



**UK IN A  
CHANGING  
EUROPE**

**MIGRATION TO THE  
UK AFTER BREXIT:  
POLICY, POLITICS AND PUBLIC OPINION**

# FOREWORD

If there's one thing we pride ourselves on at UK in a Changing Europe, it's timeliness. And to prove the point, I'm delighted to be able to present this report on what is not only proving a key battleground during this election campaign, but is likely to continue to represent a significant policy challenge to whatever government is elected on 4 July.

Immigration, while far less salient than it was in 2016, is becoming a key political and policy issue again. This report not only analyses what has changed in terms of both outcomes and public opinion but considers how a future government might respond to the issue of migration, and the kinds of tradeoffs they will have to address.

My heartfelt thanks to the indefatigable Rob Ford, who did the bulk of the work on this, with significant input from Jonathan Portes. As ever, our various contributors managed to stick diligently to deadlines and to respond promptly to the numerous comments and suggestions they received back from us. Stephen Hunsaker produced the charts with his usual efficiency and aplomb, while John Barlow and Alex Walker went over the whole thing with their eagle eyes and made the final product much better as a result.

As ever, I hope you find what follows interesting, accessible, and informative.

10 June 2024

**Professor Anand Menon**  
Director, UK in a Changing Europe

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# INTRODUCTION

Immigration was central to the EU referendum and to the Brexit process. Control of immigration was a core demand of Leave voters, and ending free movement was a key pledge by the Leave campaign. Both the May and Johnson governments stuck to this pledge as a red line, and it was duly implemented in the Trade and Cooperation Agreement, which came into force at the beginning of 2021. The inflows from poorer EU countries which once loomed large in migration statistics and political debate have now slowed to a trickle, and largely dropped out of the discussion.

The end of free movement has been just one part of a bigger shift in migration policy and outcomes over the course of this Parliament. The post-Brexit system for labour migration offers more control in principle, but has so far been operated as an open and flexible way to address domestic pressures, in particular through the large scale recruitment of health and social care workers. Post-study work visas introduced to help universities weather the Brexit transition have further encouraged booming recruitment of foreign students. And new humanitarian migration channels have opened up for residents of Ukraine and Hong Kong as the UK government has responded to new threats and conflicts abroad.

As the UK emerged from Covid restrictions, the impact of more liberal policies for work, study and humanitarian migration soon became clear, with a sharp increase in migration to historically unprecedented levels. The latest Office for National Statistics (ONS) statistics suggest the numbers peaked at the end of 2022, with 1.15 million long term international migrants (those planning to stay at least a year) arriving in the UK over the previous 12 months – the vast majority of these from outside the EU (see Table 1). The large post-Covid spike in arrivals has pushed immigration to the top of the political agenda again. Growing public concern, concentrated among Conservative supporters, has led to a series of government initiatives to bring numbers down. The opposition has been more reticent, but as the election approaches, Labour has begun to set out its stall on the issue too. The first sustained political debate over the goals and outcomes of the post-Brexit migration framework is now well underway.

**Table 1: Non-EU immigration flows since 2019**

|              | 2019           | 2020           | 2021           | 2022             | 2023             |
|--------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|------------------|
| Work         | 99,000         | 71,000         | 139,000        | 277,000          | 423,000          |
| Study        | 120,000        | 112,000        | 264,000        | 419,000          | 379,000          |
| Humanitarian | 6,000          | 1,000          | 57,000         | 160,000          | 50,000           |
| Asylum       | 42,000         | 35,000         | 56,000         | 92,000           | 81,000           |
| Family       | 78,000         | 56,000         | 66,000         | 67,000           | 75,000           |
| Other        | 23,000         | 20,000         | 29,000         | 38,000           | 21,000           |
| <b>Total</b> | <b>368,000</b> | <b>295,000</b> | <b>611,000</b> | <b>1,053,000</b> | <b>1,029,000</b> |

Source: [Office for National Statistics](#). All figures include dependents

With immigration set to be a central issue in the coming general election campaign for the first time since the EU referendum, the goal of this report is to provide a comprehensive overview of the changes in policy, outcomes and public opinion which have reshaped the landscape on this contentious issue over the course of this Parliament. The report has four parts. In part 1, we review the post-Brexit migration system for work and study. The new system has relieved pressures in health and social care, eased labour market shortages, and subsidised the higher education sector. However, large rises in numbers have brought new pressures of their own, and moves to cut these numbers will bring further impacts in future.

In part 2 we look at the changes to the UK's humanitarian migration policy. The government has moved to open up nationality specific humanitarian routes, in particular for residents of Ukraine and Hong Kong, while restricting the UK's system of territorial asylum. This has made it extremely difficult for refugees arriving unauthorised in the UK to be granted residence. Taken together, these two policies mark a shift away from standard international asylum procedures towards visa routes that allow the government to pick and choose which groups receive protection.


In part 3 we look at what the public think of the migration system and the outcomes it delivers. There was a major liberal shift in public opinion between Brexit and the recent spike in migration, with more people saying the economic and cultural impact of immigration was positive, and fewer seeing immigration as a problem. More people supported the recruitment of migrant workers, and that support spread to a wider range of roles - including lower paid professions such as hospitality and seasonal agricultural work. The public now look back on the past two decades of EU migration as beneficial. And, as more positive views of immigration and its effects spread, the share of voters saying control of

immigration was a top political priority fell sharply.

The recent spike in immigration has partly, but not fully, reversed this shift, though there are clear rises in public concern in specific areas. The public are unhappy about irregular migrants crossing the channel on small boats, about current levels of asylum migration, and they are growing more anxious about very high levels of student migration and inflows of primary migrants' dependents. With more voters in general, and Conservative voters in particular, naming migration as a top priority, immigration is moving up the agenda again after a long post-Brexit decline.

Part 4 turns to the challenges ahead for the next government, with a series of short contributions examining the options on the table for policymakers on different aspects of migration policy. There are tough choices ahead on many fronts. The incoming government will need a clear strategic vision of the economic and social role of migration, on the UK's international and humanitarian responsibilities, and on how to integrate migrants into society and politics. Policymakers will need to communicate this vision to a public unsettled by recent sharp rises in migration, but still fundamentally pragmatic and open to the benefits it can bring.

Brexit did indeed enable the UK government to 'take back control' of immigration policy. The current migration debate reflects the choices policymakers have made, balancing opportunities and challenges, and the effects - both anticipated and not - of those choices. This report aims to provide a clear and evidence-based account of these, and how they have been received by the public. We hope this will help to inform both voters and policymakers as they consider the choices to come, in the general election and after.



# **PART 1: THE POST-BREXIT MIGRATION SYSTEM – POLICY AND OUTCOMES**



# THE POST-BREXIT MIGRATION SYSTEM – POLICY AND OUTCOMES

Jonathan Portes

Brexit led to the most significant set of changes to the legal framework for immigration to the UK since the early 1970s. In the run up to the Brexit referendum, net migration from the European Union had risen sharply. In fact, [revised estimates](#) now suggest that it was even higher than thought at the time, peaking at well over 300,000 in the year to June 2016.

During the referendum, the official Vote Leave campaign avoided specific promises to reduce immigration, instead [stating](#) that after Brexit, the United Kingdom would introduce a “fairer immigration system that is better for Britain, stops discriminating on the basis of where you come from, and instead allows us to pick people on the basis of skills”.

The [new system](#) was introduced in January 2021. The [key features](#) of the initial plan for the post-Brexit ‘points based’ system for labour migration were:

- eligible positions would pay more than £25,600 or the lower quartile of the average salary for that occupation, whichever is higher, and require skills equivalent to at least RQF3 (broadly the equivalent of 2 A-levels)
- ‘discounts’ for trainees, those with recent PhDs, and those in ‘shortage occupations’ meant that for some occupations/recruits the salary threshold could be as low as about £20,000.
- for the National Health Service and teachers, instead of the salary threshold, recruits could be paid according to prevailing national pay scales. However, the same skill threshold applied, which covers radiographers and technicians as well as doctors and nurses, but not lower-skilled NHS positions.
- there was also to be an expanded Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme, but no other sectoral schemes for workers who do not meet the skill threshold, and in particular, despite high levels of vacancies and staff shortages, no schemes for the social care sector or for accommodation and hospitality.
- some restrictive and bureaucratic features of the old ‘Tier 2’ labour migration system, in particular the overall quota (already substantially relaxed in practice) and the ‘Resident Labour Market Test’ requiring

employers to demonstrate (in principle if not in practice) that they could not find a suitable resident worker, were abolished.

- one proposal included in the original White Paper, but not implemented, was a route ‘allowing temporary short-term workers to come for a year.’ This proposal, designed to address some of the difficulties faced by employers who previously relied heavily on EU-origin workers coming to the United Kingdom, was dropped due to concerns about administration and enforcement.

At the same time, the EU Settlement Scheme gave EU nationals resident in the UK (as well as some family members from outside the EU) an entitlement to apply for ‘settled status’ (or, for more recent arrivals ‘pre-settled status’); meaning that those who wished to remain permanently in the UK could do so. Some 5.5 million have applied.

While the new system broadly fulfilled Vote Leave’s pledge, the precise specification of the salary and skills thresholds was considerably more liberal than those applied to non-EU migrants under the previous system, reflecting both business concerns and the desire on the part of government (especially the Treasury) to smooth the impact of Brexit and to make a reality of ‘Global Britain’.

Moreover, two more major changes, announced separately, further liberalised the system. In 2004, the United Kingdom had introduced a ‘Post-Study Work Visa’, which allowed most international students graduating from UK universities to extend their stay for up to two years, during which time they could work in any job. This scheme was abolished by the Coalition government in 2012, due to (largely ill-founded) concerns over overstaying as well as more substantive worries over the employment outcomes of those using the scheme.

Reintroducing some version of the scheme had long been a priority of the university sector, which regarded it as essential for the United Kingdom to compete in the international student market against other English-speaking countries which offer similar schemes, and it was indeed reintroduced in 2021. Again, the government’s motivation was to smooth the Brexit transition, here for universities who were facing large falls in EU student numbers resulting from Brexit. Given the sector’s heavy and growing reliance on international student fees to subsidise domestic students paying below cost, any major shortfall in international students would have serious adverse consequences.

The second liberalisation was for care workers. While senior care workers were already eligible for visas under the new system, staff shortages grew throughout the sector after the end of the free movement, exacerbated severely by the pandemic and its aftermath. In December 2021 the Migration Advisory

Committee - very reluctantly, given its [long-standing position](#) that these shortages were best addressed by improving pay and conditions in the care sector - recommended that all care worker occupations (regardless of skill level, and, given the low levels of pay prevalent in the sector, essentially regardless of salary) should be eligible for a visa.

## RECENT MIGRATION TRENDS

What, then, has the impact of Brexit, the pandemic and its aftermath, and the new system been on migration trends? We can divide the time between the EU referendum and now into three periods:

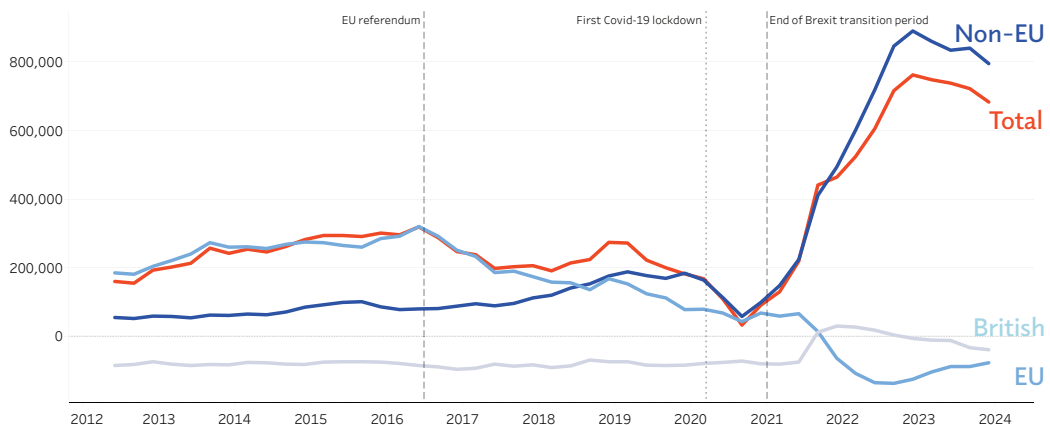
- From the referendum to the pandemic (June 2016 to February 2020) there was much debate about future plans for immigration but only minor changes to the immigration policies in force (since free movement rights continued until the end of the Brexit transition period in January 2021).
- The pandemic and the associated lockdowns, including enforced closures and other restrictions, from March 2020 to the spring of 2021 (retailers were allowed to reopen in April 2021). As noted above, the post-Brexit migration system was introduced in January 2021, but had little impact on outcomes while a wide range of pandemic restrictions remained in place.
- The period of full operation of the post-Brexit system, alongside the reopening and normalisation of the economy, from the summer of 2021 up to the present.

