

A Foreign Perspective on UKIP

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May 26, 2014



I was sitting at the kitchen table with my Japanese wife, and two of our friends, one Korean and the other Hungarian.

I asked them what they thought of the UKIP message regarding the challenges associated with immigration, the 'lack of English being spoken before the train gets to Grove Park,' remark, etc. I particularly wanted to know if they perceived the general message from UKIP as something that was racist and made them feel uneasy, since none of them were born in the UK...

My wife certainly didn't think it was racist. The Korean said that if she was back home and she was to experience no one speaking Korean on the train that she would feel uncomfortable, but, she added, she probably wouldn't say anything about it cuz of the education she has had living in London for so many years, where she said you are taught not to comment on those kinds of feelings. But, she said, it wouldn't change the feeling of: 'why is no one speaking Korean around here?'

The Hungarian commented that a lot of the Somali people she knows don't speak much English. And that's her speaking as someone who certainly doesn't speak perfect English.

Then the most interesting thing was the picture our Korean friend painted about where she works. She trains and assesses students at a college where people want to go into the nursery and teaching assistant lines of work.

The management of the college (which is in some kind of partnership with a local borough college) is set up as a charity but is, from what I could tell, essentially a business. Our friend is seriously overworked. She is normally given a case load of 45-55 people she is training and assessing. And one reason that it is such hard work is that many of them don't speak v good English. Many of them are Somali or Bangladeshi. Often she does an oral assessment as writing in English is a challenge for many of them. Even verbal assessments are not easy. Many of the people she is training have been in the UK for 10 plus years, but just not been able to learn a lot of English. One reason she said a lot of them are doing the course is because of the changes to the benefit system and they need to either find work or go in to education. They can get government loans for the courses too. She said it is hard for them to meet the standards needed. And then of course the college wants to get them a certificate for their studies, as that is what allows it to get paid all the tuition fees. And hence the pressure our friend gets put under by her managers, who are not really running a charity, but actually a business enterprise.

Anyway, it's just a snap shot of one person's experience of working in London, but it is nevertheless an authentic experience of a foreigner in London who has taken the time to study here, learn English and get a job and is trying to contribute all be it in a v difficult environment.

I was listening to Any Questions and Question Time this week. And there is a kind of strange hypocrisy and lack of integrity in the way some people from the three main parties so keenly imply UKIP to be a racist party. It's not that I am saying they are necessarily wrong. It's instead something about the tone with which they say it, that seems to grate and hint at a prejudice of people who don't think like them, or express things like them. Christian Hunt in one breath seemed to say how we should focus on policy and not ridicule UKIP, and then in the next breath was deriding them with a slightly condescending smirk. In one of the programs someone asked the question that now needs to be debated: 'how do you define racism in the current climate?' Some of the responses to this avoided the question and moved straight on to blame UKIP for scaremongering and peddling fear. One of them skipped the question on race altogether and went straight on to sexism and homophobia. No one was open and relaxed enough when live on air to explore this important question with a bit more depth.

I wonder, if these politicians were to listen to our Korean friend talking about how the unfair pressure she is under to pass people as competent teaching assistants, when they speak so little English, how would they take it? Would they see what she describes as encouraging division and using the language of fear?

Even managing a local under 8 football team, I get mums coming along with their boys on a Saturday morning and some of them need to get their 8 year old to speak for them, to give me their mobile number, etc. If they have only been here for a year I fully understand. But if they have been in West London for several years I would want to hear them trying, even if with difficulty, speak for them selves, in English. Is that racist?

I should say our club has lots of effective managers and coaches who are not originally from the UK. So it certainly is possible.

Going back to the three established parties, there is a kind of horror that they seem to feel. Their distaste for the new kid on the block is perhaps less to do with UKIP's sometimes unfortunate council candidates, but more to do with the fact that there is a new party that is having such a big impact on their power base.

Perhaps they would behave in the same way to the Greens if they were having a similar impact on their share of the vote? Accusing them of being Utopian or something...

They accuse UKIP of wanting to keep limits on immigration in an unhelpful way. But it seems like they want to do the same with the political landscape, they don't want to share it with anyone new. They don't really want their political culture to be invaded by new people, with new or radical ideas. It doesn't fit in their political box. Ironic when you consider how they depict UKIP.

This is why so many people found UKIP's success on Thursday and last night so refreshing. We might wonder seriously about what will be in their manifesto, be thinking they need to be careful with their generalisations about Romanians, and perhaps we find their disapproval of the foreign aid budget a bit short sighted, but on the other hand, here is a party not afraid of challenging the status quo, not desperately trying to over crowd the centre ground, but actually creating an opportunity for the big parties to get involved in a more diverse debate, where not everyone is trying to simply sound safe.

For Nick Clegg, Modern Conservatives, and New Labour politicians diversity is a word used to articulate how the general public should embrace attitudes that differ from their own, but certainly not a word that might be relevant to the political class, and the breadth and depth of debate that could be had in Westminster and on the BBCs Question Time.