Migration, housing, robots, lettuces… Time for some joined-up thinking

Some clear thinking on how post-Brexit Britain will function is urgently needed and it seems in rather short supply at the moment. On the one hand, arch-remoaner Lord Mandelson recently claimed that the electorate will change its mind about Brexit when levels of immigration fail to drop. His assumption is that it will not do so – an assumption which has already been contradicted by a survey from the Chartered Institute of Personnel, whose members are suggesting that there has been a drop in the number of workers from EU countries coming to the UK. Quoting statistics from the Office of National Statistics, more than 60,000 EU workers came to the UK in each of the three quarters prior to the referendum. That number fell below 30,000 in the three months to the end of September. Furthermore, the most recent quarterly figures from the Office of National Statistics saw net migration fall by 49,000, with 23,000 fewer people arriving and 26,000 more departing. In other words, Mandelson's claims have already been rebutted and we haven't even triggered Article 50!

Indeed, ever since the referendum result, some EU citizens resident in the UK have been considering returning home. The Chartered Institute of Personnel report claims that up to a quarter of firms in their survey believed that some of the EU nationals they employ are possibly considering leaving the country in 2017.

David Davis recently told an audience in Estonia that the UK would not suddenly shut the door on low-skilled migration form the EU. The word "suddenly" is significant. If on Brexit day, all migration were to cease, it could cause labour shortages in several sectors, but fast forward a few years and the

ability to control migration is likely to be a great blessing. Mr Davis said it will take “years and years” to persuade British workers to do jobs in the hospitality industry or agriculture that are currently carried out by EU migrants, arguing the economy needs continued immigration to maintain its success. This, however, is questionable. Will these jobs still be done by human beings, British or otherwise? As far back as November 2015, speaking to the Trades Union Congress, Andy Haldane of the Bank of England suggested that within a decade, as many as 15 million jobs could be at risk of automation – in other words, replaced by robots. Although Mr Haldane didn’t mention migration, many of the jobs which he cited as vulnerable, such as “production tasks” are done by migrants.

The idea that we need migrants to fund our pensions unless we want to work into our 70s, as suggested by John Cridland, a director of the CBI, is therefore very debatable. Within 10-15 years, even if Mr Haldane’s figure of 15 million is a bit optimistic, we could well be suffering from a surfeit of labour almost on a par with the 19th century when mechanization resulted in a massive fall in the number of farm labourers needed to work the land. Fortunately, at that time, industry was able to absorb the surplus labour, but in the early 21st century, few, if any, growth industries are labour intensive. What will we do with all the unemployed immigrants? Perhaps Mr Cridland would like to answer. One thing is sure, if their jobs have been displaced by robots, they will not be contributing to anyone’s pension.

The likely reduction in migration on Brexit should therefore be welcomed as an incentive to develop artificial intelligence. As far back as July 2013, Fraser Nelson of the *Spectator* wrote *“We have to wean the country off the drug of immigration.”* In Japan, the robotics revolution is already under way. Fukoku Mutual Life Insurance is laying off 34 employees and replacing them with an artificial intelligence

system. Besides saving on salaries, the company reckons that the new machine will be more productive as it can calculate policyholder payouts at a much faster rate than humans.

Japan has never been keen on encouraging immigration and even with a falling population, the electorate would rather encourage more women back into the labour force or else increase the number of older retirement-age workers. While the well-entrenched Japanese preference for cultural homogeneity and very little immigration has attracted much criticism, in the age of robotics, contrary to received wisdom, it may well prove a blessing.

Certainly, as a result of its opposition to large-scale immigration Japan has been spared some of the problems which the UK is facing. In many parts of our country, groups are forming to oppose large-scale housebuilding on green field sites. In places like the Cotswolds and East Kent for example, there is widespread anger at the prospect of large, unsightly developments. Were it not for immigration, the UK population would be more or less static and there would be no need to concrete over the countryside.

And the problems of removing land from agricultural use has been highlighted recently by the sharp increases in the costs of vegetables such as lettuces and courgettes. Poor weather conditions in southern Europe, including flooding in Spain and cold weather in Italy, where many winter vegetables are grown, has been the cause. Why not, then, grow more produce in this country? This is what some MPs are proposing and it makes a lot of sense as we are only 77% self-sufficient for food. However, a growing population fuelled by immigration, leading to less available agricultural land is only going to make things worse.

These challenging issues give the lie to claims that those who voted for Brexit out of a desire to reduce immigration were all motivated by racism. It is more a case of weighing up the

alternatives and deciding that a cut in immigration is the better option. What is racist about the concern that if migration is not reduced, we will be vulnerable to food shortages? Or that we are likely to find ourselves stuck with possibly millions of unemployed immigrants once the artificial intelligence revolution really gets under way? From the Flemish weavers through to the Huguenots, immigration benefitted the UK in the past but things are different now.

Of course, those who have already settled in the UK should not be booted out on Brexit. Of course, UK citizens should be free to marry a spouse from another country. Of course, the international nature of our academic institutions should be allowed to continue, but large scale migration is another matter. Weighed in the balance, it is likely to cause more problems, particularly in the longer term, than it solves.

The government therefore needs to engage in some joined-up thinking as it plans its post-Brexit immigration policy. Next year marks 70 years since the arrival of 492 Caribbean citizens on board MV Empire Windrush – an event which marked the beginning of large-scale immigration to the UK. We needed those people then and they are to be admired for their tenacity in staying put in the face of quite blatant hostility. 70 years on, however, the assumption that we will still ***need*** to bring people – particularly low-skilled workers – into this crowded little island is looking very questionable.