

Title of Podcast: The Rest is Politics

Episode: Are We Getting Immigration Completely Wrong?

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Toplines:

- Gerald Knaus is in favour of **humane yet controlled borders**; upholding the Greece-Turkey model of a cut-off date combined with authority to return people and the creation of legal routes; and pursuing a coalition between certain EU states to handle the UK's immigration issues while preserving alliances.
- Gerald Knaus believes that **policy fails when the public perceives a credible lack of control**.
- Zoe Gardner is **in favour of more open borders**; upholding the Ukraine model of humanitarian entry; creating an online platform to allow anyone to apply for asylum in the UK from anywhere in Europe to manage migration flows within Europe; and **combining the asylum system and immigration system**.
- Zoe Gardner believes that **policy fails when rights under the Refugee Convention are treated as a first line of defense rather than a backstop**, and when inclusion and anti-racism are not emphasized.
- Gerald Knaus disagrees with Zoe Gardner's view that arguments in favour of open borders and less control can be effective.

Hosts and Guests:

- **Rory Stewart**, Host
- **Alastair Campbell**, Host
- **Gerald Knaus**, Chairman and Co-Founder of European Stability Institute
- **Zoe Gardner**, Immigration Expert and Campaigner

Circulated Materials: Subscription required, free trial available: [Are We Getting Immigration Completely Wrong?](#)

Key Points:

Gerald:

- The dominant issue in Britain and Germany has become the debate on **how we can have borders that are both humane and have the control** that the public in every democracy craves.
- The deadliest border in the world is the one surrounding the EU.
- A need for orders where...
 - Thousands do not die every year.
 - There is control without mistreatment.

Rory: *How did we end up with the modern approach to asylum and refugees? What was the approach to asylum like before the Second World War, and how has it changed?*

Gerald:

- After 1938, Nazi policies were designed to terrorize people into leaving.
- Switzerland decided it did not want people crossing the border between Austria and Switzerland. So, it sent police to the border, who would then hand the people over to the Nazis, who would often send them to camps. Probably at least 25,000 died because of this.
- **Core part of the Refugee Convention is Article 33, *non-refoulement*—not doing what the Swiss did.**
- **Refugee Convention became a standard, at least for the West, based on the idea that democracies will never again behave like the Swiss did then.**

Alastair: *Since then, have the values that led to the Refugee Convention eroded?*

Gerald:

- **Need the support of the majority, and all democracies want control.**
- Believes most people do not want control at the cost of people drowning or being tortured, except when they believe that otherwise something catastrophic will happen to their own communities. So, the **far-right uses the fear of a mass invasion.**
- **Crossing the channel is not a human rights issue because France is a safe country; it is a policy issue.**
- Policy can effectively prevent people from getting into boats.
 - A million people crossed the sea from Turkey to Greece in 12 months. More than 1,100 drowned.
 - Our first priority, drowning has to stop. Second, control is needed.
 - **Not having control fuels people like Orban, who want to neglect human rights.**
 - **The way to stop people from getting in boats is to make it futile, not dangerous.** It becomes futile if they know they will be returned.
 - A deal could only be made if Turkey would protect them.
 - Turkey agreed to take anyone back after a certain cutoff date.

Alastair: *Why?*

Gerald:

- They knew that if the threat of being returned was credible and believed, they would not have to take many back, as fewer people would get into boats.
- Since the U.K. made an agreement with France, 2% of the people who crossed since August have been detained, and the other 98% know they will not be returned. **There is no incentive not to get in the boats.**

Rory: *Would Turkey not prefer that the refugees go to Europe?*

Gerald:

- Communicated the message that if they did not have an agreement with the EU, the EU would resort to violence, and that would mean a hostile border.

- The EU also had to commit to:
 - 6 billion Euros for four years to fund Syrians who stayed in Turkey.
 - Allowing Turks to enter Europe visa-free as tourists if they fulfilled certain conditions.

