, that aren't 'mobile' who seem to feel more threatened by this EU mobility. [8]

## Then and now

Britain began to see and (reluctantly) understand itself as a country of immigration in the late 1950s and early 1960s. Comparisons between the 1960s and 2010 can be instructive and identify continuities and change in the contemporary British politics of migration and multiculturalism.

Then, in the 1960s, debate had a strong cultural and ideological focus. Richard Crossman could report the egregious exploitation of race and immigration in the 1964 Smethwick by-election in the West Midlands won by the Conservative Party after an overtly racist campaign. In 1968, Enoch Powell could famously and provocatively prophesies 'rivers of blood'. Now the language has become more technocratic - 'earned citizenship', citizenship tests, managed migration - but concerns about migration and its effects lurk close to the surface of political debate and continue to often be framed in cultural and ideological terms.

Then, the backdrop was large-scale immigration, but it was post-colonial migration, whereas now the UK has been reshaped by large-scale migration, much of which originates from the EU and is supported by an EU rights framework. EU migrants move to the UK as EU citizens with their rights protected by a supranational legal and political order. Save the UK exiting from the EU, this movement from other EU states (mobility is actually a better way to describe it) cannot be controlled. The same applies to the fairly extensive use by Brits of the free movement framework to live and work in other EU states, of course. The key point was that the UK was one of only three EU member states to permit full and immediate labour market access

by nationals of the A8 states after May 2004 (see Figure 3).

Then, the focus was on the 'integration' of migrant newcomers, implying a process of adaptation by the migrants, but also by the host society itself. Then, the response was a form of multicultural race relations policy. Now the assumptions of this race relations framework still linger, but have been challenged by the diversity of new migration to the UK, but also by the obvious fact that the UK is a very different place – economically, socially and politically – to the UK of the mid-1960s. We can only make sense of international migration if we explore the backdrop against which it is set.

## **Life in the UK**

It is clearly the case that British society has been transformed by immigration. For some these changes have gone too far. For others, there is a tolerance of multicultural diversity. For many, however, multicultural diversity arising from migration is a social fact. It is part of everyday life as people in Britain celebrate their sporting heroes or cultural icons whose origins lie in immigration. Some many bemoan the limitations of so-called 'political correctness', but on the streets or the terraces of football stadiums it has become unimaginable to hear the kinds of racist abuse that were depressingly common in the 1960s and 1970s. The number of MPs from an ethnic minority background rose from 15 in the 2005-10 Parliament to 27 after the 2010 general election. Change is slow and cause frustrations, but is impossible to deny that things have changed and that many of these changes are for the better. Attitudes have shifted, often in significant and positive ways.

These achievements have been bolstered and reinforced by a distinctive legislative approach articulated between 1965 and 1976 that created the institutional architecture of 'race relations' policy, outlaws both direct and indirect discrimination, created the Commission for Racial Equality (now part of the Equality and Human Rights Commission to monitor its implementation) and generate powerful pressure for public and private sector organizations to reflect the diversity of British society. It also created the 'ethnic minority' as the policy referent. Britain counts, monitors, measure and observes its ethnic minority population. The scope of race relations legislation was extended in 2001 to cover the police after the Macpherson inquiry into the racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence.

Mention of migration, integration and multiculturalism does seem almost guaranteed to induce a worried frown amongst academic commentators and a search for the newest or latest 'problem'. The orientation of migration research is towards the 'problems' of migration. Yet, this perspective can neglect some rather important changes in British society. Particularly if we think over the last 40-50 years and look back to the 1960s, then it seems only fair to note the major changes that have occurred in British society as a result of immigration and that cannot be captured by a grim fixation on the latest problem to be worried about.

If the focus is to be on 'problems' then pretty soon we run-up against some new developments that have certainly elicited a collective frown from the academic community. Not the least of these is the introduction in 2007 of citizenship tests for migrants aspiring to British citizenship. This has been followed by the introduction, planned for July 2011, of 'earned citizenship'.

The 'Life in the UK' citizenship test was set against the backdrop of a more general concern



about the diminished resonance of Britishness and British values, the citizenship test seeks to conduct a basic civics exam for migrant newcomers. Apocryphal stories about its content, such as the urban myth that one question asks for the appropriate response should an accidental collision lead to the spilling of another person's pint of beer (buy him or her another or risk a beating is the powerfully embedded social norm) turn out not to be present in the test. Rather it amounts to a high school-level exam about basic features of UK society and politics. Knowledge of electoral systems rather than pub protocol is more valued in the test (although probably not in everyday life).

The decisions of a small number of EU governments to introduce citizenship tests (Germany, UK and the Netherlands) has been followed by an academic stampede of scholars eager to explore the content of these tests and pontificate about their significance for the contemporary condition of citizenship in these countries. Yet, these tests are the cherry on the cake. The citizenship exam is the end of the journey and serves as a prelude to a town hall ceremony and a photo opportunity for the beaming new UK citizens and the local mayor. It tells us very little about the processes that are absolutely central to the institution of modern citizenship as a social process, as a set of negotiations and renegotiations, as a fluid and flexible series of encounters between migrant newcomers and British society. In fact, it tells us more about the current fixations of politicians and the eagerness of academic researchers to follow the policy herd down this particular road, or maybe cul-de-sac.

