

Should Climate Activists Support Limits on Immigration?

Tuesday 26 January 2010, by [ANGUS Ian](#), [BUTLER Simon](#) (Date first published: 24 January 2010).

Contents

- [Lifeboat ethics and anti-immig](#)
- [Shifting gears](#)
- [Greens versus immigration](#)
- [Wrong Diagnosis, Wrong Cure](#)
- [A pessimistic outlook](#)

Immigrants to the developed world have frequently been blamed for unemployment, crime and other social ills. Attempts to reduce or block immigration have been justified as necessary measures to protect “our way of life” from alien influences.

Today, some environmentalists go farther, arguing that sharp cuts in immigration are needed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and slow climate change. However sincere and well-meaning such activists may be, their arguments are wrong and dangerous, and should be rejected by the climate emergency movement.

Lifeboat ethics and anti-immigrant bigots

“Environmental” arguments for reducing immigration aren’t new. In a 1974 article, “Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor,” US biologist Garrett Hardin argued that “a nation’s land has a limited capacity to support a population and as the current energy crisis has shown us, in some ways we have already exceeded the carrying capacity of our land.” Immigration, he said, was “speeding up the destruction of the environment of the rich countries.” [1]

Elsewhere he wrote: “Overpopulation can be avoided only if borders are secure; otherwise poor and overpopulated nations will export their excess to richer and less populated nations.” [2]

Hardin’s ideas have been very influential in the development of the right-wing, anti-immigration movement in the US and elsewhere. In 1979, he helped to found the Federation for American Immigration Reform (FAIR), an anti-immigrant lobbying group that has been named a “hate organization” by the Southern Poverty Law Center. [3] In addition to the usual array of anti-immigrant arguments FAIR has made a particular point of linking concerns about the environment with opposition to immigration.

Virginia Abernethy, a Hardin collaborator who calls herself an “ethnic separatist,” argues that the ability to migrate to rich countries gives people in poor countries an incentive to have bigger families. “The U.S. would help, not harm, by encouraging an appreciation of limits sooner rather than later. A relatively-closed U.S. border would create most vividly an image of limits and be an incentive to restrict family size.” [4]

Shifting gears

In the past, the “environmental” anti-immigration argument was: immigrants should be kept out because their way of life is a threat to our environment. That argument is still made by anti-immigrant groups and some conservationists.

Recently, as concern about greenhouse gas emissions and global warming increased, the anti-immigrant argument has taken on a new form. Now the argument is: immigrants should be kept out because our way of life is a threat to the world’s environment.

That’s the argument made in a recent briefing from the US Centre for Immigration Studies, a “think tank” founded by FAIR: it says that immigration worsens CO₂ emissions “because it transfers population from lower-polluting parts of the world to the United States, which is a higher polluting country.” CIS calculated that the “average immigrant” to the US contributed four times more CO₂ than in their country of origin. [5]

Otis Graham, a founder of FAIR, made the same argument in his 2004 book *Unguarded Gates*:

“Most immigrants ... move from poor societies to richer ones, intending to do what they almost always succeed in doing, take on a higher standard of living that carries a larger ecological footprint. This being the case, the logic of the relationship is straightforward. Population growth in both poor and wealthy societies, but especially in the latter, intensifies environmental problems. Where immigration shifts population numbers to wealthier societies, it does not leave global environmental damage the same, but intensifies global as well as local environmental degradation.” [6]

A recent FAIR report claims that increased population is the primary cause of the huge increase in U.S. greenhouse gas emissions between 1973 and 2007 – and that the population increase was caused by immigration. “The United States will not be able to achieve any meaningful reductions in CO₂ emissions without serious economic and social consequences for American citizens unless immigration is sharply curtailed.” [7]

The racist British National Party, which likes to call itself the “true green party” because it opposes immigration, also uses this argument. BNP leader Nick Griffin recently told the European parliament that climate change isn’t real – but that hasn’t stopped him saying immigrants will make it worse. He told author Steven Farris that by accepting immigrants from the third world, “We’re massively increasing their impact of carbon release into the world’s atmosphere. There’s no doubt about it, the western way of life is not sustainable. So what on Earth is the point of turning more people into westerners?” [8]

(It is significant that none of these supposed defenders of the environment take their argument to its logical conclusion: if immigration to the North is bad for the climate then emigration to poor countries with low emissions must be good and should be encouraged.)

Greens versus immigration

For anti-immigration bigots, concern for the environment is just a ploy – they’ll say anything to justify keeping immigrants out. It’s an example of what author and feminist activist Betsy Hartmann has called “the greening of hate — blaming environmental degradation on poor populations of color.” [9]

But it is particularly disturbing to witness the promotion of similar arguments in the mainstream media, and by environmental activists whose political views are otherwise hostile to those of FAIR and the BNP.

