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EMILY MAITLIS: Finally tonight, we're going to take a long hard look at immigration - as we continue to drill down into the top election issues that voters say they care about. After all, the momentum of Ukip in last year's European elections, this time round, it's been oddly missing from the daily discourse – immigration that is – so tonight, we'll ask what the real economic impact of immigration is, good and bad, and what it's doing in large and small ways to our culture. We'll talk to our panel of immigrants, natives, and those who see themselves as both. But first our economics correspondent Duncan Weldon reports.

DUNCAN WELDON: In areas like inner London, immigration has long been a fact of life. It's not here that changing demographics are a political issue. To really understand the impact of immigration and to see the kind of places where things have changed, you need to get on to these commuter lines out of London, go to places like Peterborough, Stevenage, Welwyn and Hatfield. A decade ago, one in ten people in Welwyn and Hatfield was foreign-born. Today that's one in five. That change has not gone unnoticed.

Vox Pop Male: We didn't ask the Polish and the Europeans to come into this country, as far as I'm concerned. You know, it's . . . it's not - we aren't Britain anymore to me. To my mind, we are not British anymore. We're a sort of multi— multi-lingual . . . and the other thing is, they talk in their own language and you can't understand them.

VOX POP FEMALE: Everywhere you go you seem to see more of these, you know, foreign shops and that. And it makes you wonder about the housing, you know, the children, if there's enough schools, you know, that sort of thing. They've got to have somewhere, but erm (*words unclear*) really.

VOX POP MALE 2: If it's controlled immigration it's (*words unclear*, 'always helpful') because you get different the different brains from different parts of the world. I myself am an immigrant to this country. First I came to study here and now I set up my own business and I have got like this type of business, you know, having (*words unclear*) skills, you know. If you are, if you can add anything into the economy, it is always positive.

DW: If public opinion is nuanced, that of business is fairly clear.

KATJA HALL CBI Immigration has been really important to the UK economy over the last few years and, in a sense, it's helped I think to keep the wheels of the recovery turning. We need immigrants to come here to fill skill gaps in the UK. They help exporters who want to go into new markets and they are really important for business and for business to be able to operate effectively.

DW: It's often said immigrants are coming over here and taking our jobs. But that isn't necessarily the case. It could be that immigrants possess certain skills lacking in the British workforce, or, just as likely, the very process of immigrants doing certain jobs create other jobs, jobs that may be taken by British workers. Most academic surveys have concluded there isn't actually a link between British unemployment and immigration. The picture on wages, however, is more nuanced. There is academic disagreement as to whether immigration pushes average wages up or down. However, there is broad agreement that the impact on the average is marginal. But looking at just the average masks important differences. One recent study found it depresses wages for the bottom fifth of earners, but boosts the incomes of higher earners. That said, the effect is small. And those most likely to be hit are themselves often those recent migrants. As long as the UK remains a prosperous and successful economy, then people will want to move here. That's a sign of success. Much of the debate has focussed on the annual flow of migration. British people have been leaving the country for decades. Over five million now live abroad. EU migration has been a political issue. It spiked after 2004 as the EU expanded into Central and Eastern Europe. It's increased by even more in recent years as the UK economy's outperformed the eurozone. But Net migration from non-EU countries has been consistently bigger. It fell after 2010 as the Government tightened policy. But it's rising again. What all this means is that the Government's 100,000 target has been very clearly missed. Whatever the academic work suggests, there are people who remain uncomfortable with the pace of change. For many people, immigration is about more than just the numbers.

EM: That was Duncan Weldon and joining us now, the carpenter and joiner Rhys Aldous from Portsmouth, one of 200 young voters the BBC is tracking through its Generation 2015 project, Magda Harvey, a Polish migrant and business owner, Jon Gaunt, a radio shock jock, also has his own business and Bidisha, a second generation Indian immigrant and novelist writer. Thank you all very much for coming in. And Rhys I will start with you and your experience, would you call yourself one of those who is uncomfortable about the pace of change and how immigration has changed your work?

RHYS ALDOUS: Erm, well, basically I left school when I was 16, I come straight out of school with no qualifications and I was an unskilled labourer. I started earning about £80 to £60 a day. But in about 2006 I think it was, erm, we had a rise in immigration and my wage dropped down to £40, and that was literally all I could get. And that's sort of how it's affected me. And because of that, I have now actually left the building trade. And I've decided to . . . I only literally made this decision a couple of weeks ago, I decided to go into the restaurant business and do something in that.

EM: How did your wage go down? I mean, was it the same boss that paid you less? How was it explained to you?

RA: I remember it was 2006, because I actually had a falling out with a boss, I left to get another job and all I could get was £40 per day. And that was because of immigration and people said, why would I hire you for £60-70 a day, when I can get a guy who's coming to work for me for £40 a day. What's the point?

EM: And Magda, it's your compatriots that the finger's being pointed at here, people who undercut British workers, who come in and if you like, you know, either take their jobs or else do it more cheaply, how do you respond to that?

