Immigration and population: The interlinked ecological crisis that dares not speak its name

Environmentalists drew global attention to the need for population control in the 1960s and 1970s, but most green groups have studiously ignored this politically charged topic. The intimately linked subject of immigration is likewise seen as taboo. However, the author argues, unless a reduction in immigration becomes a priority for the environmental movement – and is placed within the framework of a progressive protectionism (a concept explored in the article) – then political support can only grow for those who brought us Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the far right across Europe.

Colin Hines

About the author

Colin is an environmentalist who has authored several books, including *Progressive Protectionism: Taking back control* (Park House Press, 2017) and *Localization: A global manifesto* (Earthscan, 2000). He is a previous coordinator of Greenpeace International's Economics Unit.

Recent reports have shown that the sixth mass extinction of global wildlife already under way is also seriously threatening the world's food supplies (Bioversity International, 2017; Ceballos *et al.*, 2017). The report by Ceballos and colleagues (2017) was particularly interesting in its conclusion that the central factors behind these losses are *human overpopulation* and *continued population growth*. This recognition of the centrality of population numbers to the ecological crisis is in marked contrast to the position of major green international non-governmental organizations such as WWF, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth. They have a significant influence on environmental policy around the world, yet display a fastidious aversion to discussion of such a contentious matter (*cf.* Maynard *et al.*, 2017). The absence of these organizations from the immigration and population debates shows that they would rather be in 'politically correct' denial than engage seriously with the ecological implications of overpopulation and continued population growth.

In this article I argue that controlling population growth and its main engine in rich countries – namely, immigration – must be central to future environmental and social campaigning. I also argue that the best way to achieve this control will involve replacing the current model of globalization (with its emphasis on 'free trade' and 'free markets'), with a return to less open borders – a model which I call 'progressive protectionism' (for a more detailed account see Hines [2017]).

Why population and immigration controls need to be at the centre of the green agenda

In 2016, the world's human population was estimated to be 7.4 billion (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). It continues to grow, although more slowly than in the recent past. However, it is still increasing by approximately 83 million people per year. According to the 2017 United Nations *World Population Prospects* report, world population is projected to increase by more than 1 billion people within the next fifteen years, reaching 8.6 billion people by 2030, increasing further to 9.8 billion in 2050, and to as many as 11.2 billion by 2100. Incredibly, in the last six years, the United Nations' world population projections for 2100 have increased by over a billion people, from 10.1 in 2010 to 11.2 billion last year. It was previously thought human numbers would stabilize well before 2100 as a consequence of reductions in average fertility in most countries. The reality is that such reductions have not occurred on the scale projected, particularly in Africa (United Nations, 2017).

Now, the environmental impact of the human population obviously depends not just on its total size, but also upon the level of consumption and resource use by each

individual. For this reason, immigration from poorer countries to richer ones plays a crucially significant role in contributing to environmental problems. The number of immigrants to Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries has increased substantially in the last decades, from about 82 million in 1990 to 127 million in 2010. Immigrants are now the main source of population growth in the OECD countries. They contribute more and more to population growth, compared to natural increase (the excess of births over deaths) – particularly in European countries (Boubtane *et al.*, 2011). At the beginning of 2012 the population of Europe was estimated at 503.7 million, an increase of more than 100 million since 1960. In 2011 around 68% of Europe's population growth came from net migration, which thus continues to be the main determinant of population growth, as it has been since 1992 (Boubtane *et al.*, 2011). Given the ageing population in Europe, future population decline or growth is likely to depend on the contribution made by migration.

In terms of the UK, the immigration situation has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades. In 2001, the population of the UK was estimated to be 59.1 million, with 4.9 million (8.3%) foreign born. By 2011, the population of the UK had increased by 4.1 million to 63.2 million, with the foreign born population at 8 million (12.6%). Recent figures from the Office of National Statistics show that the UK population has risen at its sharpest rate in nearly 70 years – an estimated 65,648,000 people living in the country at the end of June last year, up 538,000 on the year before. This is the largest annual increase since 1946–47. Net international migration (*i.e.* the difference between those arriving in and those leaving the country in any one year) continued to be the main driver of this growth (Office of National Statistics, 2017a). An important statistic here is the percentage of live births in England and Wales being born to mothers from outside the UK: in 1990, it was 11.6% of births; by 2015, that had risen to 27.5%, the highest level on record

(Office of National Statistics, 2017a). It is estimated that net migration plus births to foreign-born parents has accounted for 85% of UK population growth since 2000 (Migration Watch UK, 2017).

If net migration continues at recent levels, then the population of the UK is expected to rise by nearly 8 million people over the next fifteen years (almost the equivalent of the population of Greater London), and by 9.7 million over the next 25 years – from an estimated 64.6 million in 2014 to 74.3 million in 2039. Net migration would account for approximately 50% of this projected increase over those 25 years, but 75% of this increase would be from future migration plus the children of those migrants (Office of National Statistics, 2017a). And, unless immigration policies change, there is no particular reason to think the UK's population growth will stop there.