For example, Ross Gittins, economics editor of the Sydney Morning Herald, said in 2008 that cutting Australia's immigration was "one of the quickest and easiest ways to reduce the growth in our emissions" because "it's a safe bet they'd be emitting more in prosperous Australia than they were before." [\[10\]](#)

Australian renewable energy expert Mark Diesendorf has urged the Australian Greens to call for immigration restrictions because Australia is such a big polluter. "Australia is world's biggest per capita emitter of greenhouse gases. So every additional Australian has a bigger impact than anywhere else." [\[11\]](#)

Even the highly respected U.S. environmentalist Bill McKibben has written that, "the immigration-limiters ... have a reasonable point," because "If you're worried about shredding the global environment, the prospect of twice as many world-champion super-consumer Americans has got to worry you." [\[12\]](#)

Noted environmentalist and journalist Tim Flannery made a similar argument during a debate on immigration policy broadcast by the Australian Broadcasting Corporation in September 2009:

"Growing Australia's population has a much greater impact than growing the population of a poor country. We are the heaviest carbon users in the world, about 23 tonnes per capita, so people that come to this country from anywhere on the planet will result almost certainly in an increase carbon emissions"

As these examples show, "green" arguments against immigration are no longer the exclusive property of anti-immigrant bigots. They are increasingly heard within the climate movement, and so require strong answers from climate activists.

Wrong Diagnosis, Wrong Cure

The view that stopping immigration to wealthy countries is a good way to fight global warming rests on a the simplistic idea that because immigrants come from countries with low per capita emissions to countries with high per capita emissions they supposedly increase total emissions simply by moving.

This argument is false on its face.

To calculate "per capita emissions," we simply divide a country's total greenhouse gas emissions by its total population. This provides a useful baseline for comparing countries of different sizes - but it tells us nothing at all about the emissions that can actually be attributed to individuals.

In fact, most emissions are caused by industrial and other processes over which individuals have no control.

In Canada, for example, no change in the number of immigrants will have any effect on the oil extraction industry at the Alberta Tar Sands, described by George Monbiot as "the world's biggest single industrial source of carbon emissions." [\[13\]](#)

Reducing immigration to the United States will have no effect whatsoever on the massive military

spending – up 50% in the past decade – which ensures that the Pentagon is the world’s biggest consumer of oil. [14] To put that in context: a study published in March 2008 found that the CO₂ emissions caused directly by the Iraq war until then were equivalent to putting 25 million more cars on the road in the U.S. [15]

Closing Australia’s borders would have had no effect on the climate denial policies of the previous Liberal Party government, or on the current Labor government’s determination to continue Australia’s role as “the world’s largest ‘coal mule.’” [16]

As US immigrant rights campaigner Patricia Huang has pointed out, “the relationship between population growth and environmental destruction is shaped by how we use our resources, not by the number of people who use them.” [17]

Labeling migrants as a climate change problem is not only unjust, but it obscures the real challenges the climate movement faces. The decisive question we must address is who makes decisions about resource use in society. In capitalist society, the big financial institutions, multinational corporations and fossil-fuel companies wield this power with devastating results for the planet’s ecosystems – and governments do their bidding.

Focusing on immigration diverts attention from the real social and economic causes of global warming, and makes it more difficult to solve them. This approach mistakenly links the trends of population and ecological harm, and so misdiagnoses the root causes of the current environmental crisis. It leaves social change out of the equation or consigns it to the far future. It downplays or ignores the fact that immigration would have a very different impact in the zero-emissions economy we need to fight for.

A pessimistic outlook

As we’ve seen, the argument that reducing immigration will protect the environment originated with right-wing, anti-immigrant bigots. Our major concern, however, is that virtually identical arguments have been adopted by progressive activists and writers who are sincerely concerned about global warming.

Despite their sincerity, their arguments betray regrettable pessimism about our common ability to build a climate emergency movement that is powerful enough to win the anti-emissions fight. As Larry Lohmann of Cornerhouse writes, the anti-immigration argument “relies on the premise that changing Northern lifestyles is a lower priority, or less achievable, than preventing others from sharing them.” [18]

In fact, including “close the borders” as an anti-emissions demand tends to make their pessimistic outlook self-confirming, by making it more difficult to build a mass movement. Not only does targeting immigration divert attention from the social causes of global warming, but it divides us from our allies, while strengthening our enemies.

Sadly, some groups that favor immigration control seem oblivious to the danger of lending credibility to bigots and racists who view immigrants as a threat to “our” way of life.