MAGDA HARVEY: Well, I never heard of a Polish builder that would work for £40 a day, in the last, I don't know, five or eight years.

EM: So you're saying that's too cheap, they wouldn't accept that.

MH: The wouldn't work for that, they wouldn't work for that, and I just don't believe that Poles suddenly came and they started to steal jobs.

RA: That's completely incorrect.

MH: May I finish? I just think that the Poles who came, they filled the gaps, where there were the gaps. And my question to you would be, if you say that you are unskilled, then you started to train yourself, when the Poles came, who had a disadvantage, they couldn't speak English, they didn't even know, you know, Poles call the UK, the country of Polyfiller, they didn't even know what that was.

EM: Okay, this is interesting. You've got a business as well Jon, you run it. Would you say that people who are coming in, it's not about nationality, but they have more skills so they're going to earn get more money?

JON GAUNT: No, it's not about picking on Poles, or anybody really, or individual immigrants, because obviously when an immigrant comes to this country or to any country, like when people went to America or whatever, they're going to join together aren't they, and they're going to work their socks off, of course they are because they're going to try and make something of themselves. And I think that's what's happened with the Poles who came to my hometown of Coventry. But they have suppressed wages, because a lot of them came as single men, and they shared houses together, so they shared costs, so they could work cheaper. I was saying this in The Sun fifteen years or twenty years ago, no, fifteen years, ten or fifteen years ago, and I was called a racist, it wasn't racist to say it and I now see mainstream politicians are saying it. Watching your film then, that was like a party political broadcast on behalf of the Immigrant Party. It was completely skewed. This whole idea that if we're against immigration or want to control immigration, there's a snide BBC kind of view that therefore we're lesser beings, or we're being prejudiced. It's not about being prejudiced. In our business, that my wife runs actually . . .

EM: Listen, listen . . .

JG: Let me finish, Emily. This is very important. We have three people working I don't even want to have to say this but I will, one is a Somalian, one was a Romanian, and I can't remember even remember where the other one came from. They all worked hard, but so does my British lad, born and bred in Coventry.

EM: (*speaking over*) Okay . . . Listen . . . Jon Gaunt listen . . .

JG: You're not racist to say that you want to control immigration.

EM: And nobody is calling you racist. What we're trying to get to the bottom of . . .

JG: (*speaking over*) The whole slant of that film was that we are thick for thinking like that.

EM: (*speaking over*) Wait a sec, it's my turn. We are trying to get to the bottom of Rhys who says that he's been undercut, that he's not been earning as much . . .

JG: Yeah . . . (*words unclear due to speaking over*)

EM: (*speaking over*) and Magda who's a Polish immigrant herself . . .

JG: Yeah.

EM: . . . who is saying that she doesn't think that's happening, can we let her respond to this?

JG: Yeah sure.

MH: Well, first of all, in the UK, in the UK we've got the minimum wage. So . . . if we've got the minimum wage, people, only people that are unskilled will work for that wage.

JG: Yeah, yeah sure.

MH: If you want to, if you want to earn more, you can just go and get additional training.

EM: Bidisha, I'm going to bring you in, because it's very easy that this argument becomes one of racism, and you know, the shot is called, who is being racist, who is thinking in 'the wrong way', help us get to the bottom of it.

BIDISHA: I do long-term outreach work with asylum seekers, refugees, migrants, undocumented people of all kinds. And I'm not going to put Rhys on trial and talk about whether you're telling the truth or not, if this is your experience, it is, what I would say is, if Rhys is being offered £40 a day, all of the migrants who he feels he's being undercut by, are being offered much less. So, that's not a living wage in any way at all, and I know from my experience that the lives of asylum seekers and refugees, which is sort of minus 5 on the scale towards regularisation, then we get up to migrants, which is a very different kettle of fish. These things tend to be conflated, live in a world of endemic labour exploitation, zero hour contracts, complete unreliability, shift work, it's very difficult to get rights to be regularised to be (*word or words unclear due to speaking over*). And it's very, very difficult.

EM: (*words unclear due to speaking over*) The finger is sometimes pointed at British workers not as driven, lazier or you know whatever. Has that been your experience in terms of who you'd employ and Magda?

JG: (*speaking over*) I think, I think, not the people we employ in our firm, but I can see that, and as I said earlier, I think immigrants, my hometown of Coventry, a lot of Poles came and worked in the mines after and during the war, and a lot of Poles have come now. A lot of these people work extremely hard. But what I'm trying to say is, and I agree with you as well, people aren't paying the minimum wage, they're paying under the minimum wage, and these people are being exploited.

EM: And everyone's being pushed down.

JG: Especially if they are illegal, of course, if they are working in the black economy. But the net result is that the experience that this young man has had is echoed right across the UK. And we do need to talk about it and we do need to have it in the open. And we don't need to tar all immigrants as if they're just coming here for benefits. That's not . . . that's as bad as tarring . . . because your whole film is slanted on, 'are people are unhappy with the pace of change' . . .

