

## Donald the Deporter

NOTHING SCRAMBLES the mind like a Trump press conference. On January 7th, at his winter palace in Florida, the president-elect mused on annexing Canada, Greenland and the Panama Canal—as well as tilting at offshore windmills for supposedly killing whales. It was a mix of free association, gleeful provocation and serious, world-changing intent.

Less noticed on January 7th, the House of Representatives passed the Laken Riley Act, which makes it easier to deport unauthorised immigrants for minor crimes such as shoplifting. Immigration is where the next administration is likely to direct its first efforts after the inauguration on January 20th. And here, too, Donald Trump promises that same mind-scrambling cocktail. Illegal immigration is a problem that lends itself to wild, crowd-pleasing and destructive policies, as well as presenting opportunities for beneficial reform. The path Mr Trump chooses will not only say something about his presidency, it could also cause ripples in the many other rich countries that have political problems over immigration.

Under President Joe Biden chaos erupted at the border, at least for a while. To their cost in the election, many Democrats responded by blaming voters for being cross about it. In the most recent numbers the Census Bureau records a net increase of 2.8m immigrants in 2023. The share of foreign-born residents in America has been higher since 1885, when Frederick Trump left Germany for New York, but it is the highest in a century. Although most Americans welcome legal migrants and the country is good at assimilating them, they resent it when immigrants claim asylum and then disappear into a shadow labour market while awaiting a court hearing.

Mr Trump takes office with a mandate to tighten controls. In the campaign he extended the abhorrent rhetoric that marked his first term, talking about immigrants “poisoning the blood” of America. The contrast with that first term, when fewer people were actually deported than under Barack Obama, is that this time he seems to want the

focus on immigration to be real. His deputy chief of staff is Stephen Miller, who yearns to restrict legal as well as illegal migration. His border tsar is Tom Homan, one of the inventors of the family-separation policy in his first term. And he has threatened to deploy the National Guard to help with deportations, where previous presidents used soldiers just for logistical support.

Mr Trump will not be able to carry through his [threat to deport 15m people](#). Shipping out such a huge number would be extraordinarily expensive and would shock the labour market, raising the prices of goods and services that illegal immigrants help provide. Research suggests that [deportations under Mr Obama](#) slowed housebuilding by throwing out so many plasterers and bricklayers. And mass expulsions would be unpopular, because over half of all irregular migrants have been in America for more than a decade. They have jobs and families, and often live in blue states that will not co-operate.

Instead Mr Trump is likely to look for a more practical policy. The temptation will be to dump the problem on Mexico. When deporting people, a big obstacle is finding governments to take them. Mr Trump might therefore simply turn back those who arrive via the southern border, threatening Mexico with tariffs unless it lets them in. Yet it is not in America's long-term interest to destabilise its poorer, southern neighbour. Mexico's president, Claudia Sheinbaum, recognises that helping America with immigration enforcement is a high card in any negotiation with the Trump administration and has signalled a willingness to help. He should meet her halfway.

Another temptation will be to focus on theatrical cruelty as a substitute for real action. Expect workplace raids with camera crews in tow, harsh internment in border states and ICE agents surging in sanctuary cities. As with the Conservative Party's plan to outsource Britain's asylum system to Rwanda, the point is partly to deter would-be migrants. It is also to persuade voters that the government is serious.

Cruelty for its own sake is wrong. By denying migrants' humanity, it coarsens American values. It may also prove unpopular. In the first Trump term Americans reacted against splitting up families and caging children; support for immigration rose. As soon as Mr Biden took office, support for immigration fell. That dynamic creates room for Mr Trump to accomplish something less harsh and more enduring.

The first step is to beef up the border. Mr Trump is lucky, because irregular crossings have already fallen sharply from their peak in 2022, after the Biden administration made deals with Mexico and other Latin American countries to help curb the flow. Mr Trump may build on this by surging immigration officials to the border, to make quick rulings on whether claims are valid. He could also oblige asylum-seekers to remain in Mexico until their cases are decided, as he did in his first term. The second step is to focus deportations on criminals, as his chief of staff has suggested he will.

That could create consent for a third step that has long been obvious yet unattainable politically. Both as a practical matter and as an exercise in justice, America cannot deport every unlawful migrant. Doing nothing means that around 11m people will spend their whole lives in America without ever acquiring the right to live there. But unless immigration flows are under control, amnesty for those already in the United States risks attracting another wave to try to enter illegally. The only solution is a deal that combines effective border enforcement with a right to stay for law-abiding migrants.

### **Deal of the century**

Such a compromise is possible. No Republican politician can outflank Mr Trump on immigration, and Democratic alarm helps him appear tough. The chances are that he will want to keep immigration as a wedge issue, pick fights with Democratic governors and mayors, and leave things broadly as he found them. But the conditions are there for him to do a deal that has eluded the past five presidents—if he wants to.