Figure 1

### After two and half years of sharp growth in non-EU nationals, 2023 saw numbers fall by nearly 12%

Long-term net migration of non-EU, EU, and British nationals in the UK, between the year end June 2012 and the year end December 2023

## UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE



Source: International Passenger Survey from the Office for National Statistics, Home Office Borders and Immigration data from the Home Office, Registration and Population Interactions Database from the Department for Work and Pensions

During the first period, although free movement remained in place, EU immigration fell sharply, from its peak of over 300,000 per year at the time of the referendum to below 100,000 at the start of the pandemic. This fall [was driven](#) by a combination of factors. The fall in the pound after the referendum made UK wages less attractive compared to those in source countries; meanwhile, labour market conditions were generally improving in those countries, with lower unemployment and rising wages. But there was certainly a large Brexit impact – since free movement was still in place, this did not reflect legal or policy change, but the vote itself does appear to have made the UK less attractive to potential EU-origin migrants. There was some acceleration of this trend in 2019, perhaps reflecting Brexit-related uncertainty and the possibility of a ‘no deal’ Brexit. Meanwhile, there was a steady although less marked increase in non-EU migration. This reflected increases in migration for work, resulting from substitution from EU to non-EU migrants (especially in the health and social care sectors) as well as increased student and refugee/humanitarian flows.

The pandemic unsurprisingly led to sharp falls in inward migration. There was also a substantial increase in return migration, particularly of EU nationals leaving the United Kingdom, reflecting their concentration in sectors (accommodation, hospitality, tourism, and retail) that were almost entirely shut down. Considerable uncertainty remains over the magnitude of this return migration, since both migration (flow) and population (stock) statistics are measured using survey data, which essentially [became useless](#) in this period due to high and differential levels of non-response. [Administrative data](#) suggests that the numbers returning to their countries of origin during the pandemic were likely to have been in the hundreds of thousands. Student migration was also severely impacted.

The reopening of the economy in mid-2021 led to widespread labour shortages in some sectors, as resurgent demand met reduced supply. This was particularly acute in sectors where significant numbers of EU-origin migrants had left the workforce, as well as in the health and social care sectors, where the pandemic appears to have led to both persistent increases in demand and increased exit rates among staff, as a result of pressure on working conditions and wages. More broadly, there also appear to have been some [structural increases](#) in levels of inactivity related to ill-health among the resident workforce.

This coincided with the introduction of the new system and the other liberalisations described above, as well as large refugee flows from Ukraine and Hong Kong, and increases in the number of asylum seekers arriving by other routes. The result has been historically very high levels of migration, overwhelmingly from outside the European Union. Over the last three years, net non-EU migration has amounted to well over 2 million, compared to an average

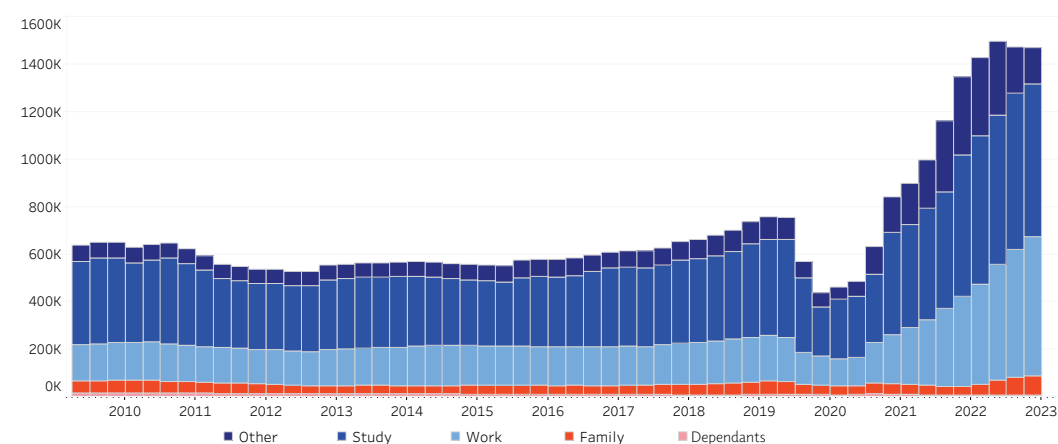
of just over 100,000 per year the previous decade, although numbers are now falling, [with net migration falling](#) by about 80,000 in 2023 compared to 2022's record levels. They are likely to [fall very sharply](#) over the next year.

While all the main categories of migration have grown, the key drivers have been the increase in the number of work and study visas and in dependents. The former category is dominated by the health and care sector, with 120,000 visas issued in the last year alone to main applicants, with a further 220,000 to their dependents.

**Figure 2**

**The key drivers of new visas have been work and study visas and their dependants**

*Total long-term visas issued by the UK by quarter from 2005-2023 by visa category using rolling year total for all countries*



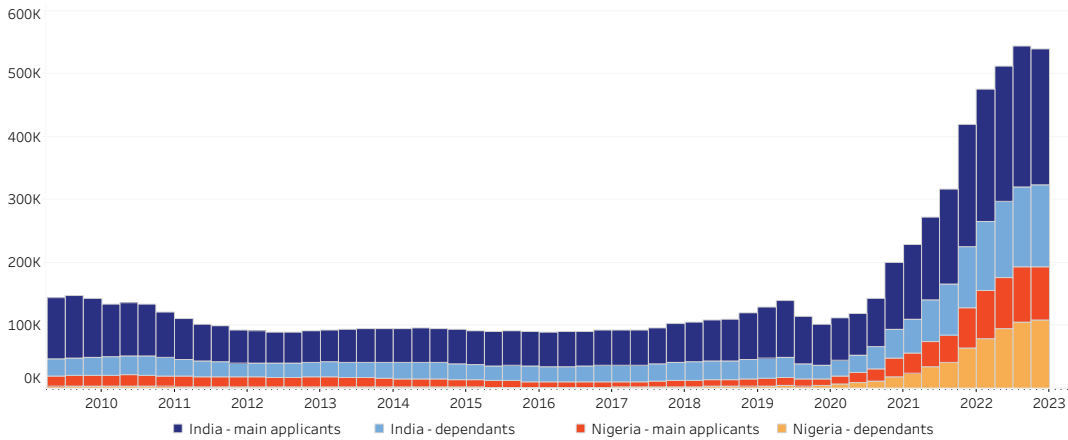
Source: Home Office, 2024; authors' calculations

The [nationality mix](#) of new migrants has also shifted radically. India has long been the largest source country for those coming here on skilled work visas; this remains the case both for the main Skilled Work Visa and those coming to work in the health and care sectors. India has also surpassed China as the largest source country for international students. Even larger proportional increases have occurred for other 'New Commonwealth' countries (Nigeria, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Zimbabwe). This shift has also driven the overall increase in numbers, since those coming from these countries - whether to work or study - are far more likely to bring dependents (spouses and/or children) than those coming from, for instance, China. The fivefold increase in visas issued to Indian and Nigerian applicants between 2020 and 2023 reflects very large rises in both main applicant visas and visas for dependents (see Chart 3).

Figure 3

### There has been a five fold increase in visas issued to Indian and Nigerian applicants between 2020 and 2023

Visas issued by the UK to India and Nigeria by quarter from 2005-2023 using annual rolling total to main applicants and their dependants



Source: Home Office, 2024; authors' calculations

Meanwhile, EU migration has continued to fall. EU net migration is now estimated to be negative, with more EU citizens leaving the UK than arriving. Flows of new EU-origin migrants into the UK labour market have [fallen very sharply](#) - only about 5,000 work visas were issued to French nationals (the largest single European source country) in 2023, compared to over 160,000 to Indians. It is important to note, however, that under the EU Settlement Scheme some 5.5 million EU nationals have (at least if they do not remain abroad for too long) a continuing right to reside and work in the UK without having to apply for a visa.

The end of free movement, and the consequent reduction in EU migration, were undoubtedly a direct consequence of Brexit. However, changes to the system applying to non-EU migrants were policy choices driven both by the political and economic ramifications of Brexit and other external factors, notably - but by no means only - the pandemic and its aftereffects.

### ECONOMIC AND LABOUR MARKET IMPACTS

The Skilled Work Visa is the main route for those coming to work in the UK. Visas within the health and social care sectors now account for two-thirds of all work visas. Within this, more than two-thirds (about 100,000) are care workers (of whom most fall under the least skilled occupational classification). NHS staff, mostly doctors and nurses, account for the rest.

Outside health and social care, the key sectors making use of the skilled work visa system are those that used the Tier 2 system: [ICT](#), professional, scientific, and technical services, and financial services. In these sectors, most new migrants

are relatively highly skilled and highly paid. In the last year, however, there has been some increase – from a low base – in those coming in other sectors to work in ‘middle-skilled’ jobs, such as chefs and butchers.

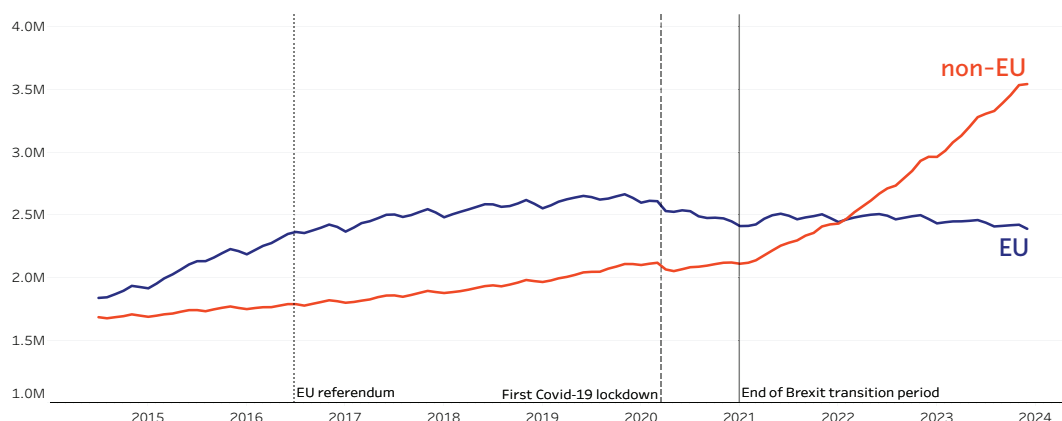
To some extent, the UK has a bifurcated system for work migration. One route for the (mostly publicly owned and/or publicly funded) health and care system, which allows workers at all skill levels to come to the UK, if they are prepared to accept the pay and conditions set by government, directly or indirectly. Another route mainly used by relatively highly skilled and well-paid workers in high productivity services in the private sector. Other aspects of this bifurcation are regional: the health and social care sectors are very dispersed around the country, for obvious reasons, while the sectors making most use of other skilled work visas are disproportionately concentrated in London, where salaries are also higher.

However, the Skilled Worker visa is by no means the only route by which immigrants enter the UK labour market. Since the introduction of the new system in January 2021, the number of non-EU-origin workers on employee payrolls grew by 1.3 million, considerably more than double the number of work visas (excluding temporary workers) issued. Indeed, with the employment of both the UK born and the EU-born flat or falling, non-EU born have, on net, generated all the employment growth seen in the UK economy over the period since the start of the pandemic, emphasising the extent to which recent economic growth has been driven by migration.

**Figure 4**

**Employment of non-EU nationals have seen a large increase post-2020, while EU nationals have decreased**

*Payrolled employments of non-UK nationals from July 2014 to December 2023*



*Source: HMRC UK payrolled employments by nationality, region, industry, age and sex, from July 2014 to December 2023. Note: "Payrolled employments" broadly correspond to the number of employee jobs on firms' returns to HMRC. It double counts those with two jobs but excludes the self-employed.*

Timing and definitional issues mean visa and payroll figures cannot be compared directly, but the much larger growth in payrolls illustrates the extent to which other migration routes also impact the UK labour market.

