

**Home Affairs Committee, Thursday 8 December
New Immigration inquiry launch**

Speech by Rt Hon Yvette Cooper MP, Chair of the Committee

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

INTRODUCTION

Today we are launching today a different kind of Select Committee inquiry

An Inquiry looking outwards at the country, not inwards at the Government

An Inquiry involving other organisations and institutions, involving business, community groups, citizens juries

And an inquiry into probably the most divisive issue we now face as a country

But one of the most important for us to reach consensus on; Immigration

Before I set out how this Inquiry is going to work and ask for help in making it happen I want to talk about the background and why I think this is needed

CONTEXT

In the last two weeks alone we have seen the extent of the challenge we face

Net migration hit 335,000 - more than three times the target the Government set six years ago.

And the highest level of immigration Britain has had

A report by Louise Casey found a serious lack of any integration plan for people arriving in the country, leaving communities divided as a result

And a report from published by Migration Observatory said 75% of people want lower immigration – though the majority of people also say those coming from abroad do benefit the economy.

Immigration is really important for Britain – for our economy and society, and it has always been so throughout our history.

But it needs to be controlled and managed so the system is fair and so that it can command public support and confidence.

Right now that doesn't happen. Public concern has steadily grown and it has consistently been one of the issues of highest concern over the last ten years.

And often the debate about immigration has been angry and polarised – an excuse for some people to whip up fear and hostility, dividing communities and making it harder to have a thoughtful discussion about the reforms that are needed. Some people have felt they can't speak out.

So there are three central reasons for having this Inquiry now

BREXIT

First, immigration will be a central issue in the Brexit negotiations, but there is no consensus on what Britain wants out of the deal.

We know that immigration – and the desire to have more control over immigration – was an important reason for many people in voting to Leave.

But there hasn't been discussion over what kind of control that should mean

“Take back control of our borders” was the slogan.

But to do what with them? That bit hasn't properly been discussed.

On both sides of the referendum debate there are a wide range of views. Even among those who led the campaign to leave the EU there are different views on immigration policy – some called for a points based system, some want to stop immigration altogether, some support free movement.

The views of those who voted to stay matter too. Some, like me, have long argued for reform to free movement even inside the EU. Others believe free movement should be retained.

Polls say the majority of people want restrictions on free movement, but not what those restrictions might be.

And whatever it is we all want, there will be trade-offs in the negotiations with the EU. The debate on trade and immigration, on free movement and the single market is going to be crucial and difficult.

A poll by Natcen said 70% of people want restrictions on free movement and 90% want to stay in the single market. But we know the negotiations with the EU are going to be challenging.

So I believe there needs to be a public debate about what kind of immigration policy we want and what kind of trade-offs people will accept

Some will take a hard line in each direction. I think the majority of people are ready to debate and compromise to get the best deal Britain can.

But right now there is a vacuum. No process to build a consensus. No chance for people to have their say. And no steer for the Government on what people will support.

That means if the Home Secretary comes out with new proposals, the chances are they will be attacked from both sides with no one supporting them.

Yet if there is no consensus behind the most important parts of the Brexit deal, in the end it will unravel. The Brexit deal will be a big constitutional change for the country – for it to be stable and sustainable, the compromises it delivers need to have some kind of broad support.

So yes, part of the purpose of this inquiry is to provide the opportunity for people across the country to debate what they really want out of Brexit and help Parliament and the Government reach a fair and sustainable settlement.

WIDER IMMIGRATION CHALLENGES

The second reason for this inquiry is because there are wider unresolved immigration challenges that the country faces.

Technological and economic change mean more people are crossing borders than ever before. Across the world countries are working out how to cope with a 40% increase in the number of international migrants – up to 244 million in 2015 – over the last fifteen years. We are seeing not just the globalisation of trade, finance and ideas, but the globalisation of people.

Businesses competing in a global market place are hungry for the best international talent. Countries with ageing populations depend on younger dynamic workers from abroad. Meanwhile climate change and poverty are leading millions of people to seek a better life elsewhere. And the dire situation

in Syria it at the heart of a refugee crisis where millions have been forced to flee their homes through no choice of their own.

