

The 'Truth' and Immigration – a BBC programme, 2013

Robin Richardson

The Truth about Immigration was broadcast by the BBC on Tuesday 7 January, having been trailed in advance both widely and deeply. Viewers were promised it would be full of new clarity and insight, based on new and powerful facts and figures. Further, it would be imbued with unusual honesty from politicians and senior civil servants, and – even – from the BBC itself. In the event the programme was a shoddy and shameful shambles. Visually, technically, conceptually, ethically, politically and emotionally, it was the very worst kind of tabloid TV, an hour of bias against understanding, totally unworthy to be described as public service broadcasting.

The programme was presented by the BBC's political editor, Nick Robinson. He claimed in his opening remarks that he was setting out to solve a political mystery. All that he and his production team in fact did, though, was parade and amplify the very bewilderment which they claimed they had a mission, and a capacity, to dispel. Viewers who were hoping for illumination were gravely disappointed. Those who expected the programme to confirm their suspicions, confusions and prejudices, however, were no doubt comforted and reassured, though not at all helpfully.

The programme began with a defining iconic image: a gigantic passenger liner towering over the port of Southampton. It is archetypally on transatlantic vessels such as the *Queen Mary 2*, and through ports such as Southampton, the programme was shamelessly implying, that multitudes of immigrants have flocked and flooded in recent years to Britain from all over the world, dwarfing and diminishing the long-suffering people who are already here.

The programme continued with a hotch potch of further clips and shots – vox pops, snatches of interviews with retired politicians and civil servants, glimpses of people with dark faces and turbans on their heads, distant views of green fields and parks, close-ups of rubbish and litter allegedly dumped by a Roma family in a northern city, and extracts from a government propaganda film about tough and rough measures undertaken at night by the Border Agency. Threaded amongst this muddle there were shots of Robinson himself walking glumly along crowded streets. (The whole country is overcrowded, you know.) Sometimes he wore an open-necked shirt in high summer sunlight but the next moment was wrapped in a muffler and overcoat under overcast skies. Always he was out of his element, as if in a foreign country.

The programme's recurring claim was one with which readers of the right-wing press are thoroughly familiar – there has been 'no grown-up discussion' (as the recurring cliché is) of immigration in Britain, and in consequence the hard-working people of Britain have not even been informed about what is going on, let alone consulted. The fault lies primarily with the blithe follies and negligence of the Blair and Brown governments, as is admitted now by former members of their cabinets. It lies also with the readiness of the BBC itself, said Robinson in an [interview with the Daily Mail](#), to collude with Labour's desire to prevent and close down debate.

[One reviewer commented](#) that indeed there has been very little debate about immigration in Britain. There has, however, been plenty of inconsequential and uninformed tittle-tattle: 'My hairdresser's cousin's postman knows a Bulgarian woman who came over just to claim benefits'. It was gossip such as this, the

reviewer pointed out, that Robinson and his production team amplified in their programme and portrayed as 'truth'.

At least, though, the programme contained some brief extracts from [an interview with Vince Cable](#). These valuably highlighted splits and tensions within the coalition government and incisively questioned the political wisdom, and also even more importantly the conceptual relevance, of the prime minister's commitment to reducing net migration, as if all migration is simply a Bad Thing, without nuance, without differentiation, without any sense of historical context. Cable also sternly referred to the dangers of stoking rampant xenophobia.

As has been [recently pointed out again by the Runnymede Trust](#) and [others](#), and by [media coverage of a recent Runnymede survey](#), the media frequently promote racism. If Cable's remarks had been developed and expanded, and illustrated with findings and reflections from reliable academic research, the programme would have been substantially more worthwhile, and professionally and ethically far more responsible. The makers of the programme could and should have considered the following six propositions.

1) Definitions and essential distinctions

Journalism about immigration should recognise that the term 'immigration' has a range of meanings and references, both popular and official. It is therefore essential to distinguish between, for example, immigration to Britain in the period 1947-62 and immigration in the periods since 1997 and 2004; between, in relation to international law, EU and non-EU countries; between different reasons for so-called immigration, different sectors of the economy, and different economic and cultural consequences.

2) Sources of anxiety

The 2013 British Social Attitudes survey, the most comprehensive academic survey of British public attitudes, shows that a high proportion of the British population thinks migration levels are too high. It shows also, however, that the proportion expressing anxiety about immigration has not changed since the 1980s, even though net migration in those days was massively lower than it is today. It is unlikely, therefore, that anxieties about migration are dependent primarily on objective facts, particularly since opposition to immigration is strongest amongst [people who know least about it](#).

3) No silver bullets

Responsible journalism should in consequence take into account factors affecting anxiety and concern such as the impact of globalisation on the capacity of national governments to control economic, ecological, financial, cultural borders, and their consequent capacity to win trust and confidence. In so far as immigrants are fallguys or scapegoats, not the real causes of anxiety, journalists and other opinion leaders have a responsibility to help people handle and cope with uncertainty, not merely moan and whine about it, or merely blame foreigners or politicians. A grown-up discussion, it follows, is one in which participants recognise that no government nowadays is omnipotent, but on the contrary each has to operate with certain limits and constraints. There are no magic wands or silver bullets.

4) Diverse range of opinion of experience and opinion

Also a mature discussion involves recognising that there are conflicts of material and psychological interest in a country such as Britain and that [not all people benefit or suffer from social change in the same ways](#) and to the same extent. The 2013 British Social Attitudes survey, for example, found that about half the population believes that immigration to Britain has been

beneficial either culturally or economically, or both. It is generally inaccurate and unhelpful to make generalisations about 'the British people' or 'British interests'.

5) The plight of the marginalised

People who do not benefit from migration and immigration include, as Robinson mentioned but did not in detail show, members of the host or receiving population. Also, of course, they include many migrants, particularly those whom officialdom deems to be illegal. The best journalism portrays the victims of social processes with respect, compassion and humanity, not with tabloid-style scapegoating, and on TV such qualities are reflected in the manner and tone of the presenter, and in the camerawork, editing and background music. The evening after Robinson's programme the BBC broadcast a remarkably sensitive and illuminating film by [Fergal Keane](#) which, without being merely soft-hearted, contained the qualities of compassion and humanity which Robinson's programme so strikingly and disappointingly lacked.

6) Being practical

Further, a mature discussion nevertheless needs to include consideration of practical measures likely to be effective and public service journalism, for example the BBC, needs to promote deliberation which is not merely a parade of political point-scoring and electioneering. For example, there are practical ways in which employers can be compelled to pay [a minimum or living wage](#), and therefore be less likely to have to employ migrant labour, and there is much that can be done positively in relation to [migrants from Bulgaria and Romania](#).

It is probably not realistic to expect such propositions to be readily acceptable to the commercial newspapers that are most vocal and hysterical in their coverage of migration issues, and that vie with each other for readers and advertisers and for the ear of right-wing politicians. But it is entirely reasonable, surely, to maintain that such propositions could and should have been borne in mind by Nick Robinson and his colleagues at the BBC.

Robin Richardson's work on equality and diversity in modern Britain is reflected at www.insted.co.uk.