

Myths of migration: the changing British population, a joint BSPS/BA event held at the British Academy on 17 November 2014

As part of its celebrations of the 25th anniversary of the publication of *The Changing Population of Britain* (edited by Heather Joshi, Blackwell, 1989), the BSPS teamed up with the British Academy for an evening meeting on UK migration. Three speakers were invited to address the following questions: Given that the movement of people shapes our neighbourhoods and communities, what are the realities of these changes, and where do the myths of migration end and the realities of population change begin? What are the new patterns of internal and trans-national migration? Who are the new immigrants, where are they from, and where do they go? Do immigrants isolate or integrate? Are we flocking to the cities, or escaping to the countryside? The meeting was chaired by Francesco Billari, the President of EAPS and a BSPS Council member, who welcomed the full house of attendees and introduced the speakers.

Tony Champion, the current BSPS President, focused on within-UK migration. He set up three 'straw men' (the term that he preferred to 'myths') and managed to demolish two of them. 'Migration' is not synonymous with 'immigration', despite the high salience of the latter in the media and indeed ONS's usage in 2011 Census outputs. Ten times as many residents moved home within the UK in the 12 months leading up to the Census as had been living outside the UK a year earlier and have the potential for considerably altering the size and composition of local populations. Secondly, the latest research shows that, while we may be living in an increasingly mobile world, residential mobility in the UK is lower now than 20-30 years ago, with an especially steep fall in shorter-distance moving. The jury is out, however, on his final question as to whether the recent signs of urban resurgence spell the end of net migration from city to countryside. Most important in UK policy terms is whether a sustained recovery from the 2008/09 recession will lead to the acceleration of the exodus from London that has been experienced in previous cycles. The major changes since the early 1990s recession, including the drop in home moving rates just mentioned, the altered housing behaviour of younger adults in recent years and the rising ethnic minority share of city populations, may be combining to produce to a new internal migration regime.

Ludi Simpson, the immediate past President of BSPS, described the two eras of globalisation, both connecting demographic and economic change. The first, in the 18th and 19th centuries, was associated with emigration from Europe, and the second, which we have experienced since the middle of the 20th century, is associated with widening inequalities which make Europe and North America particularly attractive. Within this context, immigration to the UK is not extreme, and may not be amenable to legal attempts to change it. The impact on sub-national Britain has been to create a diversity of diversities that continues to change. Movement from city central zones to suburbs and beyond began before significant immigration rather than being caused by it, and continues for all ethnic groups. Analysis of segregation is technically unable to answer questions about the barriers to equal movement, but suggests steady and slow geographical integration of ethnic groups as we currently measure them. A crude projection of ethnic diversity suggests that diversity will increase, but the most diverse local authority of Britain, the London Borough of Newham, is about as diverse as any authority will become in the next twenty years. There will be few areas in which a

single group other than White British is the largest group. Often, the next largest group will be what we now call 'Other', a mix of different origins relatively new to Britain. The measurement of ethnicity will have to change in response to the increasingly diverse nature of local diversity.

Norma Cohen, who has just retired as Demography correspondent after 27 years at the Financial Times, challenged perceptions of the relative attractiveness of Britain as the destination of first choice for those seeking to uproot themselves. In fact, migrants tend to choose countries that already are host to a significant community of their own citizens and which bear some similarity in language and culture to their own. While that makes Britain very attractive to migrants from other English-speaking nations, it makes it less so to many others. A quick look at UN migration data suggests that far more migrants – including residents of countries likely to attract the most alarmed headlines – choose destinations other than Britain. For example, migrants from India ranked Britain sixth on the list of most likely destinations, with 760,000 from there making a home here. But that compares with 2.9m Indians in the UAE, 2.0m in the USA and 1.8m in Saudi Arabia. Pakistanis rank Britain fourth, with 1.3m and 1.1m in Saudi Arabia and India respectively compared with 460,000 in the UK. And despite fears that Britain would be swamped by an influx from Albania, Romania and Bulgaria, the UK appears far down on the list of choices for residents from these nations. For Albanians, nearby Greece is the first choice with 570,000, Italy second with 450,000 and Britain 7th choice with only 20,000 Albanian-born residents. There are more than 10 times as many Bulgarians in Turkey as in the UK, and as many choose Italy or Greece as choose Britain. There are 10 times as many Romanians living in Italy and 8 times as many in Spain as are living in the UK. In fact, there are more Romanians in Israel than in Britain. Thus, the fear that failure to close the gates to migrants will leave Britain 'swamped' with foreigners is greatly overblown.

Predictably most of the ensuing discussion from the floor focused on immigration to Britain. Could Ludi's projections to 2031 provide ammunition to the UK Independence Party? How can the government resolve the tension between following the public desire to limit immigration and allowing employers to plug labour and skill shortages in finance, elderly care, etc.? How is it that the majority population can happily co-exist with ethnic minority neighbours in the same street, but want to see the UK close its doors to new arrivals? It was suggested that people should try hard to suppress their Ids and develop their Superegos, also that public acceptance of immigration would increase if newcomers quickly learnt to speak good English. Some links to internal migration were also made. Why is there a general perception that 'white flight' exists when the urban exodus rates are similar across all ethnic groups? Is there a parallel between trying to stop immigration to the country and trying to stop people moving into the countryside? What, if any, is the link between net immigration to the UK and the patterns of within-UK migration, especially in relation to London? To what extent is it population ageing that is slowing down within-UK migration? Ultimately, the discussion turned on two main points: the need for more research focusing on the processes behind migration and, above all, the need to do better at getting the key messages from research into the public domain. It was felt that meetings such as this were a useful way of doing this, but more could and should be done. To help towards this, an audio recording of this meeting is available on the British Academy website at <https://www.britac.ac.uk/events/2014/MythsofMigration.cfm>