



Global Brit

Making the most of the British diaspora

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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DEMOCRACY & CULTURE

MIGRATION

INTERNATIONAL

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Executive summary

The importance of migration in the modern world has famously led to the late 20th and early 21st centuries being dubbed the ‘Age of Migration’ (Castles and Miller 2009). Such are the movements of people that many governments find that huge numbers of their nationals live not within the boundaries of the state, but in other countries. However, home states retain some key responsibilities for their citizens overseas. In addition to looking after them at times of need or crisis, more and more governments have recognised that these citizens represent a great asset. But for this asset to be supported and mobilised effectively, governments need to be able to engage with their overseas populations in a coherent and strategic way.

This is where the idea of seeing emigrants as a ‘diaspora’ becomes useful. There are very lively ongoing discussions in academic and policy circles as to what constitutes a diaspora. In using the term ‘British diaspora’ in this report we are referring to the total population of British nationals living overseas (that is, every Brit abroad who is not a tourist or travelling for business). We think the British population overseas has the following characteristics which qualify them as a diaspora:

- They are a clearly identifiable and self-identifying national group
- They have a sense of empathy and connection with other Britons in their country of residence and in other countries overseas
- They retain an attachment to the UK and an interest in its affairs
- They demonstrate at least some ‘diasporic consciousness’, through setting up British clubs or business networks
- They mobilise collectively or show a willingness to be mobilised.

The last factor above is important to this report. Most diaspora activity (among the British or any other nationality) involves self-mobilisation – and that is as it should be. But many governments these days are trying to engage actively with and to support their diaspora communities overseas to serve home state interests. The UK government is taking a growing interest in diaspora engagement (with the devolved Scottish government in the vanguard). This is to be welcomed, but we argue that it is important that any engagement strategy works in the British national interest, in the interests of British emigrant communities themselves, and – crucially – in the interests of wider global goals. This might sound rather grandiose, but we think that the British diaspora, one of the biggest, most diverse and talented in the world, genuinely can be a force for good in international affairs and that the UK government should orientate its diaspora engagement strategy to promote this outcome.

Main findings

In one of ippr's best known reports, *Brits Abroad* (2006), we showed that there were more than 5.5 million British nationals living overseas permanently. Our analysis of the latest available figures shows that number has increased a little to 5.6 million – with around another half a million living abroad for part of the year.

However, we can now see that the boom in British emigration from 2000 onwards peaked in 2007 – when it was running at 200,000 a year – and since then it has dropped quite dramatically (by around a third). The latest estimates show that in the year to September 2009, British emigration was some 134,000 – a 23 per cent drop on the previous year and the lowest level since 2001 (ONS May 2010).

While there are communities of more than 1,000 Britons in more than 100 countries around the globe, the big expat populations are in Australia (more than a million), Spain, the United States, Canada and France. In some countries, the British community has grown substantially in recent years, including in:

- China – where our estimates suggest it has grown by 30 per cent since our 2006 study
- United Arab Emirates – where it has grown by 20 per cent in a similar period.

These increases probably reflect there being more job opportunities in those locations, although Dubai has since experienced a well-documented and dramatic downturn in employment. Other changes in patterns of Brits living abroad include:

- Second home ownership grew by nearly 20 per cent per year in the immediate years before the recession – with Spain and France the favoured locations, but other European countries gaining ground.
- By 2007 more households owned a second home overseas than a second home in England.
- An increasing number of British pensioners are living abroad – 9.2 per cent in 2009, up from 7.6 per cent in 2000 (although the increase has slowed recently, probably because of the economic downturn).

British emigrants tend to be moving abroad primarily to work – 55 per cent in 2008. They also tend to be younger, more highly educated and in higher earning jobs than the general British-born population. Latest figures show that emigration among professionals and the highly skilled has been slowing recently, with greater numbers returning home – but the UK is still experiencing 'brain drain'. There are advantages, however, as the UK received about £4.5 billion in remittances from abroad in 2006 – which represents 0.3 per cent of GDP.

Most Britons leaving the UK are doing so for the first time – in 2006, first-time emigration reached 80 per cent. Many also stay overseas for relatively short periods, with more than half of Britons returning in 2008 having been away for only one to four years.

Main findings from case study countries

As well as analysing available data sources to see the scale and nature of British emigration, we carried out extensive life history interviews with British emigrants in five countries that have experienced significant, but diverse, inflows of Brits – **Bulgaria, India, Spain, United Arab Emirates (Dubai) and the United States**. We also interviewed people such as UK consular officials, UK network organisers, the editors of expat newspapers and NGO officials. This helped us build up a detailed picture of the experiences of British emigrants – their successes and difficulties, and their needs and aspirations. The main focus of our research was the extent of their integration into their country of residence and their continuing attachment to the UK.

