



## Taking the biscuit

James O'Brien

A billionaire, a politician, an Englishman and an immigrant are seated at a table. On the table is a plate and on the plate are ten biscuits. The billionaire trowers nine of them and slips a couple to the politician, who leans towards the Englishman and whispers in his ear: 'Look out! That immigrant is trying to nick your biscuit.'

This, it seems to me, is a pretty neat encapsulation of the political discourse in this country at the moment. And, my gosh, that billionaire/politician alliance is working rather well. Voters polled across the generational and financial divides routinely report that immigration is among their chief concerns and yet when you ask them why – as I have had the privilege of doing for more than ten years on a radio phone-in show with the busiest switchboard in the business – they very rarely offer up any evidence more powerful than the phantom biscuit-nicker.

This leaves other politicians and pundits with a difficult choice: enter into a competition to see who can promise to come down hardest on the phantom biscuit-nicker; ignore the issue because the biscuit-nicker is, well, a phantom; or try to explain to people how they are being deliberately and cynically manipulated into blaming entirely the wrong people for their problems.

Option one, a race to the bottom, is currently the most popular. It is an unwinnable race but politicians of just about every hue have decided to address what voters think rather than what voters know. You can hardly blame them. It is not easy to tell angry, frightened people persuaded that their lonely biscuit is under threat from a foreigner that they should be more concerned about the whereabouts of nine that have already disappeared. Add to the mix the journalists and commentators who are also enjoying a few choice crumbs from the billionaire's table and you have an environment in which option two, ignoring the issue because it is not really an issue, becomes impossible. Meanwhile, suggesting that we should look at rich people to understand why we are poor – rather than people even poorer than us – is downright dangerous.

So option three, to tell the truth and shame the devil, involves telling voters that they are wrong and gullible. It is, moreover, almost impossible to deliver that message in the context of immigration without also seeming to add 'xenophobic' to the list of accusations. We don't really need to wonder why most politicians fight a little shy of this! It's why the ones who aren't actually motivated by ugly prejudice, but see the success of those who are, end up sounding so half-hearted when promising to 'clamp down' on the problem. They know there isn't a problem on anything like the scale the voters believe but also that as long as the voters cling to their beliefs they ignore or dismiss them at their peril.

And so politics becomes pointless in almost any meaningful or constructive sense. When the immigration myth is allowed to take hold on such a grand scale, politician and voter can blame it for literally everything. Health Service struggling? Blame immigration. Bolshy, workshy daughter can't get a job? Blame an immigrant who can. House too small or expensive? Blame immigration. Wages too low? Blame immigration. I could go on, but you get the picture: immigration can, in the right hands, be blamed for just about everything that anyone is unhappy or uncomfortable about. And a politician with the right blend of bonhomie and plausibility can grow rich and famous by doing precisely that. The voters even get gulled into thinking he or she is on their 'side', with immigrants somehow on the other. Who really benefits from this fraudulent apportioning of responsibility for social or economic problems? Easy.

Eighty-five identified individuals currently enjoy the same amount of the world's total wealth, approximately £1 trillion, as the poorest three and a half billion. Just think about that. Half of the world's population can lay claim to the same sum as just eighty-five billionaires. They are not all media moguls and plutocrats hell-bent on driving us all back to the days of feudalism and land clearances but they are generally driven by a belief that no amount of money is ever 'enough'. I imagine it would be almost impossible to amass a fortune of that size if you weren't driven by a burning desire for more, more, more. Modern capitalism is predicated on infinite growth – it's why a company reporting a dip in profits from, say, £300 million to £250 million is 'bad' news – but resources are resolutely finite. If the billionaire wants to get even richer, the money has to come from somewhere and the chances are it will come from you.

Could anything suit his project better than a political climate in which 'foreigners' or 'immigrants' or 'migrants' are routinely blamed for our problems? I can't think of anything. And as long as they are blamed what prospect is there of any of the problems they stand accused of causing actually being fixed? None. But the billionaires and their lapdogs in the media and politics don't care. They just need to keep up the illusion that they have our best interests at heart by continuing to heap scorn on people defined by their otherness, by their origins, by their arbitrary differences.

Look at the language. Five hundred 'migrants' recently died on a ship sunk by people smugglers after their human cargo dared to

complain. Actually, of course, five hundred mothers, fathers, sons and daughters died. Five hundred possessors of dreams and emotions and personalities every bit as rounded and contrary as yours and mine. Five hundred people, in other words, who are exactly like us but who happened to be born in a part of the world so awful that they were prepared to risk absolutely everything in the hope of getting to somewhere safe and relatively prosperous. Some of the people who already live there, however, have been convinced that their safety and prosperity is under mortal threat from these people who want nothing more than to share in and cherish it, who are likely to value it a lot more than those of us who take it for granted because it is all we have ever known.

We hear daily from the same people how we must stop ‘bashing bankers’; how seeking a society in which a boss earns, say, twenty-five times what her worst-paid employee does instead of two hundred times is the ‘politics of envy’; how food banks and payday loan companies and bailiffs only exist because of our fellow citizens’ fecklessness and irresponsibility. We never think they are talking about us when we swallow this rhetoric until our lives hit the buffers and we realise that they were talking about us all along. They know that the best way to distract our attention from their own responsibility for injustice and inequality and increasingly medieval distributions of wealth is to identify and castigate a scapegoat. And they know that there is no more effective scapegoat than the faceless, voiceless, blameless immigrant: the neighbour they want us to loathe.

How has it come to this? How, after seeing the history of hatred repeat itself again and again across the centuries, have we not learned to see more clearly? The answer is, was and for ever will be the same: it always suits someone to have the rest of us blaming each other for our problems and punching down in the hope of solving them. There will always be someone happy to reap the rewards of division and enmity, whatever the real costs to the rest of us. And there will always be people who love injustice, who love inequality and who love a status quo that sees more and more of the planet’s wealth moving to fewer and fewer people. We will never land a punch on them while we are being so cynically and successfully persuaded that they’re on our side and that the real villains of the piece are those immigrants over there with their beady little eyes on our biscuits. Ask who is doing the persuading, ask what is in it for them, ask who is paying their wages and then ask yourself this: whose side do you think they are really on?

Taken from *Loathe Thy Neighbour* by James O’Brien.