Alastair: *What was the result?*

Gerald:

- **The number of crossings decreased, and the number of people drowning fell to below 5% of what it was before.**
 - In the first three months of 2016, 150,000 people crossed during the winter.
 - In the summer, right after this agreement, it was 5,000 in three months.
 - The following winter, it was 4,000 in three months.
- **1.4 million Syrians got social support** on credit cards funded by the EU.
- **The EU took tens of thousands of Syrians** in an orderly way.

Alastair: *So fast forward to today, 2025, the UK has got this immigration problem that is fueling right-wing populism – if you are Keir Starmer, what do you do?*

Gerald:

- Sit down with experts. Create an outline of goals with a **widely communicated cut-off date. From this date, return everyone who crosses.** In line with British law, ensure that the country they are leaving is safe (like France).

Alastair: *So, the whole of the European Union must agree to this?*

Gerald: No, could be a coalition, proposed to the EU President, but Germany should participate. The plan should include:

1. A cut-off date.
2. Commitment that Britain will be able to detain everyone who arrives after the cut-off date.
3. Legal route for people to apply to come to the UK.

Alastair: *Why is the France deal not the key to this?*

Gerald:

- It is a step in the right direction but flawed due to a lack of communication regarding the cutoff date, and it being a pilot. **If other countries join the French, it could work.**

Alastair: *How does Mertz convince Germans to help the UK?*

Gerald:

- The goal for Western centrist parties is to prove that Orban/Trump brutality is not the only way to stop irregular migration.
- It is in their best interest to keep the Western alliance together.

Playing of pre-recorded segment with Zoe Gardner.

Alastair: *If you could shape a brand-new immigration policy, what would it look like?*

Zoe: Three main priority areas I would start with:

1. Control the asylum system – safe ways for refugees to access, which requires careful collaboration with European neighbours.
2. Immigration system for work.
3. Integration, inclusion, and belonging.

Rory: *How would setting up a safe route to asylum stop people from coming on boats?*

Zoe:

- Evidence shows that if refugees have access to safer routes, the demand for coming in dangerous ways would become smaller.

Alastair: *Could somebody in Nigeria go to the British embassy to apply for asylum?*

Zoe:

- I am not against that, but in most cases, it would not be accessible or easily managed.
- I am most convinced by a safe route that mimics the way it was done for Ukrainians: An online system that can be accessed anywhere in Europe.

Alastair: *If someone is trying to flee Iran and come to the UK, what is the ideal process?*

Zoe:

- Ideally, they should be able to apply online from Iran, but we are not yet at the stage where we can implement that. The focus should be on addressing inner flows in Europe first.

Rory: *In your system, everyone applying would be able to come to the UK?*

Zoe:

- Yes, and I do not think we would get overwhelming numbers because of that.

Alastair: *The asylum and immigration system are separate. You want them to be combined?*

Zoe:

- Yes, **that is my big disruptive idea**. A false dichotomy has been created when, in fact, we are a country that needs immigration and a country that many need to come to.

Alastair: *Is the Refugee Convention outdated?*

Zoe:

- The **purpose of treaties and conventions, like the Refugee Convention, was to create a backstop** against the worst horrors; it was never intended to be the entire system.

Rory: *You argue that not a lot of people will come to the UK. Would you change your mind if this were not true?*

Zoe:

- People, especially in countries impacted by climate change, will have to continue to move. Meanwhile, across Europe, we are experiencing the lowest birth rates and aging populations. Immigration is positive as we need to grow our population.