The popular idea that Britons emigrate because they think the UK is a terrible place to live is not borne out by the evidence. In fact, most Britons who emigrate are moving to take up positive economic opportunities overseas or to enjoy a different lifestyle, not because of negative experiences at home. They tend not to do much in the way of preparation before they leave but although more preparation would be wise for some, it is only the minority who find themselves in real trouble: many Brits abroad are adventurers and risk takers, who thrive on the challenge of adapting to a new environment.

The extent to which they integrate successfully into their new country of residence varies considerably. Those who tend to integrate successfully:

- work for local companies
- have family or friends locally
- engage in community activities
- speak the local language.

Those who tend to integrate less successfully:

- are retired or work for British or multi-national companies
- have limited family and friends locally
- live in enclaves
- have poor language skills.

Perhaps even more important to successful integration is an emigrant's outlook. Those who are positive, entrepreneurial and looking to broaden their horizons do well. Those who take a safety-first approach and are living overseas primarily because they can enjoy a better standard of living in a warmer climate have a more limited experience.

We found that integration among British emigrants is greater in the US and Bulgaria than in Dubai and Spain, while the picture was mixed in India.

Even emigrants who have lived for many years abroad, or who feel they have committed themselves wholly to a new life in a new country, often maintain significant links and attachments to the UK. Most have family in the UK, travel back frequently, and, very

strikingly, use new forms of communication, like email, social networking sites and Skype, to keep in almost constant contact. These virtual links enable a scattered and diverse collection of people to feel part of an 'imagined' national community.

The British media, particularly the BBC, is very important to emigrants, who maintain a lively interest in UK affairs (almost all of our interviewees followed UK news online). While not all British emigrants are entirely positive about modern Britain, they tend to be rather proud that the British media (particularly the BBC) tells them what is happening in the old country, 'warts and all' – and contrast this approach with the media in their places of residence.

However, being interested in UK affairs does not extend, by and large, to wanting to influence British politics. Despite the fact that millions of emigrants have the right to vote in general elections, levels of voting are very low – only some 14,000 overseas Britons had registered to vote in the 2010 general election by the end of 2009.

Business networks, churches, charitable groups, book groups and a shared interest in sport, particularly traditional British sports, help British emigrants to socialise with each other and retain links with the UK. However, most emigrants were fairly pragmatic about 'home', not articulating nostalgic or sentimental notions of it, but designating it practically as where they currently live.

We found that emigrants are varied in their understanding of 'Britishness' and their attachment to it, with attitudes ranging from 'matter of fact' Britishness – 'that's what it says on my passport' – to expressions of strong pride in being British (or English, Scottish, Welsh or Irish). We also met people who had so-called 'hyphenated identities' – describing themselves as British Asian, for example. In keeping with the findings of previous research, we did meet some Britons abroad who had a fairly negative view of contemporary Britain and felt they had 'escaped' from the UK, but they nonetheless demonstrated very British identities. Very few of our interviewees rejected the British label completely and many see their British identity as positive in some way. This leads us to conclude that the notion of a British diaspora, conceptualised as a national population, dispersed overseas, that maintains some sense of trans-national identity and homeland orientation, is viable, even if emigrants themselves do not use such terminology or demonstrate much diasporic consciousness.

We found considerable enthusiasm among British emigrants for greater interaction with the UK government, albeit on their own terms. However, current engagement by the home state with the diaspora is, by international standards, limited – even though significant strides have been taken in recent years.

A lot of effort has been put into registering emigrants on the LOCATE database as a first step to greater engagement, but it is still proving difficult to convince Brits abroad of the benefits of signing up. The UK government does provide a good level of information and support services to expatriate communities in such areas as passport renewal, signposting

and advice. Campaigns such as ‘Know Before You Go’ provide comprehensive advice on living abroad, including legal and cultural differences in some countries. In these areas, the UK government is already doing an admirable job. It is also true that emigrants can have unrealistic expectations of the help that UK missions overseas can provide. To overcome this, more could be done in the way of outreach – going beyond leaflets, online information and media campaigns towards greater face-to-face interaction with British communities. Mobilising the diaspora as form of ‘soft power’ that could promote British interests is under-developed compared with other countries – although within Britain, the devolved administration in Scotland has become increasingly active in its diaspora engagement. Incidentally, we see no reason why broader engagement with the British diaspora, led by the UK government, should cut across or undermine diaspora engagement at the level of the constituent nations of the UK. Indeed, properly coordinated, such engagement at different levels could be complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Conclusions and recommendations

The UK government needs to reconceptualise its approach to engaging with British emigrants. The good work that is already being done seems to us to be mainly tactical rather than strategic; a more coherent and joined-up approach would bring benefits both to emigrants and to the UK. In particular, the British government could be more ambitious and forward-thinking in its approach to the diaspora as an asset.