The main further sources of immigrant labour are:

- Humanitarian and refugee routes. Over the last three years, there have been large inflows, totalling some 400,000, of British National (Overseas) citizens from [Hong Kong](#), and of [Ukrainian refugees](#). Almost all of these migrants will have the right to work from arrival, although they face significant obstacles in the UK labour market. Those who obtain refugee status after claiming asylum here also have the right to work; this totalled more than 60,000 in 2023, as the government sought to clear the very large backlog of claims.
- The dependents of those on study and work visas. Students can work only for limited periods, since they are supposed to be studying, but dependents' work rights are unrestricted. They have no access to public funds, meaning they cannot claim social security benefits, and as a result the financial incentive for most spouses (who make up the overwhelming majority of dependents) to work is strong.
- (Ex)-students now on the Graduate Visa (and their dependents). Again, they have full work rights, can work in any job and have no rights to access public funds.

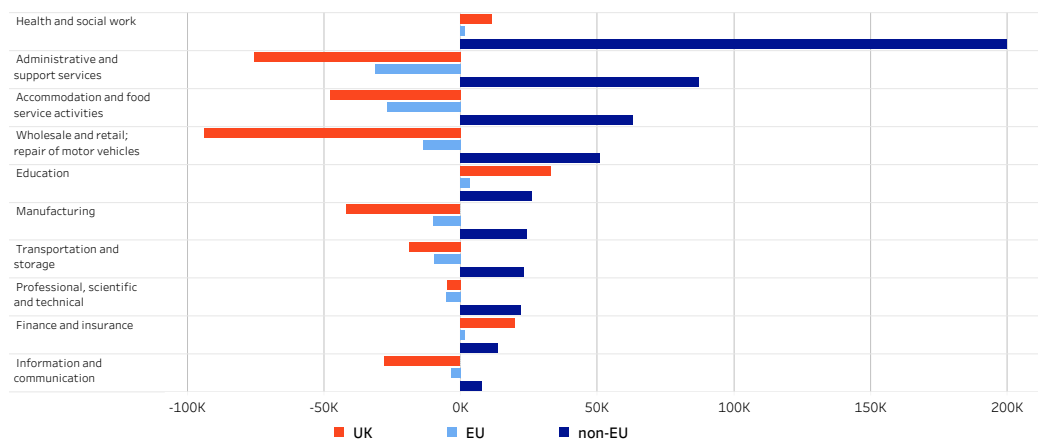
Thus, the impact of migration on the UK economy and labour market is far broader than that resulting from the skilled work visa. The rise in non-EU migration has also had a major impact in other sectors beyond those seeing large numbers of Skilled Worker Visa admissions; for example, largely offsetting the fall in EU-origin employees in the accommodation and food services sector.

Figure 5

**Employments of non-EU nationals increased in all sectors between December 2022 and 2023**



*Change in payrolled employments by nationality, top 10 largest sectors, between December 2022 and December 2023*



Source: HMRC UK payrolled employments by nationality, region, industry, age and sex, from July 2014 to December 2023

Thus, in the health and social care sectors, non-EU origin migrants have - as a matter of deliberate government policy - helped mitigate some of the severe



workforce pressures resulting from deteriorating relative pay and conditions, a lack of training, and the aftereffects of the pandemic. In high skill/high pay service sectors, non-EU migrants continue to be a major source of skilled labour. And in lower paid service sectors, the reduction in flows of EU-origin workers has been largely or wholly offset by increases in non-EU origin workers, most of whom came to the UK on other visa routes than the Skilled Work Visa.

The overall economic impact will depend on numerous factors, Nevertheless, it is worth looking at the earnings of these new entrants to the labour market, particularly since some commentators have [expressed concern](#) that the large proportion of those on skilled work visas actually working in social care, combined with the flexible nature of the Graduate Visa, may mean that the earnings of recent migrants are relatively low.

As yet, we have only limited evidence on this, especially as regards those who entered the labour market over the last few years. Analysis of [HMRC data shows](#) that non-EU origin employees who started work in 2021 or before entered the workforce at a higher point in the wage distribution, and indeed quickly surpassed the workforce median. In other words, increases in the number of non-EU origin employees were associated with higher relative wages and earnings progression rather than the reverse. However, this preceded the expansion of the care visa. The most recent (partial) [data](#) suggests that while there has been some relative fall in the earnings of new entrants, there is no evidence as yet to suggest that they are disproportionately concentrated at the low end of the earnings distribution. Despite the very large influx of Indian and Nigerian nationals, many who are likely to be young and concentrated in low-paying sectors like care, average earnings for these nationality groups remain higher than for UK nationals. The recent Migration Advisory Committee [report](#) on the Graduate visa found that those using the visa had earnings comparable to domestic graduates, with their earnings rising over time.

Beyond the labour market, the impact of recent rises in migration on the government's fiscal position is also [considerable](#). In the March Budget, the Office of Budget Responsibility revised up its projections for net migration. The impact was to improve the fiscal position by £7.5 billion in 2028-29, accounting for more than the entire net tax cut of about £6 billion for that year announced in the Budget.

## LOOKING FORWARD

We are now clearly at a turning point, with migration likely [to fall very considerably](#) over the next year, as a result both of policy changes and broader factors. On the former, in response to perceived concern over the level of migration, the government has recently introduced a substantial package of policy changes, primarily focusing on the dependents of those coming to study and to work in the care sector. The key changes are:




- Restrictions on the right of postgraduate students to be accompanied by dependents, meaning most of those on one-year Masters will no longer enjoy this right
- Restrictions on the right of care workers (but not others on skilled work visas) to be accompanied by dependents
- Increases in the general salary threshold for skilled work visas to £38,700
- Increases in the salary threshold applying to UK residents' spouses and other family members to join them here.

If applied in the year to June 2023, this would have reduced the number of visas issued by about 300,000. However, assessing its impact going forward is much harder, and will depend on labour demand and supply in the care sector, as well as how prospective students respond. Early indications are that there has been a sharp drop in international student applications to UK universities, although this is almost certainly due to a variety of factors, not just changes to the immigration rules. The latest visa data also suggest a sharp fall in the number of visas issued to care workers, although whether this is because of restrictions on dependents or because of increased enforcement activity against potential abuse of the system is unclear as yet. It is too early to tell if the changes to the salary threshold for other Skilled Work Visas will have a large impact.

The broader labour market impacts of the most recent changes are therefore highly uncertain. While the changes largely target dependents, this has likely formed a large part of the boost to labour supply from migration over the last few years, especially in sectors like hospitality, so there may well be impacts in these sectors. However, given the recent cooling in the labour market, this may not be such a major concern in the short term.

As a consequence of these changes, and as student emigration rises to reflect the earlier rise in student immigration, net migration is likely already falling sharply as of early 2024, and may continue to do so over the next few years. While forecasting migration is highly uncertain, dependent as it is both on policy and broader economic and geopolitical developments, [current forecasts](#) are for net migration to fall back to perhaps 300,000 per year over the medium term, and it

is certainly plausible that it could go significantly lower, as Brian Bell, Chair of the Migration Advisory Committee, recently suggested. As the discussion above shows, this would have significant implications for the UK economy, labour market and public finances; the OBR's 'low migration' scenario would increase borrowing by between £14 and £20 billion per year by the end of the forecast period. It would also push up the debt/GDP ratio - the government's key fiscal target, to which Labour are also committed - by 2.5%, the equivalent of £75 billion.



# **PART 2: IRREGULAR AND HUMANITARIAN MIGRATION**

# IRREGULAR AND HUMANITARIAN MIGRATION

Peter William Walsh and Mihnea Cuibus

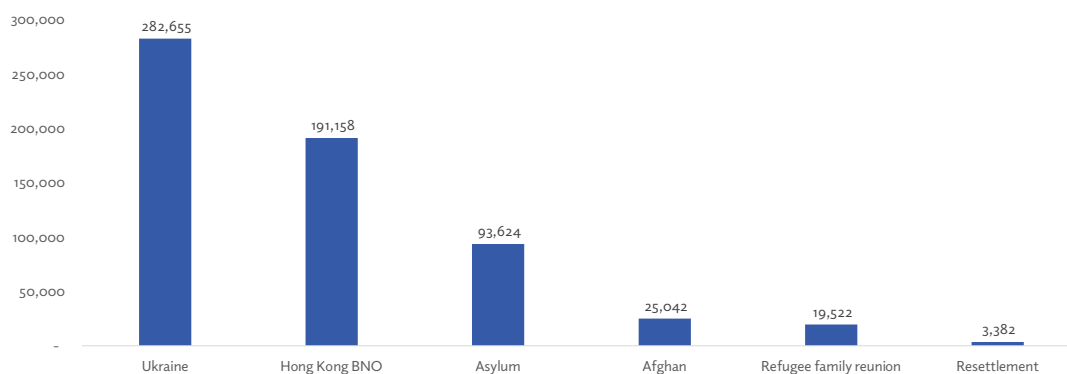
Since Brexit, the UK's humanitarian migration policy has displayed two main trends. On the one hand, the government has introduced several pieces of legislation to restrict the UK's system of territorial asylum, with current rules effectively barring all refugees arriving from 7 March 2023 from ever being granted residence in the UK. On the other, in the three years from 2021 to 2023, the government created nationality-specific humanitarian routes under which around half a million people have been given status in the UK. Around 95% are from Ukraine (283,000) or Hong Kong (191,000). Taken together, these two policies mark a shift away from standard international asylum procedures towards visa routes that allow the government to pick and choose which groups receive protection.

Figure 6

## The UK government has shifted towards visa routes allowing it to pick and choose which groups are allowed in

Number of visas issued for people offered protection in the UK from 2021-2023, by group

UK IN A  
CHANGING  
EUROPE



Source: Authors' analysis of Home Office Immigration System Statistics, Safe and legal (humanitarian) routes to the UK; and Tables Asy\_Do2, and Vis\_Do2. Notes: Data refer to issuances of status from 1 January 2021 to 31 December 2023, rather than arrivals in the UK. 'Ukraine' comprises visas issued under the Ukraine Family Scheme, Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme (Homes for Ukraine), and the Ukraine Extension Scheme. 'Hong Kong BNO' visa issuances comprises both out-of-country visa issuances and in-country visa extensions. 'Asylum' comprises grants of asylum (i.e., full refugee status) and other grants of immigration status resulting from an asylum claim. 'Afghan' comprises the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme (ACRS) and Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP). 'Resettlement' comprises the UK Resettlement Scheme, Community Sponsorship Scheme, the Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme, the Vulnerable Children Resettlement Scheme, and Mandate.

## SMALL BOATS, ASYLUM RESTRICTION, AND RWANDA

The UK's tightening of its asylum system has been spurred by a surge in the number of people arriving in the UK via small boats, with more than a hundred thousand using this method to reach the UK between 2021 and 2023. In response, the UK implemented several pieces of legislation to restrict its asylum system.

The first was the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. This bolstered existing rules on ‘inadmissibility’, which allow the government to dismiss an individual’s asylum claim if they arrived in the country without permission or have a ‘connection’ with a safe third country. The government had intended to relocate inadmissible claimants to safe third countries. But few removals have so far taken place. By the end of 2023, out of the 77,000 individuals identified for removal, only 25 had been deported. As of 31 December 2023, 48,000 of these individuals have had their claims admitted to the asylum system for processing, highlighting the limited effectiveness of the Act.

The Nationality and Borders Act also introduced a policy granting fewer rights to refugees who arrived in the UK without permission. While this law was intended to deter asylum seekers, broadly speaking it did not work. Asylum applications have continued to rise. In July 2023, the government [suspended](#) this so-called ‘two-tier’ system, arguing that the policy would be superseded by the even more restrictive Illegal Migration Bill.

This became the **Illegal Migration Act 2023** (IMA) on 20 July 2023, which closes the asylum system entirely to most people arriving irregularly in the UK. Because there is no way to apply for asylum from outside the UK, the IMA will impact the majority of people seeking asylum in the UK after its passage. In effect it withdraws the UK from the global asylum system, which is based on hearing people’s claims even if they enter a country without permission. This is why the United Nations has [described](#) the policy as an ‘asylum ban’.