Rory: *The large influx of Eastern Europeans contributed to the Brexit decision. At that time, experts, like you, said fewer people would come. What makes you feel confident now?*

Zoe:

- I am not saying very few people would come; I am saying manageable numbers would come.
- Example: When Argentina had the most open immigration system in modern times, they had negative net migration almost every single year because the economy was awful.
- **Immigration policies are not the fundamental drivers of movement.**

Rory: *Britain is a much more generous welfare state than Argentina. Can you have a welfare state with open borders? Would an Afghan living on a low wage with a chance to come to the UK not want to? 60% of people in Thailand say they want to leave if they could.*

Zoe:

- There is a discrepancy between people who say they would leave and people who would.
- We cannot have a welfare state without immigration, because we can not pay pensions without increasing our working-age population. **Our welfare state is entirely dependent on a high level of immigration over the next 30 years.**

Rory: *Should we be setting admittance targets annually based on the birth rate?*

Zoe:

- Yes. **We should create a Department for Population, Infrastructure, and Immigration** that looks at birth rates, transport needs, and housing needs and decides what the country needs holistically. But **we should not have a cap because we must respond to reality**, like Ukraine.

Rory: *There are hundreds of thousands coming through student visas and family reunification programs, most not coming to work in areas we need...*

Zoe:

- The proportion of migrants who work is much higher than the number who come through specific work visas.

Alastair: *Do you see any hope in views changing?*

Zoe:

- Given that the three major parties are all singing from the same 'hateful songsheet,' I find hope in how many people stay resilient.

Rory: *In your opinion, which country is handling asylum seekers well?*

Zoe: While far from perfect, Spain is the best example:

- Spain's PM has made it clear that Spain can be poor, closed off, and xenophobic *or* open and wealthy.
- They receive the most asylum seekers in Europe, and match asylum seekers to sectors where they are struggling to find workers.
- Spain's birth rate is even smaller (1.2), but its economy is growing faster than that of the US, UK, and Europe.

Alastair: *Can this be done by one country? How is international solidarity realized?*

Zoe:

- It is inherently an international issue.
- Must work with the EU.
- Must focus on treating people who are here better, through inclusion efforts and combating racism.

Gerald Knaus' Response

Gerald: Arguments like Zoe's (that fundamentally this is about people misunderstanding migration, there should not be a cap, and the solution is to be more generous and open) have continuously failed. Example:

- The Italian military rescued people at sea and brought them to Italy. There was a generally empathetic response.
- The last 6 months of rescue missions saw more deaths than any other 6-month period.
- Years later, a deal was made with Libya, where people were intercepted and tortured. It was not a lack of empathy in Italy; it was a lack of a concept that convinced the majority.

Rory: *What would you say to those who argue that we need more labour in the country and that complaining about high numbers is racist?*

Gerald:

- They must be on our side. **They are not proposing realistically implementable solutions.**
- In the last ten years, Germany has given protection to almost 3 million people. This was only possible with public support. The far-right is now leading polls because Germans sense a lack of control. Centrist parties must come up with a policy that appeases them.

Alastair: *Zoe Gardner would say this is about the failure of centrist parties to respond to populism. How do you respond to that?*

Gerald: Words without concrete change fuel the far-right. Example:

- Austria said their aim was 0 asylum seekers. But since it is law-abiding, it sounded like Orban yet gave protection.

Rory: *How would you propose British leaders be more outspoken about the rule of law?*

Gerald:

1. State and prove that it is **possible to reduce irregular migration without violating human rights**, believe that claim, then prove it.
2. **Remind people that Britain was one of the architects of the Refugee Convention.**
3. **Reaffirm the importance of regional and international institutions.**

Rory: *You have said that it is not just about the European Court of Human Rights...*

Gerald: The argument that it is impossible to make agreements that reduce irregular migration without violating human rights is wrong, not because of one convention, but because of the idea that we have dignity and rights because we are human, not because we are citizens. Example:

- Rwanda could have worked if the conservative government had arranged it differently.

Rory: *Are you suggesting that some part of the Rwanda deal was not so bad?*

Gerald:

- **The only places we consider safe cannot just be considered Northern Europe—that is not compatible with the global refugee system.**
- We need to aim towards the Canadian style of bringing more people in a controlled way, integrating them from day 1.