For example, last year the Australian Conservation Foundation praised Labor MP Kelvin Thompson, and Sustainable Population Australia named him to its “Population Role of Honour” when he called for immigration cuts to deal with climate change. Both ignored the fact that just 10 days earlier Thomson had revealed his real motives by calling for immigration cuts “to minimize the risk that

people who do not respect Australia's laws and legal system will enter this country." [19]

The anti-immigration response to climate change raises a huge wall between the climate movement and the most oppressed working people in the imperialist countries. How can we possibly win migrants and refugees to the climate movement while simultaneously accusing them of responsibility for rising emissions and asking the government to bar them and their families from entering the country?

What's more, it undermines efforts to work with the growing and important climate justice movement in the Third World, where global warming is now producing its first and most devastating effects. How can we expect to be taken seriously as allies, if we tell those movements that migrants are not welcome in our countries?

The Climate Justice and Migration Working Group, an international coalition of human rights and immigrant rights groups, estimates that between 25 and 50 million people have already been displaced by environmental change, and that could rise to 150 million by 2050. It calls for recognition of the right of human mobility across borders as an essential response to the climate change threat. [20]

The climate justice movement in the rich countries has a particular responsibility to support this demand – but blaming immigrants in general for global warming will make it more difficult to win public support for climate refugees.

Despite the good intentions of its green advocates, support for immigration controls strengthens the most regressive forces in our societies and weakens our ability to stop climate change.

It gives conservative governments and reactionary politicians an easy-out, allowing them to pose as friends of the environment by restricting immigration, while doing nothing to reduce real emissions.

It hands a weapon to climate change deniers, allowing them to portray the climate movement as hostile to the legitimate aspirations of the poorest and most oppressed people in the world.

People are not pollution. Inserting immigration into the climate change debate divides the environmental movement along race, class and gender lines, at a time when the broadest possible unity is essential. It is a dangerous diversion from the real issues, one the movement cannot afford and should not support.

by Ian Angus and Simon Butler

P.S.

* From Socialist Voice:

<http://www.socialistvoice.ca/?p=966>

* Ian Angus is editor of Climate and Capitalism and co-editor of Socialist Voice. Simon Butler is a member of Australia's Socialist Alliance and a staff writer for Green Left Weekly.

Footnotes

- [1] Garrett Hardin. "Lifeboat Ethics: the Case Against Helping the Poor."
- [2] "Garrett Hardin Quotations."
- [3] Southern Poverty Law Center. "New SPLC Report: Nation's Most Prominent Anti-Immigration Group has History of Hate, Extremism."
- [4] Virginia Abernethy. "The Demographic Transition Revisited: Lessons for Foreign Aid and U.S. Immigration Policy."
- [5] Leon Kolankiewicz & Steven Camarota. "Immigration to the United States and World-Wide Greenhouse Gas Emissions⁹." Centre for Immigration Studies, August 2008.
<http://www.cis.org/GreenhouseGasEmissions>.
- [6] Otis L. Graham Jr. *Unguarded Gates A History of America's Immigration Crisis*. Rowman & Littlefield. Lanham·MD. 2004. p. 140.
- [7] FAIR. "Immigration, Energy and the Environment."
- [8] Fred Pearce. "How can Nick Griffin's racist policies belong to the only 'true green party'?" *Guardian*, December 10, 2009.
- [9] Betsy Hartmann. "Conserving Racism: The Greening of Hate at Home and Abroad."
- [10] Ross Gittins. "An inconvenient truth about rising immigration." *Sydney Morning Herald*, March 3, 2008.
- [11] Mark Diesendorf. "Why Environmentalists must address Population as well as Technology and Consumption." Powerpoint presentation to a meeting organised by the NSW Greens, June 2008.
- [12] Bill Mckibben. "Does it make sense for environmentalists to want to limit immigration?"
- [13] George Monbiot. "The Urgent Threat to World Peace is ... Canada." December 1, 2009.
- [14] Sara Flounders. "Pentagon's Role in Global Catastrophe: Add Climate Havoc to War Crimes¹⁷." December 19, 2009.
- [15] Ian Angus. "Global Warming and the Iraq War¹⁸."
- [16] Guy Pearce. "Quarry Vision: coal, climate change and the end of the resources boom." *Quarterly Essay*, March 2009.
- [17] Patricia Huang. "10 Reasons to Rethink the Immigration-Overpopulation Connection." *DiffernTakes*, Spring 2009.
- [18] Larry Lohmann. "Re-imagining the Population Debate." Corner House Briefing 28, March 2003.

[19] Emily Bourke. "Migrants may pose terrorist threat." ABC News, August 7, 2009.

Australian Conservation Foundation. "Population boom will bust environment and quality of life." September 22, 2009.

Sustainable Population Australia. "Kelvin Thomson Joins Population Roll Of Honour."

[20] "Climate Justice and Migration: Position Statement."