

IT WON'T CUT IT AT THE HAIRDRESSER'S

Caron Lindsay says the immigration policy paper going to the Brighton conference is so flawed that it must be defeated

I went to the hairdresser recently. And along with some nice caramel and copper highlights, I was served up some casual racism.

Everyone in there loved Boris Johnson's comments about the burqa and the niqab and laughed along with his deeply offensive metaphors.

Just two days after the attack in Westminster I was told that Muslims didn't really help themselves. I pointed out that men rape and murder women every day of the week, but we never, rightly, say things like "men don't really help themselves".

I pointed out how Johnson's comments, playing to the extremist right, were not consequence free. No, it's not the fact that he's had a tiny bit of heat from his own party. It's the fact that every woman of colour, whether she is wearing a hijab or niqab or not, is more likely to be abused on the street as a result.

LOOK THEM IN THE EYE

I think that me taking on the arguments directly and robustly had an effect. At the very least it made them think. I looked them in the eye and told them they were wrong. In a very dignified and civilised way, but with confidence and assurance.

This is not something to be timid about. We have to tackle this sort of prejudice wherever we find it.

That's why I and others will be doing all we can to ensure that the migration policy paper coming to conference does not pass.

The motion is an exercise in embarrassed shuffling and mumbling. Every vaguely decent policy (and there are a few) comes with an plaintive "but it'll save us lots of money" caveat.

It does not compare well with the ideals of the preamble to our constitution:

Our responsibility for justice and liberty cannot be confined by national boundaries; we are committed to fight poverty, oppression, hunger, ignorance, disease and aggression wherever they occur and to promote the free movement of ideas, people, goods and services.

There are two particular paragraphs, one in the motion and one in the policy paper, that have become the focal points for criticism.

The first is in the motion: "Our goal should be a positive, liberal consensus on immigration, partly by rebuilding people's trust in the system, and that this requires us to listen and engage with those who do link pressures on public services and housing to immigration and to reject the argument that merely labels such people as racist."

We should never pander to those who scapegoat immigrants as the cause of problems because they are wrong.

We should unequivocally argue about the benefits of immigration and show that the real failure is of

successive governments to adequately invest in said public services.

People are saying these things because they have had it drip fed to them over the years through the likes of Nigel Farage and the right wing press.

They were never subtle. They always said exactly what they meant. If we're going to properly break that down, we're going to have to raise our eyes from the ground, find our voices and tell a story of how great it is that people come and settle here and work and pay taxes and bring their skills and help turn our companies and institutions into centres of excellence.

When my husband had open heart surgery in 2016, it was an Italian expert in that obscure part of the heart who saved his life. It was his Greek registrar who saved his life again in the middle of a very traumatic night. It was the kindness and skill of the Italian intensive care nurse who helped him through the first difficult days. We need to make it as easy as we can for these people to be here and feel welcome here.

If the motion is bad enough, the policy paper's second paragraph is a pure horror: "However, migration today is not the peaceful, equitable, ordered guarantor of durable security that our constitution envisages. Fuelled by the failure of governments to spread economic prosperity widely, some people feel that their concerns about employment, housing, and social and welfare resources are somehow linked to immigration. There has been an alarming rise in hostility to all immigrants, including some British people settled here for a generation or more."

People think all sorts of nonsense. Some think the earth is flat. We don't go and give them rope in case they fall off the edge.

What we should be saying is that there is nothing wrong with feeling under pressure, that your housing is awful, that you don't have enough to make ends meet. There is nothing wrong with thinking that isn't fair. Because it isn't.

Linking that to immigrants and opining that they get everything while you have nothing is wrong, though. While we shouldn't necessarily blame those who have absorbed the Faragesque drip feeding, we need to challenge it.

We should be calling it out for what it is while making sure that there is enough investment in housing, public services and jobs to render that sort of divisive rhetoric ineffective.

If that means that some people don't vote for us, then we will just have to live with that.

Let me explore in some detail why we need to take a strong stand now. We are living in the most dangerous time I have ever known. Even the softest possible Brexit will punch us in the economic gut and the poorest will be hit hardest. Jobs and public investment

are under threat.

But when they can't blame the EU anymore, who will the Tories turn on next? Not them, for putting a lie on a bus, cheating, breaking electoral law and selling us a pig in a poke. No, it'll be someone significantly more vulnerable. Disabled people, perhaps. Or those with mental ill health. Or transgender people. Then workers for daring to demand such indulgences as

maternity leave, set working hours and the right not to be dismissed just because your employer got out of bed the wrong side and feels like taking it out on someone.

If this immigration paper is an indication of how we Liberal Democrats are going to move to protect these vulnerable groups, then we really do need to demand better.

Our current immigration system is horrible. People suffer needlessly as they try to navigate a hostile environment. The paper at best tinkers around the edges when we need to be dismantling it, burning it in a massive bonfire, encasing the ashes in lead and throwing them in the sea. We need to start again from scratch with a humane, compassionate and fair culture.

Don't get me wrong. There are some half decent policies in there – allowing seekers of sanctuary to work, for example or making it easier to bring your parents in. The abolition of the appalling income requirement for bringing in your spouse is welcome, too. Continuing the work that Vince did in Government, to enforce minimum wage legislation is a good thing. But a smattering of good stuff is not enough.

There are problems. While the abolition of the awful family income requirement is the least you would expect, why can't we just have a presumption that if you want to bring your partner in to the UK you can, unless there is some reason why it's a bad idea, for example if they are a danger to the public?

Leaving a spouse without recourse to public funds for five years is just wrong and discriminates against those on low incomes. If we agree that love is equal, we should not adopt policies which render it more difficult to live with the person you love if you are poor.

There is more emphasis on making immigrants conform to the expectations of some British people rather than all of us take the opportunity to learn from them. It's fine to expand English teaching but not so fine to imply that if only immigrants conformed to our way of life, things would be so much better. We aren't really supposed to be into conformity, after all.

We should be looking to reduce the exorbitant fees for everyone, not just disabled people. Imagine you have a family of five needing to renew leave to remain. We're talking about £8,000. If you are renewing a family and private life visa, there is every possibility you are doing a very low paid job. There is a system of fee waivers but they make hen's teeth look abundant. You basically have to prove you are destitute – and that means not being able to afford anywhere to live. But often they will have slapped bail conditions on

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you tying you to a particular address. How are people supposed to resolve that conundrum?

We should have a path to citizenship for those who currently have no migration status. Many of them have been put in that situation by flawed Home Office decisions and it would only be fair to give them the chance to make their case. We were burned by the reaction to a similar policy in 2010 - but if we tell

people's stories, we can show this is fair.

POT OF FUDGE

What we needed was a document that loudly and proudly shouted that we were an enthusiastically pro-immigration party which put fairness and dignity and compassion at the heart of its policies. We had the chance to say up front that we wanted to create a system that inspired the confidence of everyone who used it and the organisations working to support them. You don't fight the fire of anti-immigrant prejudice with a bland pot of fudge that apologises for itself at every turn.

The paper will not inspire those people who left us during the coalition years because we compromised too far. Compromise in government as the junior partner in a coalition can be understandable. Doing it in opposition when we really need to make a distinctive mark is unwise.

This paper will not change the minds of the people I encountered in the hairdresser's because it does nothing to promote understanding of the realities of life for immigrants and bust the poisonous myths.

It is so flawed that I don't think it can be fixed by amendment. It must not pass in its present form. Be in the hall on Sunday at 11am. Put in a speaker's card. Let's make sure that we get rid of this paper and craft a policy we can be proud of.

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