The IMA does two main things. First, it bans anyone arriving in the UK without permission on or after 7 March 2023 (when the bill was introduced to Parliament) from ever receiving status. In theory, these people could have their asylum claims accepted, but would nevertheless be prevented from receiving any kind of legal residence. Second, for those arriving without permission from 20 July 2023 onwards (the date the IMA received Royal Assent), the IMA requires that the government remove them from the UK, regardless of whether they are seeking asylum or have been trafficked (with some narrow exceptions).

So far, **Rwanda** is the only country that has agreed to accept some of the UK’s asylum-seekers. Under the UK-Rwanda Partnership, the UK will send some people arriving via small boats or other irregular means to Rwanda, where their claims will be processed within Rwanda’s asylum system and where they would receive residence in Rwanda—not in the UK.

The Partnership was first announced in April 2022. Since then, it has been stalled by legal challenges. The first was in the European Court of Human Rights, which grounded the first flight in June 2022. The UK’s Supreme Court then ruled in November 2023 that Rwanda was not safe for asylum seekers, because of the

risk that they would be returned to countries of origin where they would face persecution.

In response to the Supreme Court's judgment, the government introduced a new [treaty](#) with Rwanda providing additional safeguards. It also produced a new draft bill declaring that Rwanda is a safe country for asylum seekers. This will make it much more difficult to successfully challenge their removal. The Safety of Rwanda Bill is now law, but the Prime Minister has [said](#) that flights will not take off before the 4 July general election. In a speech in Dover on 10 May 2024, Keir Starmer said that a Labour government would scrap the Rwanda policy, and begin processing people's asylum claims as normal, which implies repealing most of the Illegal Migration Act. That also implies there would only ever be flights to Rwanda in the event of a Conservative election win.

The deterrent effect of the plan is unknown. The Home Office's Permanent Secretary, the department's most senior civil servant, wrote in a 13 April 2022 [letter](#) to Home Secretary Priti Patel that 'evidence of a deterrent effect is highly uncertain and cannot be quantified with sufficient certainty to provide me with the necessary level of assurance over [the policy's] value for money'. The policy's deterrent effect may depend on whether large numbers of people are sent to Rwanda. Beyond statements that the scheme is 'uncapped', the government has remained tight-lipped about how many people could realistically be sent.

Studies on asylum deterrence policies in other countries have typically found that their [deterrent effects are small](#). And while some countries, such as Australia, have seen large reductions in unauthorised boat arrivals these countries' approaches usually involved *physical* enforcement activities, such as boat interceptions and pushbacks. If very large numbers of asylum seekers are sent to Rwanda, it is possible that the scheme would have a significant impact, though it is not clear how likely this scenario is.

In addition to the uncertainties about the deterrent effect, a question remains regarding what will happen to asylum seekers in the UK who are eligible for removal to Rwanda, but are not removed. Under the IMA, asylum claimants can only be removed to their country of origin if it is on a list of 34 'safe' countries: the EU-27, Iceland, Liechtenstein, Norway, Switzerland, Albania, India and Georgia. Everyone else can be removed only to a safe third country - for now, Rwanda is the only country available.

[Research](#) by the Refugee Council estimates that as of 14 April 2024, 91,000 people were in the asylum backlog, a large majority of whom could be eligible for removal to Rwanda (because they originally arrived in the UK on or after 7 March 2023). Under the IMA, none of these individuals will ever be given any form of legal immigration status. If they cannot be removed - and it seems likely that

many will not be – they will remain in the UK indefinitely as irregular migrants, at a [high financial cost to the government](#), and high personal cost to the migrants themselves.

Then there are questions regarding the [financial implications of the Rwanda scheme](#). The total financial impact is highly uncertain and depends on a wide range of factors, including the number of people relocated, as well as the size of any deterrent effect. If people are deterred from coming to the UK to claim asylum, the government saves the resources it would otherwise have spent on them.

In one plausible scenario, the UK might spend over £600m to send 300 people to Rwanda – a cost of over £2m per person. By contrast, sending 20,000 people would cost around £4 billion – or around £200,000 per person.

### **NATIONALITY-SPECIFIC HUMANITARIAN ROUTES FOR HONGKONGERS, AFGHANS, AND UKRAINIANS**

While closing the asylum system to irregular entrants, the government also introduced three nationality-specific ‘bespoke humanitarian routes’:

1. **Hong Kong British National Overseas** visa scheme, introduced on 31 January 2021 in response to China’s political crackdown in Hong Kong. The scheme functions as a typical visa route, though a notably more liberal one, which makes it easier and cheaper for Hong Kong British National (Overseas) (BNO) status holders to migrate to the UK than if they applied under the normal work, study, or family visa routes. Between 31 January 2021 and 31 December 2023, the government issued around 191,000 BNO visas.
2. **Afghans**. The Afghan Relocations and Assistance Policy (ARAP), for Afghan interpreters and other staff who helped the British military, and the Afghan Citizens Resettlement Scheme, introduced in response to the Taliban’s return to power in the summer of 2021. As of 31 December 2023, 25,000 people had been granted settlement under the Afghan route, though most of these arrived during the evacuation of Kabul, with numbers since [slowing to a trickle](#).
3. **Ukrainians**. There are two main visa routes for Ukrainians fleeing the war: the Ukraine Family Scheme, and the Ukraine Sponsorship Scheme, known as Homes for Ukraine. As of 31 December 2023, 283,000 visas had been issued under these routes.



Overall, the UK's humanitarian migration policy appears to lack a consistent framework. The government's aim to offer protection only to those who arrive via a safe and legal route means the asylum system is being largely dismantled. By contrast, the UK government has created several nationality-specific humanitarian routes, introduced on an ad-hoc basis in response to global crises. In this sense, the policymaking of the UK appears to reflect a broader international trend towards asylum restrictionism on the one hand, and the welcoming of certain circumscribed groups, on the other.



**PART 3:  
THE POST-BREXIT  
MIGRATION  
SYSTEM: WHAT THE  
PUBLIC THINK**

# THE POST-BREXIT MIGRATION SYSTEM: WHAT THE PUBLIC THINK

Robert Ford

## INTRODUCTION

Public concerns about immigration were an important factor in the vote to Leave the EU and the need to end free movement was a ‘red line’ for the UK government throughout the Brexit negotiation process. Having set out the wide-ranging changes to the UK migration system since Brexit took effect, we turn to the question of public opinion. What do voters make of it all? Have voters’ preferences on migration changed, and to what extent does the new system deliver what the public want?

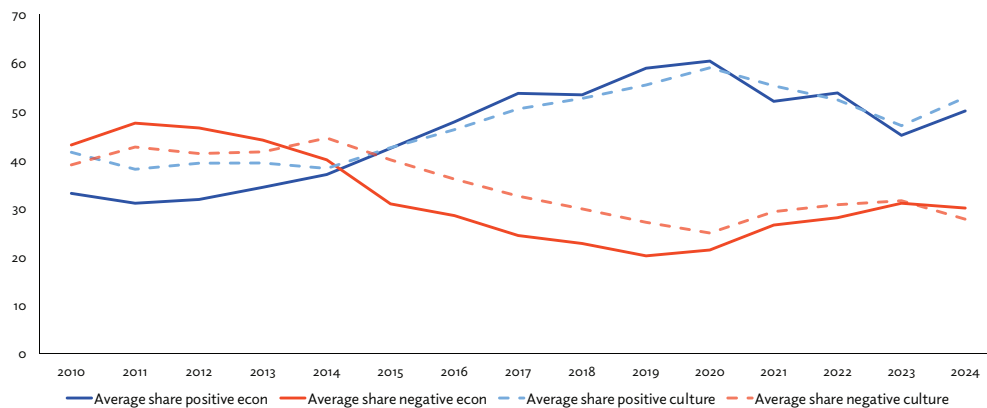
Two measures asking people about the economic and cultural impact of immigration provide us with a valuable tool for examining the evolution of public attitudes. These have been asked for over a decade in nearly identical form on three different academic surveys. Figure 7 plots the trends in these attitudes since 2010. In Figure 8, we also make use of the long running IPSOS-MORI issues index, which records what the public (unprompted) say when asked about the most important issues facing the country, to track the rise and fall in the salience of immigration as an issue on the political agenda in the same period.

Three broad trends are evident. The balance of opinion in the early 2010s was negative –strongly negative on economic impacts, narrowly negative on cultural impacts. Public concern about immigration was high, with the share of respondents naming it as a top concern in the IPSOS Issues Index between 20 and 45 per cent in every year from 2010 to 2016. Multiple [data sources](#) show that a substantial plurality or outright majority of the public said they wanted migration levels cut in this period.

Figure 7

### The mid-2010s saw a dramatic shift in public views towards the impact of immigration

Positive and negative views about the economic impact of immigration and cultural impact of immigration



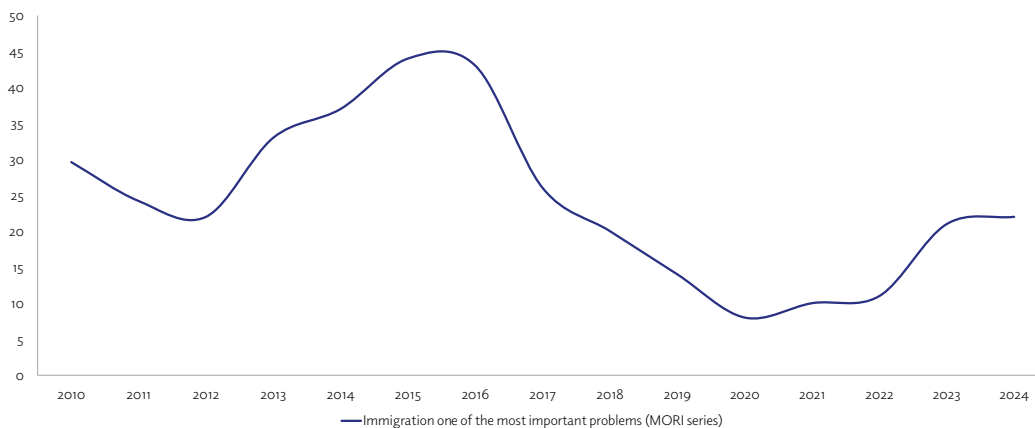
Source: European Social Survey (2010-2020); British Social Attitudes survey (2011-2023); British Election Study internet panel (2014-2023); NatCen mixed methods panel (2024). Note: The surveys do not cover identical years or time periods. Interpolation is used to provide estimates from each of the data sources in the years after the start of the survey series begins when a question is not asked, and balance the average figure produced in each year. The same trends are evident in each survey series separately.

The mood shifted around the mid-2010s, with the most rapid change in the years immediately following the EU referendum. Higher shares of the public expressed positive views about immigration, with the average share saying migration brought economic benefits rising from around a third in 2014 to over 60% in 2020, while the share saying migration was culturally enriching rose from around 40% to nearly 60% in the same period. The share with negative views also fell sharply on both measures, so the balance of opinion overall swung from negative to positive. The salience of immigration also fell sharply in this latter half of this period, from around 40% in 2016 to a 20 year low of under 10% in the Covid pandemic year of 2020.

Figure 8

### Immigration as the most important problem reached its peak in the years before the referendum

% of the public that ranked immigration as the most important problem from 2010 to 2024



Source: IPSOS-MORI issues index (annual averages except 2024 Jan-April average)

This positive shift in attitudes occurred during a period encompassing both the negotiation and implementation of Brexit and the imposition of draconian controls on travel across borders as part of the response to the Covid pandemic. In the past few years, with Covid restrictions rolled back, and a new and more liberal post-Brexit policy framework in place, we have entered a third phase on migration opinion. Migration flows have risen sharply to record highs in the years since Covid restrictions on travel were removed, a consequence of both anticipated and unexpected shifts in government policy. This has been accompanied by a negative shift in views about economic and cultural impacts – the share taking positive views on both measures is down around 10 percentage points since 2020, with negative stances rising by a similar margin. The political salience of immigration has also risen sharply again, from under 10% in 2020 to over 20% in 2023 and the first months of 2024.

However, the public mood remains more positive than it was in the 2000s and early 2010s – optimists continue to outnumber pessimists on the impact of immigration, and the share of the public who say migration should be cut is lower now than it was then, even though migration inflows are much higher now than then. The salience of migration remains well below the levels recorded pre-Brexit – the 22% of the public who named immigration as a top concern in 2023 is below the annual average recorded in every year from 2003 to 2017, and is half the peak figure recorded in 2015. This, it seems, is the new normal as we approach the next general election: concerns about immigration have returned as immigration flows have hit record highs, but the general balance of opinion is more positive now than it was before Brexit.

