

## Reply to Brooker

By Rupert Read.

### Look back in tranquility

I was sorry to read Marianne Brooker's piece. Sorry to have contributed to upset; and sorry that the article was written in such a way as to leave it open to interpretations that I clearly did not intend. Sorry also to have been therefore badly misunderstood.

I have a strong record of standing up for immigrants and refugees and against xenophobia. Indeed, I think that the climate movement must make the resettlement of climate refugees one of its key policy demands. We should - we must - take responsibility for many of those who our past climate-deadly emissions have helped render destitute.

The old piece that Brooker was replying to was written in 2014. There are various things I would change about this old piece if I were rewriting it now, almost 6 years on. For instance, there are some matters of language that would be important to change. The phrase "mass migration" is itself not a good phrase, and I wouldn't use it now. Similarly, I would replace the phrase "the third world" (which I used because I reject the use of "developing countries" as a concept - a concept which has since its inception been an instrument of growthist global-North-centric imperialism) with the phrase "the Majority world".

I am sure that most authors would similarly change some significant things in their work from over five years ago. It is an uncomfortable position to be in to be judged on such an old article; but I guess this is the internet world we live in, and at the very least it provides an opportunity for reflection and learning. (Hopefully, on all sides.)

My intention with the original article -- and to Brooker's credit this is something she clearly perceives -- was to set out why I disagree with a policy of open borders. There are genuine policy disagreements to be had here (I'll come to those); but I certainly don't concede that anyone disagreeing with a policy of open borders is automatically thereby rendered a bad or uncompassionate person.

But sure, my "Love immigrants" article was written in a different time and I would write it differently if I were to write it now (which I probably wouldn't, as my interests and campaigning priorities have moved on). Let me remind readers of the context in which I wrote, over five years ago:

### The context in which I wrote

Extinction Rebellion of course didn't exist. Rather, back then I was more active in the Green Party. I was concerned about the pro-open-borders rhetoric and pro-large-scale-immigration rhetoric operating within the Greens and within parts of the Liberal Democrats and of Labour. My central concern was that a blanket attitude of welcoming more immigration was alienating much of the electorate. Large-scale immigration to the UK, mostly from the EU, was damaging the British populace's view of the EU. My view was that, unless we tackled the root causes of this, and also ensured some way of controlling the potential scale of it (note: my focus, reflected in the "Love immigrants" piece, is on reducing the underlying *causes* of migration, the deplorable 'push factors' such as climate-degradation and war), then we would be at risk of losing a referendum on EU membership. That was why I wrote the piece. Events since then appear to have confirmed my diagnosis. If Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats had not been so gung-ho about supporting large-scale migration from EU countries to the UK, then, we would not have lost the 2016 referendum.

I do however of course recognise that the public's concerns around immigration have been used by some nefarious groups and individuals to fuel anti-immigrant sentiment, making it particularly important to take care with framing and language of any immigration argument. But it is vital that we don't allow that fact to put careful discussion of the issue beyond the bounds of acceptability; for that, driving it underground, would be disastrous, as it would fuel the sense felt by some in this country that they aren't allowed to discuss the matter honestly. (That feeling of not being permitted to discuss it, on pain of being called 'anti-immigrant or 'racist' etc., is unfortunately stoked by Brooker's approach, as I will explain below.)

### My personal view of migration

Because I've been put on the spot and judged about this, let me explain in very clear terms my own purely personal view of the matter of migration policy (which is not Green Party policy, let alone anything to do with Extinction Rebellion): If I were determining immigration policy in the UK, I would have sought to reduce immigration to the UK from the European Union, *so that there was more scope for resettling more climate refugees here*. I think it wrong that we have not taken in far more refugees from Syria (and Darfur, and the Yemen, and so forth), whereas populations of European Union citizens in this country have swelled. In the future, we need to be ready and willing to take in many people from low-lying island states, from places such as Bangladesh for example. This will probably not be possible unless we restrict further migration from the European Union.

Why? Why shouldn't we just take in both?

## Being Eco-logical

It is politically completely unviable to have a population in this country swelling by miles more than our population is already. Moreover, it is ecologically unviable. The basic point here is food. This country is now completely incapable of feeding itself. (And that's another reason why we should take our fair share of climate refugees now. Because *Britons may be climate refugees soon*. If our food supply collapses, as our climate changes for the worst, this is entirely possible.)

Being food-insecure, as we are, is a very foolish position to be in, as we move into the era of climate disasters. So, open borders for the UK, which could very probably lead to a drastic increase in population here, makes no sense for those who understand ecological limits. The *Ecologist*, in the 'Blueprint for survival', was founded on the concept of ecological limits. It seems odd to be harshly judged by its editors for simply acknowledging that concept.

To be clear, *I am absolutely not one of those who thinks that population is the main determinant of ecological footprint*. Consumption-levels per capita are the main determinant thereof (which is why we need to be more concerned about population growth in rich countries than in poor countries). But to deny that population growth bears any causal influence upon overall ecological footprint is simply that: a form of denialism. A form of refusal to recognise reality. For, obviously, it is by multiplying consumption levels per head by population levels that one can determine the overall level of ecological impact.