EM: *(interrupting)* Bidisha.

JG: What on earth does that mean?

B: Well, what I would like to see happening is stop scapegoating people who are different to us. The problem is, the perpetrators . . .

JG: *(words unclear)*

B: Please don't speak over me.

JG: I don't think they're doing that.

B: Please don't speak over me. The thing that we have to do is look at the labour market. We are forcing people, particularly at the lower end of the labour market as a whole, in this country in any country, into a deeply competitive and cruel, very, very unreliable . . .

EM: *(interrupting)* So immigration is working better for employers than for employees. Let's just . . .

B: And there is always expectation . . .

EM: Let's just take a pause at that point. We're going to bring you a tiny bit more Nigel Farage, this is from last year when he was asked in a BBC documentary it was preferable for the UK to be poorer, but with a greater sense of British identity. Just listen to his answer.

NICK ROBINSON: Are you Nigel Farage saying, "I accept we could be poorer but so be it."

NF: Yes, so be it. I don't want to live in a country whose population is heading towards 75 million people. There are some things in a society and in a community that actually matter more than just money. Quality of life, overcrowded Britain, lack of social housing, youth unemployment, these are very real issues.

EM: Magda, you're a wealth creator, you work in business, how do you respond to those words? Do you hear that as a slight, or do you hear that as common sense for any country?

MH: Yes, it's common sense for any country. I used to live in central London, but when I had my daughter, I thought my garden was too small, my house was too small, I couldn't afford a house in the centre of London, so I moved outside London. And that's what is happening everywhere in the world. I think that has nothing to do with immigration.

JG: *(attempts to speak over)*

MH: This is about the economic situation in the whole world.

RA It's not just about the economy, you can't say it's not to do with not immigration. Let's just say you have a town, you have a thousand people in that town and then say 500 immigrants move into the town, are you telling me it's not going to affect services, the NHS, you know housing? This is definitely going to affect, it affects everything, immigration affects everything. If you left thousands of people in, and to be truthful we don't even know how many we are letting in, because we don't have any actual proper guards. We don't know who we're counting in and out, so . . . how can you control it? How can we control it.

EM: But your sense then, do you feel the immigration as, if you like, overriding everything else in your life?

RA: It was, back at the time. Now, I've changed my career, so I'm doing something different where it doesn't affect me so much. Back, when I was starting out, as an unskilled labourer, yeah it massively affected me. I was going on building sites and I was encountering large Eastern Europeans, and they were looking at me, like, what are you doing here? This is *my* building site. You know? That's discrimination . . .

EM: We often use this phrase, you know, people feel uncomfortable or, you know, people aren't sure, we don't like foreign languages on trains . . .

B: But it's a feeling.

JG: (*words unclear*)

EM: But, no, actually it's a practicality. If you can't get your kids into a school or service in hospitals, then we ought to stop treating it like that and say this is a practical issue, and the effect it's having on people's lives.

B: But there is absolutely no proof whatsoever, beyond the feeling, beyond looking around you in your day-to-day life, that this is anything to do with immigration, or migration or multiculturalism. We need to put money into schools and, and the NHS and housing. And that is an issue for absolutely everybody. But I think the deeper thing which Nigel Farage is so good at exploiting is the fear of difference, the fear of the other, the sense that Britain is full. Britain is not full.

JG: (*speaking over*) No.

EM: But John, when you look at the money that has come in . . . immigrants have actually paid more to the UK in taxes than they have taken away in benefits.

JG: Are we talking about the legal immigrants now or the illegal immigrants?

EM: The European immigrants.

JG: I mean, the bottom line is, well-controlled, managed immigration has been good for this country. But the 'immigrants are us' policy pioneered by Blair has been bad for it. And how Miliband can now stand up and say we need everybody able to speak, read and write English, which doesn't really affect the Poles. How he can say this now, how he can he have the barefaced cheek, when he is part of a party . . .

EM: What do you mean it doesn't affect the Poles?

JG: When he is part of a party, when he is part of a party . . . when he's part of a party that paid for translators, and having everything translated, and the absolute fortune behind this. It doesn't affect the Poles so much, because the Poles have learned the language very, very quickly and adapted to our society.

EM: Magda, last word.

MH: Yes, but you know I didn't . . . English is not my first language, I had to, I had to learn, and that was my disadvantage.

JG: And so you should, so you should learn it, if you come to our country! What's wrong with that?

EM: Wait. Magda?

MH: Can I just . . . I just think you want to argue. That's the whole thing, you don't want to get to the bottom of the problem,

JG: Really?

MH: you just want to argue here, but I'm not here to argue. I just would like to go to what Rhys said. When you had the towns and villages where there would be only 500 people living, that would be the last place

where you would get suddenly 1000 immigrants. They always go first where the workplace is. If they went to the places where there are 10,000 people living, I am sure they did not take the workplace. I am sure they created new jobs.

EM: I will be here all evening, but I'm sorry we have got to get out of here!

*Moves on to discuss Election index on how the Commons will look after the election.*