### **VIEWS ABOUT SPECIFIC MIGRANT GROUPS**

Questions about the overall levels and impacts of migration are very abstract, reflecting judgements on a complex system involving multiple migration flows operating under different rules and with different effects. The levers of policy also operate on more specific forms of migration, with distinct systems covering migration for work, for study, for claiming asylum and for family reunion. It may therefore be more useful to break the system down into constituent parts which more closely correspond to the policy choices governments make.

### **MIGRATION FOR WORK**

As discussed in the first part of this report, the post-Brexit policy framework for labour migration now applies a unified system under which potential migrants qualify for a visa by securing ‘points’ under various criteria relating to skills, salaries and so on. In practice, this gives the government high discretionary control over who gets a work visa, as ministers have full control over what is awarded ‘points.’ Thus in December 2023, Home Secretary James Cleverly [made](#)

[the rules](#) more restrictive, increasing minimum income requirements for the most widely used ‘tier 2’ skilled worker visas. Given the government can fine tune the rules for work visas, it is worth seeing how the public view the recruitment of migrants into a variety of different jobs. The IPSOS-MORI/British Future immigration tracker has polled the public regularly on their views of migrant recruitment into nine different professions – net support for each profession in 2020-2024 is shown in Figure 9.

**Figure 9**

**There is strong and stable support for increased recruitment of migrants into the NHS**

*Net support for increasing or reducing migration of nine specific worker groups 2020-2024*



Source: IPSOS-MORI immigration tracker 2020-2024

There is strong and stable public support for the increased recruitment of migrants into the NHS, with net support around +40 for recruiting more doctors and nurses in all three years. The public have also swung in favour of greater migrant recruitment into social care, with net support rising from +4 in 2020 to +28 in 2022 and +24 in 2024. Other evidence points in the same direction. When asked in January 2024 whether the NHS should be free to recruit as many migrants as it needs or whether the government should set limits, respondents on the NatCen panel split 60-40 overall in favour of letting NHS managers recruit as many migrants as they need – though Conservative supporters and Leave voters were more evenly divided.

There is one more group where the public breaks strongly in favour of increased migrant recruitment, and it is a rather surprising one – fruitpickers. It seems the British public accept [the argument](#) often made by farmers that they [cannot get](#) sufficient British workers to do this intensive, low paid, seasonal work, and therefore support the recruitment of migrants to get in the harvest. The agricultural sector’s dependence on migrant labour is also reflected in policy, with the [number of places](#) available on the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme increasing eighteen-fold from 2,500 when the scheme was introduced in 2019 to 45,000 in 2024.

There are four more groups where opinion is more evenly divided and volatile: two highly skilled groups with globally mobile workforces – academics and IT workers – and two groups where many workers have lower skills and/or pay – construction and hospitality. In all of these cases, opinion has shifted between modest net support for increases, even splits, and net support for cuts. This may suggest that, outside of health and agriculture, the public are more uncertain about the need for migration, and more swayed by the current needs of labour markets than by a general desire to recruit ‘the best and the brightest.’ It seems the public are just as responsive to the needs of restaurants and construction sites as those of university campuses and tech companies. This is supported by other evidence. When asked directly by IPSOS-MORI whether the government’s priority when allocating work visas should be addressing shortages at all skill levels or attracting people for highly skilled roles, the public split 52-26 in favour of addressing shortages at all skill levels.

There is only one profession where the public consistently favour reducing migrant recruitment – banking. The British public, it seems, may not have had enough of experts, or of migrant workers. But they have had enough of bankers.

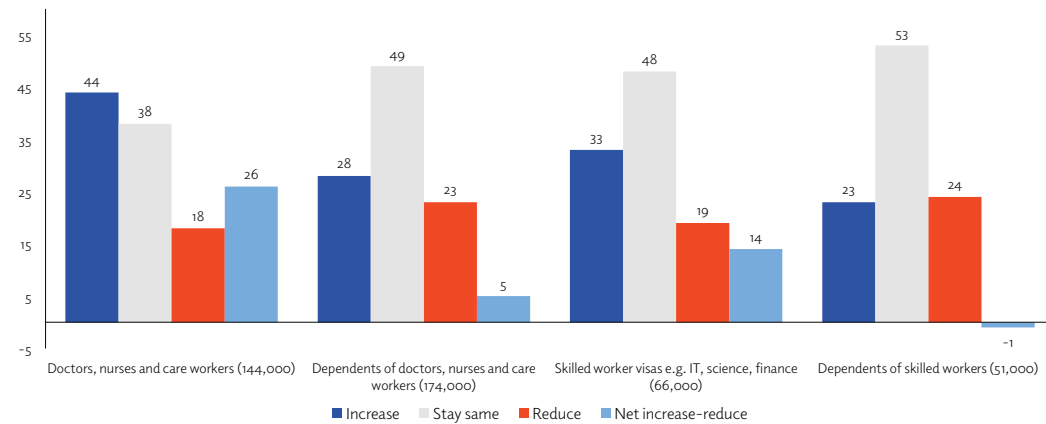
While these poll questions provide much insight into how migrant workers are viewed in a range of occupations, citizens are not given any information about how many migrants are coming to Britain to work in each of these jobs. It is not clear therefore how, if at all, the answers given reflect responses to actual migration flows in different jobs, or to broader principles about where migrant labour is or isn’t desirable. People may favour increasing migration into each profession in principle, yet also oppose the large increase in migration that would result if all employers could recruit more freely from abroad.

A different way to gauge public preferences is to present information on current migration flows and ask poll respondents to make judgments about these. This requires asking about the rather larger and broader groups reported in official statistics, but it means we know the answers reflect respondents’ judgements about actual migration levels. We undertook such polling on the NatCen panel in January 2024, asking about four labour migration related groups – doctors, nurses and care workers and their dependents, and workers on skilled worker visas and their dependents. For each group, respondents were provided with the number of immigrants recorded arriving in each of these categories in the latest official statistics. The results are presented in Figure 10.

**Figure 10**

**Support for the recruitment of migrants into the health sector when presented with official statistics**

*Views about migration levels of four labour migration related groups, when given current migration statistics*



Source: NatCen panel, January 2024. Respondents presented with estimates of the number of migrants arriving in each category in the year to September 2023, drawing on Home Office and ONS data.

Support for the recruitment of migrants into the health sector and into other skilled roles remains high even when respondents are presented with official statistics showing large current inflows. After learning that 144,000 migrants arrived to work in health and social care in the previous year, 44% of respondents favoured increasing this number further, while 18% wanted it reduced. This +26 balance of opinion is a little lower than when doctors and nurses were asked about separately in IPSOS-MORI’s 2024 poll, but is similar to the figure recorded for care workers by IPSOS-MORI. When told 66,000 migrants arrived on skilled worker visas in sectors such as IT, science and finance, 33% favoured increasing this number and 14% wanted it reduced – this +14 balance of opinion is more positive than when respondents were asked about IT workers, academics or bankers separately, and without migration statistics by IPSOS-MORI.

Support for the dependents of migrant workers is lower, though only a minority favour cuts. When told that 174,000 people arrived as dependents of health and social care workers in the past year, 28% favoured further increasing this number while 23% wanted it reduced – a +5 balance of opinion. When advised 53,000 migrants had arrived as the dependents of skilled workers outside health and social care, 23% favoured increases and 24% backed reductions – a -1 balance of opinion.

The balance of opinion between increases and cuts also tells only part of the story. In three out of four cases, the most popular option – backed by around half of respondents – is to maintain migration levels where they are. Respondents in the NatCen polling are only given three options (increase, reduce or stay the same) while IPSOS-MORI offered five, with respondents able to call for larger or smaller increases or reductions. If we add together ‘increase a little’ and ‘stay the



same' in MORI's figures, we find that here, too, around half of respondents favour stable numbers or modest rises across all of the skilled migrant groups (except bankers) The public are concerned both about the disruptions that rapid rises in migration can bring, and the costs of swingeing cuts - they support a stable system which avoids either extreme.

### **MIGRATION AND THE EU: FREE MOVEMENT OF LABOUR**

The free movement of workers across the borders of member states is a core principle of EU membership. The unrestricted flow of EU workers was not a controversial issue in the early decades of the UK's EU membership but became so in the years following the accession of eight new member states (the 'A8') in 2004. Britain was one of the few countries not to impose transitional controls on migration, and experienced a large influx of migration from Poland, Lithuania and the other poorer, post-Communist societies which had joined the EU that year. Free movement rapidly became politically contentious, and the need to 'take back control' by ending free movement rights became a central plank of both the Leave campaign in the EU referendum and the UK's negotiating positions in the Brexit process - a 'red line' which helped encourage a 'hard Brexit' with the UK withdrawing from the EU single market.

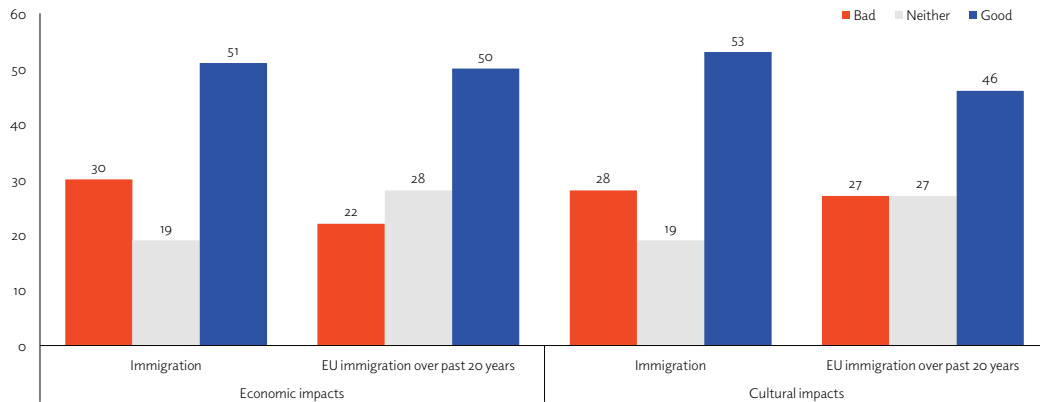
Given how politically contentious free movement was in the run up to Brexit, we may wonder how the public view EU migration in retrospect, two decades after the A8 migration began in 2004, and three years after free movement rights ended in Britain. We can look at this issue in two ways - by seeing how people now assess the impact of EU migration, and by asking how they view the idea of restoring the free movement system.

We asked people in our NatCen panel sample to assess the overall cultural and economic impact of EU immigration over the previous 20 years, from the A8 accession to the present day. Figure 11 presents the results. It seems the public now look back on past EU immigration as beneficial in the round. Half of respondents rate the economic impact as positive, while a fifth rate it negatively. Views of cultural impacts are a bit more mixed, with 46% rating these as positive and 27% as negative. When we compare these views to judgements of current immigration, the balance of opinion about EU migration over the long run is slightly more positive on economic impacts and slightly more negative on cultural impacts. Less than ten years after the demand for controls on such migration played a central role in the decision to depart the EU altogether, the British public now look back on free movement migration as, on balance, a good thing for Britain.

