

Britain Has Never Been a "Nation of Immigrants". But It Will Be Soon.



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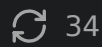
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I still remember my confusion nearly 25 years ago when I read an [article](#) on the BBC in which Barbara Roche, Tony Blair's Immigration Minister, called Britain "a country of migrants". I was in my last year of school and not remotely political. I found the quote shocking, not because of its political implications but simply because I had, up to that point, done my best to educate myself on the history of this country. Nowhere in my reading had I found any justification for the claim that Britain's history was defined, or even significantly shaped by, immigration.

Before we look at the facts, it is worth observing that Roche's claim is now widely regarded as self-evident. When I once challenged the notion that Britain was a nation of immigrants on Iain Dale's LBC show, Iain was shocked and asked me to clarify. Journalists and commentators in our public space regularly claim that [immigrants built Britain](#). I could give example after example but let's be honest: for all intents and purposes, in public space this matter has been effectively settled.

Until this week, at least.

A [recent report](#) from the University of Buckingham, produced by Matthew Goodwin, predicts that people born abroad and their descendants will constitute the majority of the British population by 2079. This statistic triggered into action commentators like David Aaronovitch, who responded by [claiming that](#) "The foreign born and their descendants' covers just a tiny fraction of everyone in the country".

On *Question Time*, the BBC's flagship political programme, Mark Serwotka, the former head of one of Britain's major unions, recently **claimed** that "Britain is the great country that it is because of centuries of immigration that brought us cultural enrichment, supporting our public services and some of our greatest things" before adding that "we should be proud of the inevitable applause."

Let's set the politics aside for a moment and look at the facts.

The Norman conquest following the Battle of Hastings in 1066 brought around 5,000 to 10,000 people from what is now France. England's foreign-born population at that time was in the low single digits, possibly as low as 1%. This remained unchanged for centuries, with a 1440 survey recording just 14,500 foreign-born residents in England (1%). From 1330 to 1550, total immigration is estimated at 65,000 people.

During the early modern period, approximately 1,000 people a year came to England over the course of the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries. These inflows included 50,000 Huguenots, Irish migrants, and Jews returning under Cromwell.

The following hundred years saw a significant increase, primarily through a large wave of Irish people fleeing the Great Famine in the 1840s. In total, Britain's foreign-born population increased by between 1.5 and 2 million people in the 19th century. If that sounds like a lot, remember that this occurred over 100 years, i.e. an annual increase of 15,000 to 20,000 people. By 1901, Britain's foreign-born population had risen from 0.5% to a whopping 1.5%.

The first half of the 20th century saw little change, with between 10,000 and 14,000 arrivals annually. This included immigration related to both world wars and from the Commonwealth. By 1951, the foreign-born population in the UK was 4.4%.

Despite significant post-war immigration, between 1951 and 2001, average net migration into Britain is estimated at just **7,800 people a year**. Taking the 1990s as a separate decade, it was much higher but still **just 40,000** annually.

As late as 1996, the year I moved to Britain, net immigration was running at just 55,000 people a year. By this point, the foreign-born population of the UK had risen, but only to 7%.

To summarise this barrage of figures: immigrants have played a small but not insignificant role throughout British history, making up a few percent of the population.

They did not “build Britain”. Britain was at its peak as a nation during the late 19th and early 20th century, losing its dominance in terms of territory, population, wealth and global influence in the wake of WWII.

Of course, individual immigrants and their children made significant contributions during this period, including the great engineer Isambard Kingdom Brunel, Michael Marks (the co-founder of Marks & Spencer), and the author Joseph Conrad.

But, we must not lose sight of the fact that Britain’s glory days were built by its native population.

The reason we are having this nonsensical debate, of course, is that the claim that “Britain is a nation of immigrants” serves two different purposes.



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