A similar fixation seems likely to occur on 'earned citizenship' to be introduced in July 2011 with a three-stage entry process to the hallowed state of British citizen. The context here is important. Much migration to the UK in the post-war period was, of course, by subjects of the crown holding British passport and able to declare *civis Britannicus sum* (I am a British citizen). [9] Britain has continued to operate a fairly open citizenship regime, with around 1 million people accepted for British citizenship in the first decade of the 21st century. Earned citizenship sets out staging posts on the road to citizenship acquisition. The first step is temporary residence, including an English language test. This is followed by 'probationary citizenship' during which time migrants will need to show that they have earned the right to stay in the UK with a swifter route to British citizenship for those who contribute to the community and thus demonstrate 'active citizenship'.

## **British values**

Some of the most striking features of contemporary debates in the UK center on citizenship tests, earned citizenship, 'our values', the debate about 'Britishness' and, in contrast, 'Muslim values' and concern about radicalization and extremism. Some aspects of this debate center on demographic change and the likely future size of the Muslim population given its younger age profile. Kaufman makes a striking case for 'demography as destiny' and ascribes to it the status of the social science with most predictive accuracy. [10] Kaufman notes the younger age profile and higher birth rates of the British Muslim population. In Britain, 4.7 percent of those under the age of 16 are Muslims as opposed to just 0.6 percent of those aged over 65s. The fertility rate of the average Muslim woman is two-thirds higher than the median British woman. Kaufman projects an increase in the British Muslim population from around 4 percent in 2009 to 7 percent in 2030. He also notes, however, that Muslim fertility is normalizing and that non-Muslim immigrant groups are also increasing.



An underlying issue with the 'demography is destiny' argument is that it holds political institutions static. It was, of course, the case that earlier migrant groups such as Jews or Catholics were seen as difficult to assimilate and a potential threat. The crux of the issue seems to be the content of social and institutional processes. Here we have accounts that are full of foreboding. Caldwell, for example, asks whether Europe can be the same with different people in it? The obvious answer is no, probably not. But Caldwell's point is rather different. His view is that Europeans are now too weak-willed, have lost a sense of themselves and their values with the risk that they fall prey to groups or cultures that are more confident or certain about their identities and values. The key issue here for Caldwell is Europe's Muslim population. [11]

In a not dissimilar vein, Joppke explores the 'limits of integration' in the UK for group-based claims as Muslims qua Muslims. [12] His argument is that the pathologies of UK race relations stimulate the production of demands that cannot be accommodated. Joppke draws from the Pew 'Muslim values' survey to note that 81 percent of British Muslim respondents to the survey considered themselves Muslims first and only 7 percent considered themselves to be British citizens first. This compared to 42 percent of French Muslims who saw themselves as French first and 46 percent who saw themselves as Muslims first. Joppke looks admiringly at the capacity of the French state – or 'the dreaded Jacobin state across the Channel,' as he puts it (p. 467) – where Muslims and non-Muslims according to Pew hold equally benign views of one another. This can be seen as a 'failure of British multiculturalism and a success of French Republicanism' (p. 467). Joppke argues that a pathology of the UK race relations model is that it leads people to expect the wrong things of the state – respect and recognition – when it is 'multiple adjustments' in areas such as markets and culture that are the essence of integration.

What then are the demands of British Muslims? Joppke has them barking up the wrong tree seeking respect and recognition rather than integration through welfare and work. Drawing from social research other than the Pew survey helps exploration of the attitudes of British Muslims. The UK government's own citizenship survey analyzed Muslim attitudes in 2008. [13] More than 9 in ten Muslims agreed that they felt part of British society. They expressed high levels of trust in institutions, indeed they seemed to have far more trust in elected politicians than the general population. There were widespread perceptions of discrimination targeted at Muslims and a sense that this was increasing. What the survey found was a reflection of precisely the point that Joppke makes, i.e. that British Muslims do tend to see their place in British society in terms of these multiple adjustments of every-day life mediated by local communities, by social and political institutions and by the labour market and welfare state.