Figure 11

**UK public look back on two decades of EU immigration as beneficial in the round**

Views about economic and cultural impacts of immigration overall, and EU immigration over past 20 years



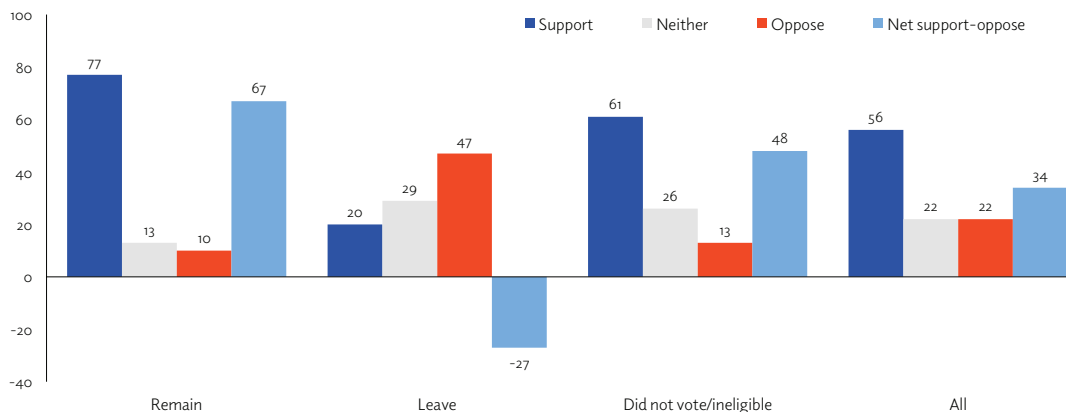
Source: NatCen Panel (January 2024)

With the public now seeing the impact of free movement migration in broadly positive terms, it is perhaps not surprising that the balance of opinion is now in favour of reintroducing free movement rights in the future. When asked whether they supported or opposed the return of free movement rights, well over half of our NatCen panel respondents were in favour, while just over one in five were against (Figure 11). Support was, unsurprisingly, strongest among Remain voters, with 77% backing the return of free movement, but over six in ten of those who abstained or were too young to vote also favour restoring free movement. The balance of opinion among Leave voters is as we might expect against, but less than half of Leave voters oppose the idea outright - 20% support it, and another 29% are neutral.

Figure 12

**The UK public now see the impact of free movement migration in broadly positive terms**

Views about reintroducing free movement rights, by EU referendum vote choice



Source: NatCen Panel (January 2024)

## MIGRATION FOR STUDY

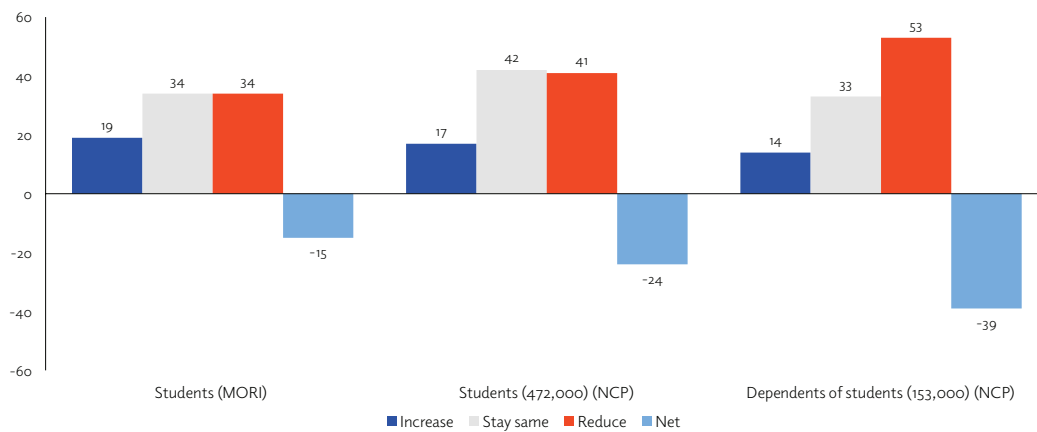
While the public generally support the recruitment of migrant labour by British employers, they are more sceptical about the large-scale recruitment of foreign students by British universities. Student migration has increased rapidly in the past two decades, with universities growing ever more reliant on the high fees paid by foreign students to balance the books in the face of frozen domestic student fees and falling research income. Students are now the largest group by far in official migration statistics, and recent polling suggests the scale of these inflows is beginning to concern the public.

**Figure 13**

### Recent polling suggest growing public concern about the scale of student migration

*Views of migration levels for student and student dependants*

**UK IN A  
CHANGING  
EUROPE**



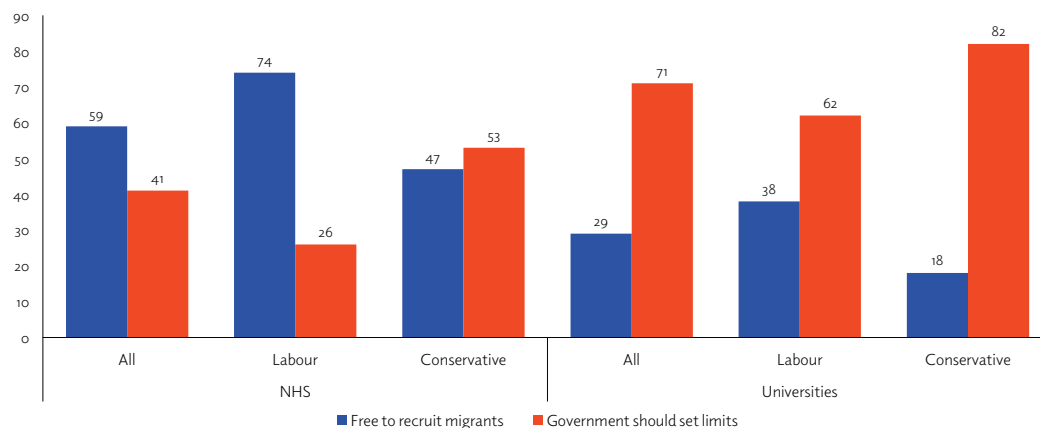
Source: NatCen panel (Jan 2024); IPSOS-MORI Immigration Tracker (Feb 2024)

Both the MORI migration tracker and the recent NatCen panel poll on migration have recently asked similar questions on students, enabling us to compare how the public judge migration levels in the abstract and when given the most recent official statistics. This comparison is presented in Figure 13. The balance of opinion in the MORI poll is negative, with 19% favouring an increase in student migration while 34% favour cuts. On the NatCen panel, where respondents were told 472,000 students had arrived in the past year, the balance shifts further in favour of cuts, with 17% favouring increases and 41% backing reductions. The NatCen panel also presented respondents with figures on the migration of student dependents, with 153,000 recorded in the most recent statistics. Support for cutting this number was even higher, with 14% favouring increases and a majority of 53% wanting reductions.

Figure 14

### The UK public reject the principle of allowing universities the freedom to recruit students from abroad

Responses by party affiliation to the question, “should NHS/universities be free to recruit migrants or should government impose limits?”



Source: NatCen Panel January 2024

The NatCen panel also suggests that the public reject the general principle of allowing universities the freedom to recruit students from abroad. We asked NatCen panellists about two sets of institutions which currently have broad discretion to recruit migrants as they see fit - the NHS and universities. In each case we asked respondents whether they thought the institutions should be free to recruit as many migrants as they needed, or whether the government should set limits. A majority of respondents backed leaving the NHS free to recruit as many migrants as it needed, with Labour partisans breaking 3 to 1 in favour while Conservatives were evenly divided. However, a larger majority rejected similar freedoms for universities, with 70% of respondents overall, including over 60% of Labour partisans and over 80% of Conservative identifiers, backing the imposition of government limits on the recruitment of student migrants.

While the public are concerned about very high student migrant numbers, they take a more positive view on post-study work visas, the subject of recently published [rapid review](#) by the Migration Advisory Committee. The IPSOS-MORI immigration tracker shows nearly half support the government’s two-year post-study work visa, with only a fifth opposed. Supporters of the post-study visa outnumbered opponents even among more migration sceptical groups such as Conservative voters (43% support-25% oppose) and Leave voters (35% support-31% oppose).

### HUMANITARIAN MIGRATION

Those migrating to Britain for humanitarian reasons - moving across borders to seek safety or escape political repression - typically form a relatively small part of overall migration flows but a much larger part of the political debate about migration. This has been particularly true in the second half of this parliament,

when three developments have spurred unusually large flows of humanitarian migrants to Britain - the Russian invasion of Ukraine in the spring of 2022, the British government's decision to open a special visa route for British National (Overseas) citizens from Hong Kong (a response to growing concerns about rising political repression in the former Imperial territory), and growing numbers of asylum claimants arriving in Britain after travelling across the English channel on small boats.

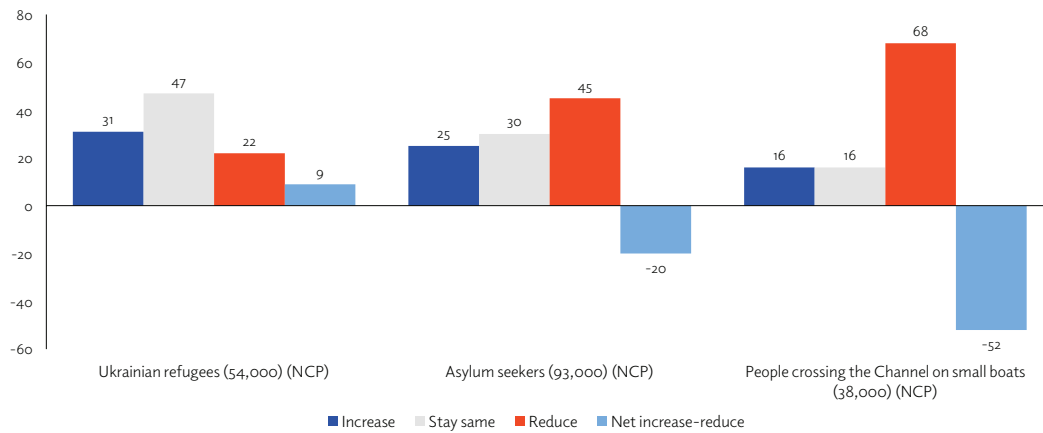
The public take very different views of these humanitarian migration flows. The balance of opinion among NatCen panel respondents presented with the most recent statistics on asylum migration and small boat arrivals was strongly in favour of reductions to both groups (see Figure 14). 25% of respondents said asylum migration should be increased from the current 93,000 figure, while 45% favoured reductions, a -20 balance of opinion. There was a much stronger demand for reductions of small boat migration - 16% of respondents said such migration should be increased from the most recent figure of 38,000, while 68% wanted the number to come down - this -52 balance of opinion is by some margin the most negative of any group asked about in the NatCen Panel study. The government's campaign to sharply reduce small boat arrivals thus enjoys strong backing from public opinion.

The public are, however, much more positively inclined towards Ukrainian refugees and migrants from Hong Kong. 31% of respondents favoured increasing the number of Ukrainian refugees from the most recent figure, while 22% favoured reductions - a +9 balance of opinion. The NatCen panel did not ask about the level of migration from Hong Kong, but the IPSOS-MORI immigration tracker has found two thirds support for the principle of allowing Hong Kong citizens to migrate to Britain, with one third saying such migration should be allowed without limit, while another third favour applying some restrictions to the numbers who arrive.

Figure 15

**The UK public take very different views on humanitarian migration flows**

Views of migration levels for Ukrainian refugees, asylum seekers, and people crossing the English Channel on small boats



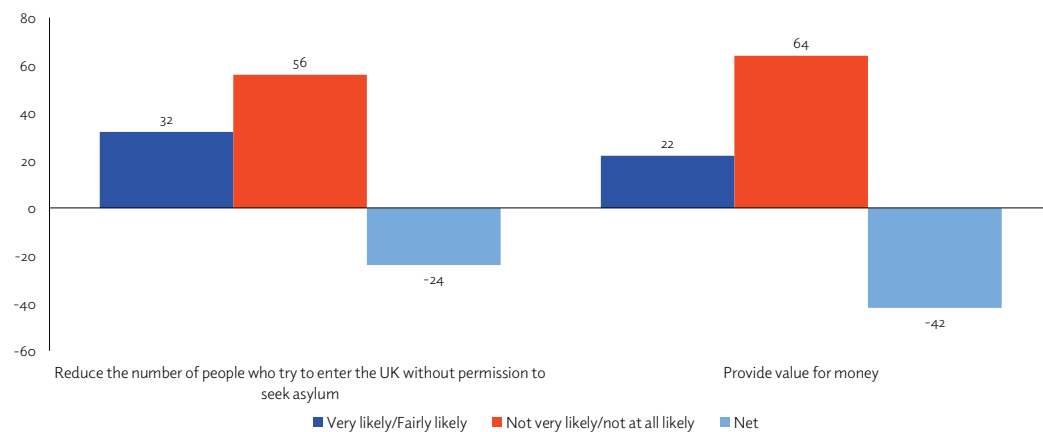
Source: NatCen Panel January 2024

There is also a large gap in public opinion between the general principle of asylum, which enjoys high public support, and the actual operation of the asylum system, which is more contentious. For example, 64% of respondents on the NatCen panel agreed that Britain should take in refugees fleeing violence and war, yet as we have seen the public on balance want to see current asylum arrivals cut, and strongly favour cutting Channel crossings - which is one of the main ways asylum seekers fleeing war reach Britain. This gap reflects low public confidence in the operation of the asylum system, with IPSOS-MORI finding that concerns that the asylum system was too generous and that the government was failing to control irregular migration were the most common explanations for public dissatisfaction with immigration policy.

