# Dumplings bridge divides on child benefits but not on immigration



They arrived as strangers with a byline: a Guardian experiment pairing people from different parts of the political map to see whether conversation can bridge the divide. Cushla, 49, a software worker who moved to the UK from New Zealand in 1999 and describes herself as centre‑left, and Martin, 66, a retired photographer who voted Reform last time and says he is right‑of‑centre, met for dumplings in east London and spent the evening testing that premise. According to the original report, the meal took place at Xi Home Dumplings Bay on Blossom Street in E1.

Their backgrounds set the scene for a wide‑ranging conversation. Cushla told The Guardian she had come to the UK on an ancestry visa — a route the government guidance explains is available to Commonwealth citizens with a grandparent born in the UK and permits work and study for five years, with potential settlement thereafter. Martin, who told the paper he has voted for Reform, aligned with a party that is commonly described in public sources as a right‑wing, populist force campaigning on tighter immigration controls and scepticism about the political establishment.

First impressions were disarming. Cushla arrived with blue hair; Martin admitted he had expected an easy stereotype but found her “lovely from the outset” and “friendly and interesting.” Cushla told The Guardian she had tried to put him at ease by saying: “Don’t worry, my partner voted for Brexit.” Martin replied, according to the paper: “Why are you here, then? You dine across the divide every evening!” The small talk — shredded prawn rolls, deep‑fried lotus root and, eventually, fuller discussion — helped unstick more brittle assumptions.

Crime and public order dominated the early exchange. Martin described what he sees as a recent deterioration in disorder — from people jumping turnstiles to phone‑snatching and shoplifting — and argued for tougher local policing and sentencing to “get a grip” on the problem. His anecdote about courts and the need for longer custodial sentences for serious violent and sexual offences was countered by Cushla’s interest in restorative justice and the limits of a system she sees as underfunded. Official statistics add nuance to the conversational claims: the Office for National Statistics’ recent bulletin documents mixed trends across offence types, with some violent crimes falling but shoplifting and theft from the person rising sharply in recent years, a pattern that helps explain public concern about petty crime and visible disorder.

The justice debate exposed a fault line about policy ends and means. Martin argued that certain offenders require long custodial sentences and that prison provision is a long‑term infrastructure commitment that governments are reluctant to fund. Cushla said she would approach the magistracy differently, from what she described to The Guardian as “hopeful naivety,” and emphasised that money and reform are needed if the system is to do more than punish. Their exchange underscored how shared goals — safer streets, fewer reoffenders — can coexist with very different views on how to achieve them.

Welfare and party politics bled into the conversation. Both expressed scorn for what they called years of Conservative mismanagement, and, perhaps unexpectedly, they found agreement that the two‑child benefit cap ought to be removed because early childhood support matters most to life chances. Martin’s self‑identification with Reform sits against a wider debate about the party’s posture in British politics; public descriptions characterise it as to the right of the Conservatives and focused on immigration limits, tax cuts and challenging established parties, which helps explain why his positions sounded familiar to Cushla even where she disagreed.

Immigration proved the clearest point of divergence. Martin said he favours a tougher system of containment and assessment — invoking an Australian‑style island processing approach as an example — and argued for stronger border control. Cushla retorted that the language of “illegal” people dehumanises migrants and drew on her own biography to question who is deemed “legal”: “I came here on an ancestry visa,” she told The Guardian, adding that being legal can be an accident of birth. Reporting on Australia’s island processing shows why Martin’s example is contentious: analyses and human‑rights organisations have long criticised offshore centres for poor conditions, and the policy remains a fraught and politicised model rather than an uncontested blueprint. Government guidance on the ancestry route, meanwhile, confirms that such visas confer rights to work and study but include limits on access to public funds and a pathway to settlement only after sustained residence.

When the bill came, the evening closed on something closer to a civic ideal than a policy compromise. Both told The Guardian they had enjoyed the chance to talk rather than simply throw opinions at each other: Martin said it was “great to meet someone with different views” and that society pushes people into extremes; Cushla said the experience had taught her the importance of listening. Their meal at a small Dalian‑style dumpling restaurant in E1 ended as it began — with food and conversation — and with a reminder that cross‑political encounters can expose common concerns even when they fall short of agreement. The Guardian’s piece is one instance of a wider initiative inviting others to do the same.

