



BRITS ABROAD

MAPPING THE SCALE AND NATURE OF BRITISH
EMIGRATION

DHANANJAYAN SRISKANDARAJAH
AND CATHERINE DREW

© IPPR 2006

Executive summary

While immigration into the UK has received intense academic, media and political attention in recent years, the other side of the migration equation – namely emigration – has received relatively little consideration. This report aims to help address this situation by presenting fresh evidence and analysis of the scale and nature of contemporary British emigration.

While Britons have been moving all around the world for centuries, the scale of emigration from the UK in recent years has been staggering. Over the 39 years between 1966 and 2005, the UK experienced a total net loss of some 2.7 million British nationals. In other words, every year for the past 39 years, around 67,500 more British nationals left the UK than came back to it. Over the last decade, while the dominant story has been one of rising immigration of non-British nationals, relatively little attention has been paid to rising net emigration among British nationals. In 2005, for example, 198,000 Britons left to start new lives abroad, while 91,000 came back to the UK.

Our research suggests that around 5.5 million British nationals live overseas permanently (equivalent to 9.2 per cent of the UK's population). In addition, an estimated 500,000 British people live abroad for part of the year, mainly through second-home ownership. This means that nearly one in ten British nationals lives part or all of the year abroad. It also means that there are more Britons living abroad than there are foreigners living in the UK. When those claiming British ancestry are added, the figure climbs to around 58 million. In terms of absolute size and geographical spread (of both British nationals and those claiming ancestry), it is likely that only the Indian and Chinese diasporas rival Britons living abroad.

Britons who live abroad are spread across the globe. While around three-quarters of all Britons living abroad live in the top 10 destination countries (Australia, Spain, US, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, South Africa, France, Germany and Cyprus), some 112 countries are estimated to have a British population of more than 1,000.

Britons living abroad are not a homogenous group. They hail from different demographic and socio-economic backgrounds, and have moved at different times to different countries for different reasons. For most of the last two centuries, the most popular destinations for British people emigrating were the old settler colonies of Australia, Canada, New Zealand and South Africa. Today, Australia and New Zealand remain popular destinations, though the so-called 'Ten Pound Poms', who went as part of an Australian government scheme to encourage emigration to Australia, have

given way to skilled professional emigrants. European countries are also becoming increasingly popular destinations, as cheap travel and European Union (EU) integration make countries such as Spain, France and Portugal more accessible to British emigrants.

The UK is at the crossroads of the global movement of skilled people. During the second half of the twentieth century, British emigrants became increasingly skilled. Two thirds of all Britons who leave the UK do so to seek employment abroad, and are replaced by skilled professionals from elsewhere in the world.

There has been significant growth in the number of British emigrants who are retiring or taking early retirement abroad. The UK government is currently estimated to be paying more than £2 billion per annum in pension payments to more than one million UK state pensioners living overseas. It is also transferring several hundred million pounds per annum to help other EU states provide healthcare to UK pensioners living in Europe.

Our research reveals that the dominant motivations for emigration seem to be positive attributes of the places emigrants would like to go to rather than the negative attributes of the UK. Contrary to some claims, only a minority of people (12 per cent) say they would like to leave because they do not like what Britain is becoming. We have classified the main motivations for why people emigrate into four 'flow' factors:

- *Family ties* – people moving to be with a partner or returning to their country of origin after spending many years in the UK.
- *Lifestyle* – working age families and retirees attracted by a better quality of life, better climate, better value for money and better recreational options abroad.
- *Overseas adventure* – primarily young adults spending a short period abroad looking to gain new experiences and skills, some of which may help them with their career when they return.
- *Work* – workers, usually skilled, lured by career opportunities abroad.

The majority of British expatriates slip easily into their new communities. However, a small but significant minority are finding the settlement experience much more challenging. Often these Britons come up against linguistic and cultural barriers that they have not prepared for, and have, in response, clustered together away from the host society.

Most Britons who live abroad maintain strong ties and allegiances with the UK. However, these ties with home do not necessarily translate into a sense of collective identity while abroad. For a start, in life abroad national identities (particularly Scottish and Welsh) are far more prominent than a 'British' identity. Communities of Britons living abroad are also divided by factors such as class, duration of stay, and degree of integration into the host community.

New technologies are transforming the traditional links within British communities abroad and between them and the UK. The ability of individuals to stay in close contact with the UK via the internet, satellite telecommunications and cheap travel has perhaps reduced their dependence on meeting other British people overseas. It may also mean that there is less need for them to integrate into the host society.

Our research suggests that the UK will continue to experience high net emigration in coming years. If current trends continue, we could expect as many as a million more British nationals to emigrate over the next five years. In the longer term, if the UK's growing older population continues to show an eagerness for retiring abroad, we might see Britain's overseas pensioner population swell from the one million it is at present to around 3.3 million by 2050. This would inflate the amount of pensions being paid overseas to some £6.5 billion and healthcare payments to EU member states to £1.3 billion (in current values).

Given the importance of emigration from the UK, this report suggests that UK policymakers should pay more attention to the issue. The UK government should follow the lead of several other countries and engage more with its diaspora. Such engagement would allow the UK to harness the potential of Britons living abroad to promote trade and investment links, develop overseas knowledge networks, and act as cultural ambassadors. More should also be done to promote the political participation of Britons living abroad and to make the most of returning Britons.

It will also be necessary for the UK government to devise fair and workable rules on how long and under what conditions a Briton living abroad is entitled to British public services. Such provision will not only ensure that those who are entitled to benefits receive them but will also help minimise the destitution experienced by some Britons living abroad who fall between the gaps of national entitlements. A better system of information on who is abroad at any one time will also be critical in ensuring the safety of Britons living abroad during times of crisis.