We believe that a significant proportion of the British diaspora can be categorised as ‘progressive global’ Britons, who have a dynamic international outlook, are already active in their local communities in many different ways and are interested in agendas around economic development and innovation, equality and human rights, global justice and sustainability, which the last Labour government espoused as foreign policy aims and which the new Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government may well take up. The focus of renewed diaspora engagement should therefore be to leverage the enthusiasm and commitment of this group in supporting these activities. Such a process would have a number of elements:

- Moving beyond a narrow focus on assisting and protecting British citizens
- Moving beyond ‘banging the drum’ for British business and encouraging loyalty to the ‘old country’
- Moving towards seeing British emigrants as capable and successful agents with whom it is possible to forge partnerships to promote shared goals
- Moving towards mobilising the diaspora in pursuit of long-term progressive and sustainable global goals.

Of course, not all Brits abroad would want to be partners in such a strategy, and the basic services of support, advice and documentation need to be maintained and continually developed. In fact, the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) has already taken significant steps to modernise and improve mainstream consular services. It is a world

leader in providing online and other information in supporting emigrants to be well prepared for life overseas and to avoid situations where they could put themselves in trouble or danger.

Beyond the broad change of mindset and approach outlined above, we have a number of recommendations aimed not just at the FCO but also at the wider UK government. Many other departments of government have key responsibilities in this area – while non-governmental organisations can also play a useful role (as some, such as Age UK, are already doing).

- In order to encourage Britons to register with the LOCATE database, a more meaningful and proactive outreach programme to engage with diaspora communities and existing diaspora networks needs to come first.
- A priority of the UK government should be to take simple and practical steps to encourage and support the integration of newly arrived emigrants into local communities.
- Low cost schemes to encourage and support civic activism by British diaspora communities should also be considered. These could take the form of small grants for innovative projects or awards and recognition schemes.
- The UK government should consider ways to grant formal recognition of British ancestry and should make the process of renewing British citizenship or registering the birth of British children overseas more meaningful and symbolic.
- The UK government should simplify the process of registering and voting in UK and European elections, and allow emigrants to vote in elections for devolved institutions in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales.
- The UK government should be proactive and innovative in marketing the best and safest ways for Britons abroad to send and invest their money in the UK.
- Embassies and consulates should be transformed into inclusive and accessible hubs for a much wider range of activities and a wider range of diaspora groups.
- All missions should have some ‘community space’ and be as open as possible to ordinary Britons.
- The FCO should further develop strategies that it has already pursued in countries like Spain to ‘embed’ officials from other government departments and from relevant NGOs so that emigrants can find advice (such as on pensions and business support) at ‘one stop shops’.
- Learning from initiatives such as Global Scot and the New Zealand Kea network, the UK government should look to build a strong, worldwide ‘Global British’ network, first and foremost to support the diaspora in its activities but with the added benefit of promoting the UK.
- The FCO should establish a cross-departmental unit, with strong links to outside bodies, that has a specific remit to look at policy and practice on emigration and

diaspora affairs.

- The UK government should coordinate its diaspora engagement with that of constituent nations (and perhaps, in time, English regions with strong identities) to maximise the mutual benefits.
- A key segment of diaspora engagement should be maintaining strong contact and providing support to British emigrants from minority ethnic backgrounds, some of whom will see emigration as a return 'home'. Such a strategy would link with the greater support we believe should be provided for what we have elsewhere called the 'secondary diaspora' of former immigrants to the UK, who maintain a significant attachment to the UK and are also an under-utilised asset for the UK.
- While we do not support the idea of the overseas British communities having seats in Parliament, there should be a clearly identified Minister with responsibility for diaspora affairs who should have a regular question time slot in the House of Commons.

Overall, our research has identified significant opportunities for the UK if it were to engage more proactively with its large, diverse and fascinating diaspora, and recognise it as a real asset. We think that too often Brits abroad are caricatured in this country in ways that are dated and unfair. Popular images of drunken and boorish Costa Brits or reactionary colonial types in India are a long way from the modern reality. In our research we met many Britons living abroad who, as well as working in a wide range of professions and industries, often at senior levels, are active and progressive in the community in their new countries of residence. Although many expats want to be independent and self-sufficient - and certainly do not look to the UK government to 'hold their hands' - there are ways in which they could be supported and encouraged, which would help them to pursue their own objectives. If there were a genuine partnership between the UK government and its diaspora, we think the payback for the 'home state' would be increased further still.

We do not propose grandiose diaspora engagement schemes, partly because they are most unlikely to be taken up over the next few years because of budget restrictions, but also because we do not think this is the right approach. Rather our proposals are more about changing mindsets and outlook, building on the activities and initiatives that British emigrants are already engaged in, and which are not necessarily expensive.

Brits abroad are not a burden or an embarrassment: they are in many ways the best of Britain and we should be proud and supportive of them.

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