Figure 16

**Most of the public do not believe the Rwanda scheme will deliver what the government claims**

Views about the likely impact of the Rwanda scheme - deterrence and value for money



Source: IPSOS-MORI immigration tracker, February 2024

The same gap between principles and practice weakens support for the government’s flagship ‘Rwanda scheme’. While the IPSOS-MORI tracker shows the public support the scheme in the abstract – with 47% backing it and 29% opposed – most people do not believe the scheme will deliver what the government claims. A substantial majority of IPSOS-MORI panellists rated the scheme unlikely to reduce irregular arrivals of asylum claimants, and an even larger majority said it was unlikely to provide value for money. And opinion on both has become more pessimistic over time. While the public like the Rwanda scheme in theory, they expect it to be an expensive flop in practice.

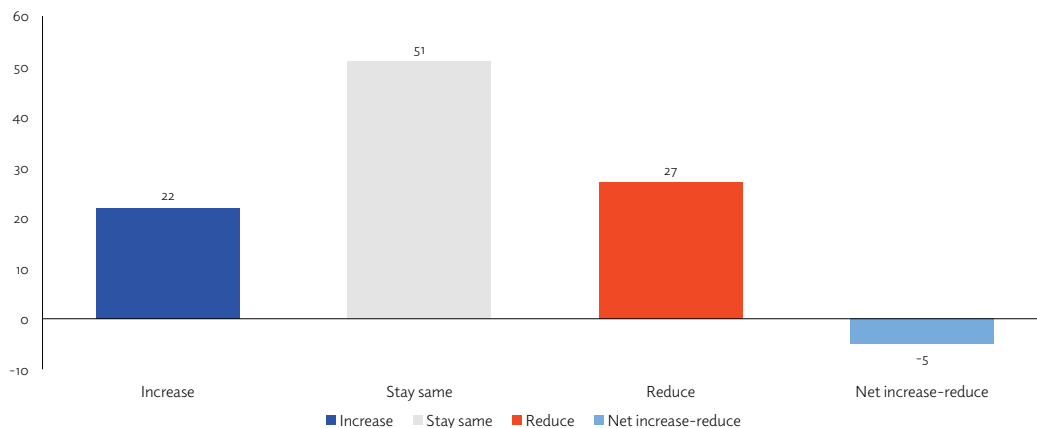
### FAMILY REUNIFICATION MIGRATION

The final, and numerically least significant, piece of the migration puzzle is family reunification migration – that is, foreign nationals sponsored for a visa by family members who are British citizens or settled migrants with indefinite leave to remain. This is usually spouses and children, though other relatives can receive visas too. The government has [announced](#) plans to sharply increase the minimum income required to sponsor a family visa, with the threshold [rising in stages](#) from £18,600 to £29,000 in Spring 2024 and £38,700 in early 2025. This will not have a large impact on overall immigration levels, as the numbers arriving are not very large – 66,000 in the year to September 2023. However, when given this figure, more of the public favoured cuts than increases, though a majority preferred keeping current levels the same. There is thus some evidence the public favour increased control here, and with inflation running high there is an economic case for updating income thresholds that have been frozen since 2012 to reflect rising living costs.

Figure 17

#### There is evidence the public favour increased control of family reunification migration

Views of family reunion migration when given numbers admitted in most recent statistics



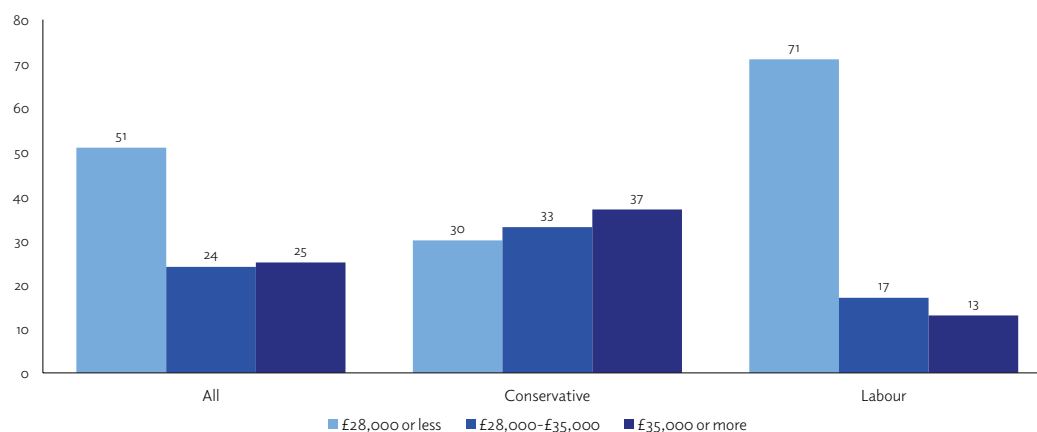
Source: NatCen Panel, January 2024

We also have some direct evidence as to what threshold the public would prefer. The NatCen panel gave respondents a range of options, from no income threshold at all to a threshold above £45,000. Figure 18 shows the results for all respondents, and for those expressing Conservative and Labour partisanship. Roughly half of respondents, including 70% of Labour supporters and 30% of Conservative supporters, would set the threshold at £28,000 or below. There would thus be majority support for leaving the threshold where it now is after the first staged increase came into force on 11 April 2024, though a majority of Conservative supporters would favour further increases.

**Figure 18**

**There is majority support for leaving the threshold for family visas where it was**

*Views about income thresholds for family visas*



Source: NatCen panel, January 2024

Another quarter of the public, and one third of Conservative voters, support a threshold between £28,000 and £35,000. The scheduled rise to £38,700 in early 2025 would take the income threshold above this level, and indeed leave it higher than the level preferred by three quarters of the public, and two thirds of Conservative supporters. The IPSOS-MORI immigration tracker has also asked people whether different income thresholds were ‘too low’, ‘too high’ or ‘about right’ and came to similar conclusions: on balance the public saw a £22,000 threshold as ‘too low’, but £38,700 was seen by most as ‘too high.’ The level of £29,000 introduced in April 2024 attracted the most even spread of responses – with one third saying it was ‘too high’, one third ‘too low’ and one third ‘about right.’

**POLICIES FOR INTEGRATING SETTLED MIGRANTS**

There is one final aspect of migration policy worth considering – the rules and qualification periods for accessing social and political rights, including citizenship. These have little impact on immigration statistics and have played little role in past migration debates, but they play a central role in determining the integration



of immigrants into British social and political life, and have attracted some [sustained discussion](#) on the left recently. At present, migrants have to live and work in Britain for between five and ten years on time limited visas - which exclude them from any access to most welfare benefits - before they can qualify for 'indefinite leave to remain' (ILR), an open ended status which also opens the pathway to citizenship. The government charges high fees for visas, for ILR applications and for citizenship - the Migration Observatory has [calculated](#) that the cumulative fees paid from arrival to citizenship range from £5,100 for a single health care worker to £41,500 for a skilled worker with a partner and two children.

Our new polling with the NatCen panel took a look at this issue from two angles. Firstly, examining the general principle of qualification periods: how long should migrants be working and paying taxes in Britain before they are granted full political and social rights? Secondly, examining the specific practice of citizenship - how much do the public think settled migrants should be charged for citizenship, and do they feel certain groups should be exempted from fees?

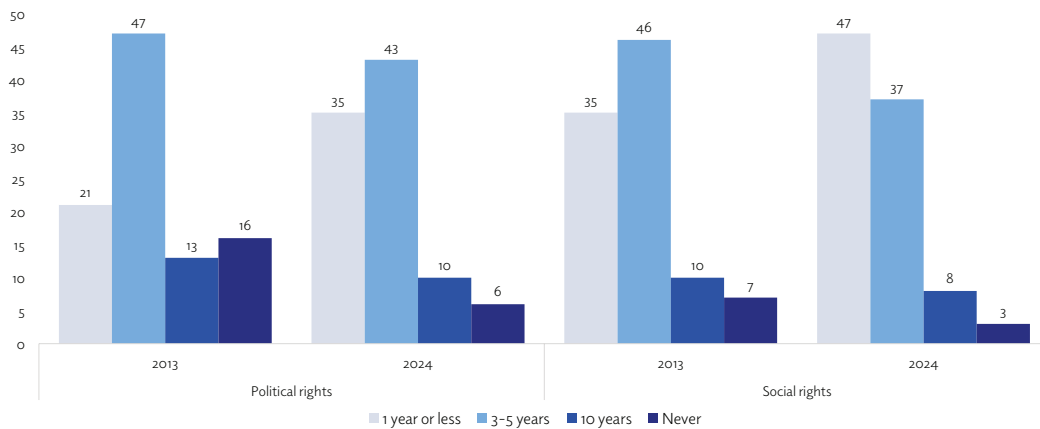
We first asked respondents when they thought migrants who are working and paying taxes in the UK should get access to (a) the same welfare benefits as UK citizens and (b) the same political rights as UK citizens. This replicates a question asked on the British Social Attitudes survey in 2013, so we can also look at how views have changed over the past decade. The results are shown in Figure 19.

Most of the public support giving migrants full political and social rights after a fairly short qualification period, and support for a more liberal approach has risen over time. In 2013, 29% of respondents felt migrants should wait longer than five years before getting full political rights or be excluded from such rights permanently, while 17% felt this way about migrant access to welfare. By 2024, only 16% would make migrants wait longer than 5 years for political rights, and only 11% on social rights. Support for the most liberal options - giving migrants access to the same rights as UK citizens after a year or less - rose from 21% to 35% for political rights and from 35% to 47% for social rights.

**Figure 19**

**There is majority support for leaving the threshold for family visas where it was**

*Views about income thresholds for family visas*



Source: NatCen panel, January 2024

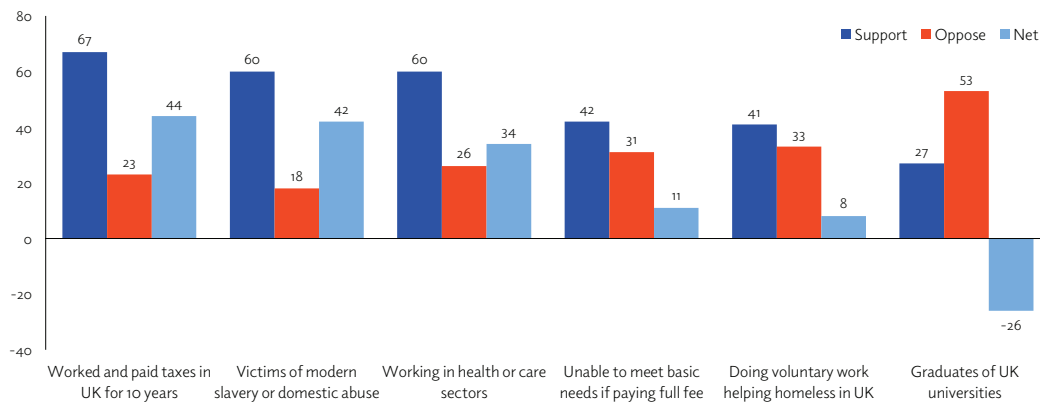
We also asked our NatCen participants about citizenship fees. We told them the current fee is £1,500 and the costs of processing a citizenship application are estimated by the government to be £505, meaning a profit for the government of £995 per application. We gave respondents three options for the fee level - no fee at all, a fee which covered costs, or a fee which made a profit for the government. Setting fees to cover costs only was by far the most popular option, backed by 56% of respondents. Only a small minority of 5% favoured levying no fee at all, while 38% overall (and a majority of Conservative partisans) supported setting a fee which delivered a profit for the government. Most of the public do not support using the fees charged to migrants as a revenue stream for government. While our questions focus only on citizenship fees, this finding may have broader implications, given the very high fees paid by immigrants to receive and renew visas, and the health surcharge all immigrants have to pay yearly, which was raised sharply in February 2024 to over £1,000 per year.