## Against open borders

Marianne Brooker disagrees with my article because she believes that we should abolish borders. That's a perfectly legitimate political perspective. It is also, we should note, a very minority one. It is subscribed to by some on the Left, and by some Greens. It is not subscribed to by any British political party, including Labour, the Green Party or the Liberal Democrats. (That doesn't mean of course that it is necessarily wrong; but it does mean that it is not likely to be a credible basis for practical democratic politics. It's easy for advocates of open borders to attack their opponents; because their own view's downsides are unlikely to be exposed by history as it unfolds, because their views are unlikely ever to be instantiated in government policy.)

So: it seems to me odd that I should be vilified merely for not believing in open-borders-now. Especially given that my reasons are entirely different from those of most 'mainstream' politicians in this country. Most mainstream politicians simply want to restrain immigration-levels (typically, by way of border-controls), but typically are keen to take in immigrants whose presence here leads to economic growth. My perspective by contrast is that being *humane*, rather than trying foolishly to keep growing the economy, should be our guide. That's why I want us to take in fewer Europeans and *more climate refugees*. In the years to come, this situation - of our needing to choose be-

tween taking in those who can contribute most economically, and those whose *need* is the deepest - will only grow.

### Short-term, transitional challenges

A couple of specific responses to Brooker. She takes me to task for stating that high immigration tends to reduce social cohesion. Well, there is plenty of evidence that immigration tends to reduce social cohesion – at least in the short term, all things being equal. To say this is not *at all* to cast any blame on immigrants: that would be victim-blaming, and would be obscene. That's why my piece stressed that we need to *embrace* immigrants; while looking carefully at the systemic policy-matters that can damage social cohesion. There is nothing racist or xenophobic about saying this: it is simply a fact that a rapid in-rush of new people into an area makes the maintenance of social cohesion in that area more challenging: to see this, consider the uncontroversial example of students. When a large number of students suddenly move into an area, those in that area already are likely to suddenly feel less at home in the area. That kind of thing is all that I meant, when I spoke of large-scale immigration as a challenge for the maintenance of social cohesion.

So Brooker completely misunderstands what I was saying, when she claims that my article had an “individualising focus... on an undeserving scapegoat.” There was a completely *non*-individualising focus, in my article: I said that we should be completely *for* immigrants as individuals; but that we should also look calmly at *systems* and policy. And there was no scapegoating at all: just as it is not scapegoating students, to state the obvious fact that if a university suddenly expands and brings lots of students into some part of town, that part of town is likely to change character in a way that will, at least initially, be challenging and difficult, especially for existing residents. Obviously, there are things that can be done to ameliorate such a situation. But to pretend that there is no challenge, or (worse) to claim that to speak of such a situation as involving a challenge for all is tantamount to racism — or to prejudice against young people, in the student case — is unwise, to say the least. My focus was on the system level.

Brooker also takes me to task for having said that significant immigration puts pressure on public services. But again, to say this is clearly not to scapegoat. It is simply to state what is (in the short to medium term) obvious fact. If many people move swiftly into an area, then there won't be enough school places in that area, etc. etc. In other words: The difficulty is in the transition period. The immediate effect of rapid large-scale immigration is simply undeniably pressure on public services, etc. Of course that can be dealt with by intelligent public-policy; but again, to pretend that there is no challenge in the first place is denial.

### Summing up

In summary, Brooker says, “Can we love individual immigrants, while opposing mass migration? The answer is no.” I would urge anyone tempted to take up that harsh stance to think very carefully before doing so. In doing so, someone may think that they are probabilifying a wider embrace of open borders. Instead, they may merely evoke an attitude of feeling moralised against. Which is not a productive basis for the changing of minds.

My view is that our migration policy should focus on human needs, within ecological limits without cognizance of which we cannot satisfy human needs in any case. That view would mean that we would instead take in more people from those parts of the Majority World where people are being worst hit by climate/ecological breakdown (or by displacement caused by war, etc). Britain’s current immigration policy, by favouring EU citizens, tends toward institutional racism. I would *reverse* that policy; I would *loosen* migration controls for those in most need, especially those people from the Majority World most badly affected by climatic-displacement (and I’d tighten them up for those (principally Europeans, also North Americans) in least need).

I appreciate some readers will not agree with my position, and will instead argue for open borders. To those readers, I would say this: feel free to disagree with me and campaign for open borders. I do not speak for the Green Party or Extinction Rebellion on migration (XR has no position on migration policy, no more than it does on Brexit or on electric cars or a hundred other things: it simply has its values (centrally, non-violence) and its three demands), and these organisations are composed of and respect people with differing opinions. I welcome and respect different opinions on this and other issues, and for a movement -- especially a deliberately broad-based movement such as XR with no manifesto beyond its three demands -- to be successful, it must avoid dogmatically cleaving to narrow solutions to the variegated issues that in our democracy we face.

To be very clear once again, in conclusion: I would like to see immigration into the UK reduced by improving conditions across the world, i.e. tackling the root causes of migration. I do *not* favour ‘tighter migration controls’, at least in the (vital) sense that *I want to see this country being MORE welcoming toward climate-refugees.*

We should warmly welcome those immigrants that are here, wherever they’re from. That doesn’t imply that we should in effect try to bring as many as possible here. ‘Only’ that we should love those who are.

If that doesn’t scotch unwise and ugly rumours against me of being a closet-xenophobe or racist or whatever, then I’m not sure what will.