Yet the pace of change creates real challenges for communities and for social solidarity – and real pressures in democracies too.

The Casey report set out some of the social challenges communities face and the need for more action on integration.

There are economic questions about how our economy has become so riven with skills shortages that we are so dependent on skills from abroad rather than training more at home.

There are distributional questions. For example the NIESR report out this week says that if immigration falls as a result of Brexit, then growth will be hit and our country overall will be worse off. However those on the lowest pay who have been hardest hit over the last few years will see a modest income rise.

And there are geographic questions. The labour market requirements and attitudes to immigration vary significantly across the country – with big differences between Scotland and England, and between London and elsewhere. But the current immigration system can't accommodate that at all.

So the second part of the purpose of this inquiry is to look into some of the wider trends and challenges on immigration we face over the next few years.

POLARISATION ON IMMIGRATION

And the third is not just about what we debate, but how we do so.

Because too often debates about immigration become polarised and angry. Instead we want to look at whether it is possible to find common ground, and to debate these challenging issues in a sensible rather than a divisive way.

Some will say they've heard enough of immigration, that everyone has been banging on about it too much, and can't we get back to talking about jobs or the NHS instead.

And they have a point. There has been a lot of noise about immigration. But too often it has been shouting not talking.

Too often all that gets heard are the loudest, angriest voices and others are silenced.

Some people exploit public concern to whip up fear and hatred. At its worst, the Home Affairs Select Committee has seen in our other Inquiry into hate crime, awful examples of hatred and racist abuse.

But just because some people exploit the issue in a way that is totally wrong, doesn't mean the rest of us should be silent from talking about it or ignore the problem. It isn't racist to worry about immigration. We have to make sure we have a sensible debate.

Too often in the past politics has failed to build confidence or consensus. Trust has been undermined – be it by the failure to have controls on Eastern European migration over a decade ago, or setting targets that aren't met today.

We should talk more about different kinds of immigration and asylum – illegal immigration, students, high skilled migration, low skilled migration, people joining family, refugees – on each of which people have very different views. And also about the impact on communities and the labour market, or whether the system is fair. And we've done too little to tackle the divisions and the anger.

Yet in public meetings I've held on immigration in the past, there has been rather less anger and rather more consensus than you would think.

That is why part of the purpose of this Inquiry is to try to identify where the common ground is now on immigration, to work out what would help build a consensus.

INQUIRY DETAILS

So here's how the Inquiry will work.

The Committee intends to hold events in every region and nation of the country.

As well as the traditional formal evidence sessions – from local businesses, community leaders and others.

We want to hold a different kind of event - broad based public meetings, bringing local people together for debates and discussions

We want to provide the opportunity for many more local consultations and debates.

British Future will be running around 60 citizens panels in different parts of the country – like small citizens juries to deliberate and submit evidence to the inquiry

We are encouraging other organisations to run participation and deliberation events too – community groups, faith groups, think tanks, local councils, MPs, media organisations.

And in the New Year we will launch an online consultation too.

We are today publishing the terms of reference and they are deliberately broad.

The Committee itself has a wide range of different views about the challenges and what the response should be and we know ourselves we won't always agree.

WHAT IS AT STAKE

This is a different kind of Inquiry. And a very difficult subject.

I admit, this is hard. We may find it is difficult to reach consensus. And it will be up to Government to decide whether they listen in the negotiations.

I accept we will probably be criticised from all sides. But I hope people will get involved to try to make this work.

Because no one else is doing this at the moment.

And what if we don't try to solve the deep divisions we face on immigration?

What if we don't try publicly to resolve the genuine policy conflicts we face?

What if five years down the line we end up with less integration or more skills shortages or higher public concern and everyone just shouting at each other as a result?

What if division grows? Won't we look back and wish we had at least tried to have a sensible debate.

In the end I still believe that most people in Britain want to find solutions not just shout about problems, that most people are ready to consider and compromise and that there is already more consensus than people think. That is what this Inquiry is designed to find out.