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## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[7]](https://www.wjxfoodculture.co.uk/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/ancestry-visa), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_UK)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin)
* Paragraph 4 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[5]](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2024)
* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin)
* Paragraph 6 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[4]](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_UK)
* Paragraph 7 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[6]](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-66027565), [[3]](https://www.gov.uk/ancestry-visa)
* Paragraph 8 – [[1]](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin), [[7]](https://www.wjxfoodculture.co.uk/)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2025/aug/10/dining-across-the-divide-cushla-martin> - The Guardian's Dining Across the Divide piece profiles Cushla and Martin, two Londoners with contrasting backgrounds who share a meal and civil conversation. Cushla, a 49-year-old software worker from New Zealand, and Martin, a 66-year-old retired photographer, discuss crime, justice, welfare and immigration while eating at Xi Home Dumplings Bay. The article records personal anecdotes, voting histories, and differing policy views: Cushla favours restorative justice and questions the "illegal" label for migrants, while Martin advocates tougher sentencing and controlled immigration similar to Australia's island processing. Both conclude the encounter showed the value of listening and finding common ground across political divides.
3. <https://www.gov.uk/ancestry-visa> - The UK Government's guidance explains the Ancestry visa for Commonwealth citizens with a grandparent born in the UK, the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man. Applicants must be 17 or over, intend to work in the UK, and show evidence of ancestry, identity and means of support. The visa is granted for five years, allows employment and study, and may lead to indefinite leave to remain after five years' continuous residence. Pages detail eligibility, required documents, fees, application timing and the process for extending stay or applying for settlement, emphasising applicants cannot access public funds while on the visa.
4. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reform_UK> - Reform UK is described on Wikipedia as a right-wing populist political party in the United Kingdom, founded in 2018 as the Brexit Party and rebranded in 2021. Led by Nigel Farage since 2024, the party campaigns on limiting immigration, opposing net-zero policies, cutting taxes and challenging the political establishment. Wikipedia outlines Reform's electoral history, manifesto commitments, and position on the political spectrum to the right of the Conservatives. The entry summarises leadership, ideology, election results and controversies, providing context for the party's recent growth and policy priorities that inform voters' perceptions of right-of-centre platforms in British politics and media coverage.
5. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/bulletins/crimeinenglandandwales/yearendingdecember2024> - The Office for National Statistics bulletin on crime in England and Wales presents official statistics showing mixed trends: while homicide and some violent crime categories fell, shoplifting and theft from the person rose sharply, reaching record levels in recent years. The report separates Crime Survey estimates and police-recorded crime, noting methodological differences and pandemic effects on trends. It provides detailed figures for offences, including increases in shoplifting and theft from the person, changes in knife and firearm offences. The publication is used by policymakers and commentators to assess public safety and inform debates about policing, sentencing and social policy issues.
6. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-australia-66027565> - BBC's explainer on Nauru outlines Australia's controversial offshore processing of asylum seekers, tracing the policy from its origins during the early 2000s to later reinstatement in 2012. The piece details conditions in regional processing centres, human rights concerns and the political argument that offshore detention deters maritime arrivals. It summarises critic reports, medical charity findings, UN scrutiny and financial costs of maintaining remote centres, as well as legal rulings and policy shifts. The article explains why Australia has used island detention as a migration tool and why the approach remains internationally contentious despite intermittent closures and evacuations and ongoing debate.
7. <https://www.wjxfoodculture.co.uk/> - Xi Home Dumplings Bay's website describes a London restaurant specialising in handmade northeastern Chinese dumplings inspired by Dalian cuisine. It lists locations including Liverpool Street (Blossom Street) in E1, Covent Garden and a Bang Bang Oriental Food Hall outlet, opening hours, menus and reservation links. The site emphasises artisanal techniques, fresh ingredients and signature dishes such as king prawn and lobster dumplings, while offering online ordering via delivery partners. Contact details and locations are provided, confirming the Blossom Street address in E1 noted in the Guardian piece. The site supports the restaurant's authenticity claims and practical information for visitors today.