

Immigration is the Key

by Michael Curtis

The Soviet leader Vladimir Lenin once said, "There are decades when nothing happens, and there are weeks when decades happen." He might have been talking of the UK in June 2016 with the events connected with the referendum on June 23, 2016 on British membership of or Brexit, exit, from the European Union.

Britain has innumerable problems concerning its membership of the EU and the issues of freedom of movement of goods, capital, services, and people, and about the right of EU citizens to live and work in any EU state. Yet, whether voiced openly or not, at the heart of the events is the widespread public concern about the increasing immigration into the country.

Those events resemble a film noir or a Shakespearean play, say Julius Caesar, with its political turmoil, its incorrect assumptions and unexpected outcome of the referendum, its undisguised ambitions not made of sterner stuff, its intrigues and betrayals of leading political figures supposed to be friends and allies.

Among the star events in this continuing serio-comical drama are the resignation of David Cameron as Prime Minister, the turmoil for leadership of the Conservative Party, the resignation of Nigel Farage, from his position as leader of the anti-immigrant party UKIP (UK Independence Party), and the stubbornness of Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the Labour Party in refusing to heed the sizable vote of his parliamentary colleagues calling on him to resign.

Yet, all interested in the present U.S. presidential election should take account of the British events and possible parallel between the two countries. There is a distinct

resemblance regarding pertinent issues and popular anxieties. Similar factors are said to trouble citizens: the impact of globalization; the free trade economy; the decline in jobs and wages; the weakening of national dignity and esteem.

In both countries a considerable part of the electorate appears disgruntled, antagonistic to established power institutions, and concerned with what they regard as a decline in the status and popularity of their country. If the disgruntled in the UK want to throw off the shackles of the supposed tyranny of the European Union and the detached bureaucracy in Brussels, supporters of Donald Trump want to end the tyranny of established authorities in Washington, D.C.

There is a similar cry to make their country Great Again. Both countries exhibit feelings of frustration, the belief that citizens have lost control of their destinies. The attitude is not without its ironies. In Britain, the leader of those advocating Brexit, the army of the discontented, was Boris Johnson, Conservative former Mayor of London, the product of the elitist Eton and Oxford.

It is enticing to contemplate that Donald Trump, looking for a vice-presidential running mate, might consider Boris who was born in New York City. Boris is no longer a contender to become prime minister since he was betrayed by his supposed ally, Michael Gove, Justice Minister, partly because Boris appeared to soften his position on relations with the EU when he said that Britain is part of Europe and always will be. Like the nursery poem about the Grand old Duke of York, "he marched his ten thousand men up to the top of the hill, and he marched them down again."

In Britain as in the U.S. no one factor explains the voting inclinations of citizens, but it is highly likely that the most important issue was immigration. About this questions arise. Do people lie to pollsters when they refuse to declare that immigration is their main concern? Is there a "social

desirability bias" according to which some people tend to answer questions in a manner that is politically correct or socially respectable by the majority?

The crucial factor is that immigration into Britain continues to increase, especially since eight Eastern and Central states joined the EU, allowing their citizens free movement to other countries. In 2014, 560,000 arrived in UK, while 317,000 left. In 2015 net immigration into UK was 330,000. Half of the immigrants had EU passports. The foreign born population doubled in two decades: in 2016 it is 8.3 million, and the number of foreign citizens increased from 2 to 5 million. The British population today contains 13 per cent foreign born and 8.5 percent foreign citizens.

The British population is thus changing. Since 1997 there has been a flow of immigration into Britain from the Caribbean and South Asia, and the share of the populations in England and Wales of ethnic minorities is 14 per cent. Those minorities are largely concentrated in London, south England, and a number of cities in the Midlands. More than 35 per cent of Londoners were born abroad.

Britain at first did not impose limits on immigration in the belief that the numbers would be small. But Britain became a draw for less skilled European immigrants because its labor markets were less regulated than in other EU countries and migrants could find jobs more easily.

The governing Conservative party has been concerned to reduce the amount of net migration: included in its measures were changes to rules on student immigration, limiting foreign students, family reunion migration, limiting the number of work permits, and in general is considering ending the free movement system of the EU.

It was responding to the political reality that a sizeable majority, 77 per cent, of the public want immigration reduced

either a little or a lot.

Interestingly, there are great variations in the citizenry depending on educational qualification, age, and the issue involved. The higher educated, and younger people, 30-35, take a much more favorable attitude to immigration than the less well educated and older people, especially those over 70.

What is important in Britain, and perhaps also in the U.S., is that, according to surveys of British social attitudes, citizens are more concerned about the impact of immigration on public services than on the impact on the economy or culture.

About 42% believe that immigration is good, and 35 per cent think it is bad, for the economy, and about 40 % believe the immigrants enrich cultural life while 40 per cent think the opposite.

Most important, there is widespread public concern about the pressure of immigration on public services, especially the National Health Service and the schools. About 62% express concern about increased pressure on the NHS, and 72% are concerned about the schools.

Not surprisingly, a leading contender for Conservative Party leader, Michael Gove argues that money saved by leaving the EU would mostly be spent on the NHS. The Brexit campaign to leave the EU had stressed that Britain would spend £350 million a week on NHS, the amount that would have gone to EU.

It remains unclear or uncertain what the impact of Brexit would be in terms of British trade, economic growth, and GDP. What is certain is that limits and more controls on immigration will be imposed, not so much for reasons of racism or xenophobia, or the "sacred right of independence," but to sustain social institutions and processes held to be important in British society. American politicians, aware of the controversial medical and educational issues, might take note of this and adjust their policies accordingly.