Indeed, without managed migration, the population of the rich world would soar. Indicative here are the results of a global Gallup poll of half a million people in 154 countries (representing more than 98% of the world's adult population) that took place between 2010 to 2012. This poll showed that around 630 million of the world's adults would like to leave their country and move somewhere else permanently. In this poll, more than 100 million expressed a preference for the USA, and 42 million a preference for the UK (Clifton, 2013).

The primary reason such immigration from poor to rich nations should be an issue for those concerned about the ecological crisis is that it inevitably results in a larger 'global ecological footprint' than would otherwise be the case without such levels of immigration. An individual's ecological footprint is an approximate measure of that individual's impact on the Earth's ecosystems (see https://www.footprintnetwork.org). Unsurprisingly, wealthier people typically have a much larger ecological footprint than poorer people. For example, the work of the Global Footprint Network, the Stockholm Environment Institute and the

"Immigration from poorer countries to richer ones plays a crucially significant role in contributing to environmental problems."

UK Government's Committee on Climate Change indicates that if everyone on Earth lived as the average Briton does, we would need three planets' resources to sustain us, and ten times the capacity of the planet to absorb greenhouse gas emissions at that level (Chance, 2013).

Progressive protectionism

For these reasons, in my book *Progressive Protectionism* (Hines, 2017) I propose that all mainstream parties in the OECD should commit to something along the lines of 'no new, large-scale, permanent immigration'. The word 'new' makes it clear that curbing future levels of immigration should involve no changes for those already legally resident in a country. 'Permanent' has the caveat that foreign students are welcome to study there and workers temporarily to fill vacancies here, but only for specified periods. Countries should no longer countenance the permanent propping-up of whole sectors of their economies via contined immigration. In the UK, for example, we must rapidly train enough doctors, nurses and carers from our own population to prevent the shameful theft of such vital staff from the poorer countries which originally paid for their education.

What I term 'progressive protectionism' is a more comprehensive approach than just controlling the movement of people across international borders. It offers an internationalist, more equitable and environmentally protective end goal for groupings of nation states to protect and re-diversify their national economies and help others to do the same. Progressive protectionism is a shift away from open markets to allow nation states to take back control of the movement of capital, goods, services and people across their borders. The end goal is to allow national economies to prosper by maximizing local economic activity, in a way that adequately protects the environment, reduces inequalities and power imbalances, and improves social welfare. Such an ambitious agenda will require cooperation amongst regional neighbours and a reorientation of the end goals of global aid and trade rules to help rebuild local economies and local control worldwide.

It should be noted that I am not advocating a return to the 'beggar thy neighbour' protectionism of the 1920s and 30s. In that approach, the goal was for each country to increase its economic strength by limiting imports and increasing its global exports at the expense of its competitors. In contrast to such a focus on export-oriented growth, progressive protectionism aims to re-localize much economic activity, and thereby to reduce permanently the amount of international trade in goods, capital and services – and, of course, to enable nation states to decide the level of migration that their citizens desire.

At the same time, it is equally important to think through the implications of adopting a stricter approach to immigration. First and foremost, we have to redouble the commitments that we make to improve people's economic and social prospects in their own countries. The crucial thing is to tackle the root causes of why people feel they have no choice but to leave their communities in the first place. Beyond the horror of war and conflict, much of this is to do with poverty, unemployment and people's local economic prospects, or with their sense of security and personal freedom in autocratic, oppressive political circumstances. Much of this, in turn, stems from ruthlessly imposed notions of international competitiveness, which pit nations against each other in the global economy. The alternative to this, and the policies required to implement that alternative, are explained in detail in Hines (2017). The essence is that export-led growth will need to be progressively reduced as the emphasis shifts to protecting and rebuilding local economies. Trade deals that prioritize corporate profit at the expense of the well-being of the majority and the environment must be eliminated.

Against the backdrop of progressive protectionism, it becomes possible to redefine the kind of internationalism that we will need for the future. All foreign policy, all trade agreements,

"Progressive protectionism is a shift away from open markets to allow nation states to take back control of the movement of capital, goods, services and people across their borders."

and all aid and development transfers will need to be focused on minimizing those factors that persuade people that their chances are better off outside their country than inside. Arms sales will need to be dramatically curtailed. Aid and development policies must prioritize employment opportunities for young men and women. Education for girls and access for all women to reproductive healthcare and fertility management must take centre stage in order to help to reduce population growth. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals would become more politically relevant, as would policies to urgently curb global warming to lessen the inevitability of ending up with more and more climate refugees. The structural adjustment and austerity policies forced onto poor countries and the eurozone will have to end. Finally, to help stem any future rise in refugees, the developed countries would have to stop their involvement in overseas military interventions.

From a progressive, internationalist position, this is what 'taking back control' would look like. Of course, it is crucial that during the debate about optimum levels of migration, immigrants already in the host country should be under no pressure whatsoever to leave. Also critical must be the concept of not interfering with legal marriages, civil partnerships or the reuniting of family members with those who were resident before the introduction of such new policies. Just treatment for asylum seekers must also be strongly defended.