The data may be ageing and awaiting the latest input from the 2011 census, but research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation also allows us to explore these multiple adjustments and assess work, education and earnings. The Rowntree research showed increased employment rates between 1991 and 2001 for Black African, Pakistani and Bangladeshi men, linked to improved educational attainment. In contrast, Britain's Indian and Chinese origin population has experienced educational attainment, employment and earnings that can out-strip the White population. There were, however, substantial gaps between employment rates for Black African, Black Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi and those for other minority groups and the White population. Employment rates for Pakistani and Bangladeshi women were particularly low. People from ethnic minorities also earned less than White people. Educational

attainment was seen as the key driver of employment performance. [14] Here we also see the legacies of migration. For example, of movement in the 1950s and 1960s to soon-to-decline industrial areas of the Midlands and North West by migrant from Pakistan. In towns like Oldham in Lancashire where the BNP have been strong, it is the common experience of so-cial and economic exclusion (poor education, employment, health and housing outcomes) that is a shared characteristic of both the white and Muslim populations, but these two communities lead separate lives and levels of interaction have been described as worrying low. [15] In such terms, the things that unite - common experience of exclu-sion - becomes mediated as an issue of race, ethnicity and identity so that political institutions lose their traction and problems become far more difficult to resolve.

## The centrality of work and welfare

This brings us back to where we started with the argument that the debate about immigration is a debate about the future of the British welfare state and the economic model that sustains it. The debate about Britishness can only be a reflection of a more fundamental de-bate that matters far more to British people than often empty rhetoric about British values because work and welfare provide the context within which identities are shaped and reshaped. It is simply impos-sible to understand the debate about contemporary immigration in the UK without relating it to the institutions that govern work and welfare. Citizenship tests, earned citizenship and the like are a powerful ref-lection of this debate, but they are epiphenomenal. They can actually distract from underlying dynamics, misdirect focus to the cultural and the ideological content of debates about migration and integration in the UK and away from the allocative and distributive issues associa-ted with work and welfare that give it power, resonance and meaning. It is in the content of a welfare state under pressure that Britain's civic nation has been born. The fact that these strains and pressures seem only likely to increase as tough public sector retrenchment occurs after the 2010 general election means that the birth pains are likely to endure and the childhood is likely to be difficult.

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**Plus : *Politique étrangère*, IFRI, vol. 75, n°2, été 2010, Le Royaume-Uni après les élections**

politique étrangère

12 2010  
Le Président de la République nomme  
le Premier ministre  
Il désigne les autres membres  
du Gouvernement  
Le Parlement est élu



LE ROYAUME-UNI est-il si différent qu'il le croit, et que nous le croyons, de ses congénères continentaux ? Les problèmes ne manquent pas au Royaume – cohésion interne, questions économiques et monétaires... –, mais les éléments du rebond existent.... Et il se pourrait que le « modèle » britannique s'avère plus résistant que prévu, ou annoncé par des Cassandre continentaux trop pressés. L'échec manifeste, ces deux dernières décennies, de la relation diplomatique – et militaire – Londres/Washington ne conduit ni les élites britanniques, ni l'opinion, à moduler leur rejet quasi instinctif des ambitions européennes. La position « européenne » de la Grande-Bretagne ne sera sans doute demain ni aussi catastrophique qu'on le craint, ni aussi positive qu'on l'espère de ce côté-ci de la Manche.

La Grande-Bretagne et l'Europe : de la résistance à la rancœur  
par Jolyon Howorth. Selon un sondage de mars 2010, 55 % des Britanniques souhaitent que le Royaume-Uni se retire de l'UE, et 60 % souhaitent « une renégociation en profondeur » de ses rapports avec l'Europe. Et en 2009, 44 % des membres du Parti conservateur se prononçaient en faveur d'un retrait de l'Union.

Économie britannique : fin ou rebond d'un modèle ? par Eric Le Boucher  
Le british come-back à l'œuvre depuis 30 ans est-il simplement mis entre parenthèses, le temps d'éponger les dégâts de la crise, ou bien est-il caduc, la Grande-Bretagne se banalisant, rentrant dans le rang des autres pays européens ?

Le Royaume-Uni sera-t-il plus uni en 2020 ? par Alan Butt Philip.  
Le Royaume est constitué de quatre nations contenues dans un État, et non d'une nation unique. Sa multiculturalité résulte à la fois d'une immigration massive, et d'une diversité culturelle interne de longue date.

Immigration et multiculturalisme : vers une nouvelle nation civique ? par Andrew Geddes.  
C'est dans un État providence sous pression qu'est née l'idée de la nation civique britannique. Ces pressions pourraient désormais s'accroître, et cette nouvelle nation, après un accouchement douloureux, se prépare sans doute une enfance difficile.

Quelles perspectives pour la politique de défense britannique ? par Benoît Gomis et Christophe Goussot. La politique de défense britannique n'a fait l'objet d'aucune révision d'envergure depuis la Strategic Defence Review conduite par l'équipe de George Robertson en 1998. Or depuis cette date, la situation des armées britanniques a bien changé...

**Le site de l'IFRI**, en français [Voir](#) en anglais [See](#)

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## P.-S.

Andrew Geddes is Professor in and Head of the Department of Politics at the University of Sheffield, UK. Recent and forthcoming publications include *Immigration and European Integration : Beyond Fortress Europe ?* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2008) and (with C. Boswell) *Migration and Mobility in the European Union* (London, Palgrave, 2011).

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