Every effort should be made to encourage integration in a way that promotes more harmonious communities. Indeed, such practical measures will be made a great deal easier if the future is seen to be one where communities will not have to experience future levels of permanent inward migration to which they are strongly opposed. Such a clear-cut reduction in the number of economic migrants could also mean that the public becomes more amenable to a larger number of refugees being provided with a safe haven.

> "It is a complete dereliction of environmentalists' duty to protect the planet to continue to ignore immigration and population growth and not to campaign for their reduction."

Conclusion

As argued above, it is a complete dereliction of environmentalists' duty to protect the planet to continue to ignore immigration and population growth and not to campaign for their reduction. Without reducing human population growth, solutions to other aspects of ecological and social concern are made far more difficult. If environmentalists instead engaged with these crucially important issues, they could contribute to a fundamental shift in the end goals of diplomatic, aid and trade policies such that those policies were seen through the prism of limiting people's need to migrate. As proposed above, this could turn campaigns that at present seem to be mere moral handwringing into genuine international priorities.

However, the absence of environmentalists from public debates about immigration and population makes them appear not to be serious about really tackling global, environmental and social threats. Instead, they remain trapped in a form of politically correct denial. This must stop. Green groups must resume their central role in alerting the public to these problems and campaign publicly for their solutions. As I have argued in this paper, a policy framework of progressive protectionism should be central to this political project. Were these concrete proposals to become the focus of environmental campaigning it might return the movement to the centre stage of policymaking.

The environmental movement has a responsibility to take the lead in campaigning to curb population increases. It was, after all, environmentalists who first drew global attention to the need for population control in the 1960s and 1970s. However, since that time, after criticism by developing countries' activists and leaders that talk of population control is a form of colonialism, racism or imperialism, most green groups have studiously ignored this topic. For example, many on the left of the environmental movement have argued at length that the root of the ecological crisis is the consumption patterns of the rich – but have remained silent about the role

played by human overpopulation, despite the obvious point that total environmental impact is the product of individual impact *and* population.

Immigration as a topic is even more politically charged than that of population, and has also been seen as taboo within the environmental movement. However, the international attention to migration and the political upheavals that have resulted in the US and Europe must change all that. Unless a reduction in immigration too becomes a priority for the environmental movement, and – as argued here – is placed within the framework of a progressive protectionism, then political support can only grow for those who brought us Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the far right across Europe (exemplified in the recent electoral successes in Germany of Alternativ für Deutschland). ∎

References

Bioversity International (2017) *Mainstreaming Agrobiodiversity in Sustainable Food Systems: Scientific foundations for an agrobiodiversity index.* Bioversity International, Rome, Italy.

Boubtane E, Coulibaly D and Rault C (2011) *Immigration, Unemployment and Growth in the Host Country: Bootstrap panel Granger causality analysis on OECD Countries* (discussion paper 5853). Forschungsinstitut zur Zukunft der Arbeit, Bonn, Germany. Available at https://is.gd/qsQXvv (accessed December 2017).

Ceballos G, Ehrlich PE and Dirzo R (2017) Biological annihilation via the ongoing sixth mass extinction signaled by vertebrate population losses and declines. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* **114**: E6089–96.

Chance T (2013) *On Migration, Population and Ecology.* Available at https://is.gd/vW63Ny (accessed December 2017).

Clifton J (2013) More than 100 million worldwide dream of a life in the US. *Gallup News*, 21 March. Available at https://is.gd/ZKQBgw (accessed December 2017).

Hines C (2017) *Progressive Protectionism: Taking back control.* Park House Press, London, UK.

Maynard R, Porritt J, Galavotti C *et al.* (2017) Nature versus nurture of a growing human population. *The Guardian*, 12 July. Available at https://is.gd/QHEHZV (accessed December 2017).

Migration Watch UK (2017) *Population: Key topics*. Available at https://is.gd/4DOpZy (accessed December 2017).

Office of National Statistics (2017a) *Population Estimates for UK, England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland: Mid 2016.* Office of National Statistics, London, UK. Available at https://is.gd/zGgrw6 (accessed December 2017).

Office of National Statistics (2017b) National Population Projections: 2016-based statistical bulletin. Office of National Statistics, London, UK. Available at https://is.gd/LRl5uQ (accessed December 2017).

Population Reference Bureau (2016) 2016 World Population Data Sheet: With a special focus on human needs and sustainable resources. Population Reference Bureau, Washington, DC, USA. Available at https://is.gd/X3nnEP (accessed December 2017).

United Nations (2017) *World Population Prospects: Key findings and advance tables*. United Nations, New York, NY, USA. Available at https://is.gd/HF0L0t (accessed December 2017).

"Unless a reduction in immigration too becomes a priority for the environmental movement, then political support can only grow for those who brought us Brexit, the election of Donald Trump and the rise of the far right across Europe."