The public are also open to adjusting the fee system to reflect circumstances. Large majorities supported waiving citizenship fees for those who had worked and paid taxes in the UK for 10 years (67% support), victims of modern slavery and domestic abuse (60%) and those working in the health and social care sector (60%). The balance of opinion was also narrowly in favour of waivers for those facing poverty if they paid the full fee (42% support, 31% opposed) and to those doing voluntary work helping the homeless (41% vs 33%). A majority of respondents oppose offering a fee waiver to the graduates of UK universities - the only group we asked about where the balance of opinion was firmly against a waiver.

Figure 20

The UK public are open to adjusting the citizenship fee system to reflect circumstances

Support for fee waivers for various groups



Source: NatCen panel January 2024

CONCLUSION: THE STATE OF MIGRATION AHEAD OF THE ELECTION

Brexit brought dramatic changes to the migration system, though often not the changes its architects and supporters expected. Migration from the EU has declined sharply since the end of free movement rights, but overall migration has risen to record highs, as the needs of the economy, pressures on public service, and political tensions abroad have between them more than offset limited government efforts at imposing control.

The public’s attitude towards migration has also changed a lot since Brexit, with more positive views of migration impacts overall, and more support for migrants in the labour market in particular. Regardless of the outcome of the next election, the next government will inherit a public opinion landscape where migration is more widely accepted than it ever was before 2015, and policymakers can expect further declines in migration levels in the next few years from developments already in train. Humanitarian inflows from Ukraine and Hong Kong will fall out of the statistics, post-Covid students will graduate and depart in large numbers, and the effects of new restrictions introduced by the outgoing government will begin to show up in the statistics. But the next government will still face distinct challenges in each part of the post-Brexit migration landscape.

**Labour migration** is perhaps the area where Brexit has done most to make life easier for policymakers. The post-Brexit system of unified government control over work visas is broadly working in economic and political terms. Policymakers have been able to loosen rules to address labour shortages in social care and agriculture, then more recently to tighten rules again in response to growing

public concerns about numbers. Public support for immigrant labour has risen - whereas voters previously strongly favoured higher a higher skilled 'best and brightest' system, they now support the recruitment of migrant labour in a wider range of professions. The recent decision to tighten restrictions on the dependents of migrant workers also makes sense within this framework. It will substantially reduce high overall numbers which have generated public concern, but will do so by restricting one of the forms of labour-related migration with lowest public support. But the recent changes may not be cost free - employers competing to recruit mobile workers will often find it harder to recruit workers when they cannot bring their families with them, particularly if other countries offer visas on more generous terms.

Governments before and after Brexit have operated a liberal system for **student migration**, with universities free to recruit as many students as they want, and to use the high fees paid by foreign students to subsidise research and the teaching of domestic students. There are now signs that this model is coming under strain. Ever rising recruitment of foreign students is now beginning to attract critical media and political attention. Growing public resistance may require ministers and universities to reconsider a funding model which bakes in ever growing reliance on foreign student fees to offset the real terms decline in frozen domestic fees. Yet while voters are growing restive about student migration, they may be even less keen on the most likely alternatives: tax rises, fee increases or cuts to domestic student places.

A new model for **humanitarian migration** has unexpectedly emerged in the years since Brexit, with large inflows of migrants fleeing conflict in Ukraine and political oppression in Hong Kong accepted under bespoke arrangements, even as the government has pushed for greater restrictions on asylum applicants, particularly those arriving unauthorised on small boats across the English Channel. The attractions of this model are clear - humanitarian migration from Ukraine and Hong Kong enjoys much higher public support than asylum migration in general, and unauthorised 'small boats' migration has generated widespread public concern. Yet the new model also brings tensions: efforts to control irregular migration require collaboration with other countries, which may not be forthcoming if Britain is seen as shirking its responsibilities under international law.

As part of its efforts to reduce migration levels, the government has opted to make **family migration** much harder, through a series of staggered increases in the income levels required to sponsor visas for spouses and children. This may not be a sustainable or desirable shift. Family migration levels are too low for this to have much impact on overall immigration levels, most of the public think the

income thresholds should be lower, and stories of British families split up by high income thresholds may generate further critical attention to the new policy if the thresholds ramp up.

The Brexit process has not, as yet, generated any fresh look **at policy towards settled migrants**, even as the EU Settlement Scheme has registered six million EU citizens with long term rights to remain in Britain, most of whom lack full political rights. The current policy framework towards settled migrants is both restrictive and inconsistent. There is high and growing public support for a more generous settlement providing full political and social rights to migrants after a few years residence, and reducing the onerous fees they are charged to gain full rights. While such policies will have little direct impact on migration numbers, they do have important implications for immigrant integration and for securing public support for migration policy in the round. A fresh look at this area may be overdue.



# PART 4: CHALLENGES AHEAD

# THE POST-BREXIT POLITICAL ECONOMY OF IMMIGRATION

James Hampshire

As the analysis earlier in this report has illustrated, net migration averaged around 200-250,000 before Brexit, but has almost tripled since and is likely to remain well above pre-Brexit levels in coming years.

Almost as dramatic as the increase in volume has been the change in the origins of immigrants - EU nationals have fallen from seven in ten immigrants at the time of the EU referendum to just one in ten today, while immigration from countries such as India, Nigeria, and China has soared.

It might seem perverse that a referendum in which [anti-immigration](#) sentiment played a central role, and which ended free movement, has been followed by much higher levels of immigration. To understand why this has happened requires consideration of the UK's political economy: how its model of capitalism generates demand for migrants, and why this led the Conservatives to liberalise immigration policy, only to promise the '[biggest ever](#)' cut to immigration just two years later.

Post-Brexit Britain illustrates how [conflicting](#) political and economic imperatives shape immigration policies. In recent years, Conservative politicians have repeatedly promised to reduce immigration: implicitly, by 'taking back control' in the EU referendum, and explicitly with David Cameron's 2010 [pledge](#) to cut net migration and the 2019 manifesto commitment that 'numbers will come down'. In government these campaign promises often collide with economic realities, for example employers lobbying for migrant workers to address labour and skills shortages. It's an example of how, as the former New York Governor, Mario Cuomo, once quipped, politicians campaign in poetry, but govern in prose.

The prosaic reality is that the UK economy depends on migrants. Work and study are the main [reasons](#) why people come to the UK: about a third of immigrants arrive on work visas and over a third come as international students. The UK depends on migrants to do jobs in low-wage sectors, such as agriculture and care, while at the other end of the labour market, employers in high-pay sectors such as financial services, tech, and research expect to recruit from an international workforce.

The two main groups that have driven the increase in immigration since Brexit are care workers and international students. Work in the care sector is poorly paid and working conditions are hard. As the British population ages, there is

significant demand for care workers, yet at prevailing rates of pay British citizens do not want to do these jobs. EU nationals used to do much of this work and their departure from the care sector since 2016 has created acute labour shortages, leading the government to create a special visa. The Health and Care work visas are now the [most common](#) type of work visa.

The other group driving post-Brexit increases in immigration is international students. Since the introduction of the student fee regime in 2012, the real value of the fee paid by UK students has [fallen](#) by nearly a third and universities have sought to make up the shortfall by recruiting international students, who pay much higher fees. Universities have been encouraged to do so by successive governments, which have refused to consider reforms such as raising the cap on domestic fees or reintroducing direct public funding of higher education.

In short, increased overall immigration has been driven by a combination of demand for migrants in sectors such as care and [agriculture](#), and universities' reliance on international students and the high fees they bring. The Johnson government responded to the labour supply shock of Brexit by liberalising work visas, but with a general election looming, the Sunak government has reverted to the familiar language of cuts. Sunak initially sought to satisfy anti-immigration sentiment with his 'Stop the Boats' agenda and the Rwanda deportation plan, but following the release of migration statistics in November 2023 he said that legal migration was also 'too high' and promised '[do what is necessary](#)' to bring numbers down.

A [policy package](#) to reduce migration was swiftly announced, including an increase in the minimum salary for work visas from £26,200 to £38,700; a ban on social care workers bringing their partners and children; and an increase in the income requirement for sponsors of foreign spouses and partners, from £18,600 to £29,000, with a further increase to £38,700 by early 2025. The raised salary threshold for work visas will have less impact than appearances suggest, since care workers are exempted, and many other workers admitted through this route are paid above the increased threshold. The most dramatic cuts are to family migrants, especially the dependants of international students and care workers. Preventing care workers from migrating with their families will reduce numbers but will also make an already [exploited](#) group more vulnerable. Denying potentially [three-quarters](#) of British citizens the right to bring a foreign partner to the UK may prove politically unsustainable (a delay has already been introduced following a public petition).

But none of these measures address the fundamental drivers of high migration. A government that wished to do so would look beyond draconian immigration policies to address the causes of labour and skills shortages which generate



demand for migrants in the first place. So for instance, government could increase funding for social care to [improve pay](#) in the sector; it could develop policies to address [chronic underinvestment](#) and skills deficits; or it could agree to a new funding settlement for higher education. None of these measures are cheap or quick fixes, however.

A future [Labour government](#) will likely face less political pressure to restrict immigration, for two reasons. The first is that current levels of immigration are [likely to decline](#), with some evidence that this is already occurring (though Labour will have to consider whether it wishes to reinstate family migration rights). The second is that [public attitudes](#) to immigration have become more positive overall, and Labour's electoral coalition is far less concerned about immigration than Conservative voters. While the history of immigration politics cautions against undue optimism, there may be political space for a less dishonest immigration debate.

# WHERE NEXT? ECONOMIC MIGRATION POLICY CHALLENGES FOR THE NEXT PARLIAMENT

Jonathan Portes

The next government will inherit levels of immigration that will be high by historical standards, but will almost certainly be falling very sharply. After peaking at 766,000 in 2022, net migration fell to 686,000 in 2023 and will fall further as the impact of arrivals from Hong Kong and Ukraine drops out of the figures, student emigration rises to reflect the earlier rise in student immigration, and new restrictions on dependents of students and care workers are implemented. Already, in the most recent quarter of data, visas for work and study are down about 20% year on year, and this fall is likely to accelerate. While forecasting migration is highly uncertain, these factors might be expected to reduce net migration to [300,000 per year](#) or below, less than half the current level.

Such reductions should allow space for a more considered approach. Many in both parties believe work-related migration is too high due to a failure to train and invest in British workers. The Shadow Immigration Minister, for example, [argues](#):

**‘We are crystal clear as to why employers are looking abroad - because for 13 years the Conservatives have failed to train up Britain’s home-grown talent to fill the UK’s one million job vacancies, and they have failed to get millions of inactive working-age people back to work’.**

In other words, immigration may be necessary in the short-term, but this is a second-best solution, driven by failures of the education, skills and welfare systems. This case is strongest in sectors where the government controls both the quantity and price of labour - most obviously the NHS and care sectors. If the government funded more training places for doctors and nurses, that should, over time, lower demand for migrant workers, especially if combined with improvements in pay and conditions for existing workers to improve retention. In the care sector, which has seen by far the largest expansion of work visas under the post-Brexit migration system, the connection is even more direct.

What about the private sector? Labour has argued that employers should only be able to recruit internationally when they have plans to recruit and train in the UK, arguing that the latter should, at least over time, reduce the need for the former.

However, there's little evidence that this trade-off holds. In the private sector, and in sectors where output and demand can adjust as labour supply changes, both migration and increased domestic labour supply lead to increased labour demand.

The UK has had over the past 25 years numerous strategies for training and workforce development. None have succeeded, but there is [little evidence](#) that this has anything to do with migration. Instead, the culprits are poor planning, insufficient investment (from both government and business) and excessive short-termism (ditto). Remedying these issues should indeed be a priority for a new government.

Moreover, in a dynamic economy characterised by rapid technological change, it is difficult enough for businesses to plan their workforce training needs: it is impossible for civil servants to second-guess or monitor such plans. This is particularly the case in the sectors that (outside of health and care) make most use of [skilled worker visas](#) - ICT, finance and business services, consultancy, and higher education).

More broadly, there is a risk that this approach ends up falling foul of the lump of labour fallacy. In these sectors - high productivity, tradeable services, which are essential to any coherent economic growth strategy - making it harder for employers to recruit migrant workers will not increase job opportunities for Brits; by making it harder for businesses to grow, it risks doing the opposite.

What, then, would a migration strategy that was both pro-growth and pro-worker look like?

First, certainty and stability for both business and migrant workers. Rather than making sweeping changes to the post-Brexit migration system, the next government should pledge the opposite, so that businesses can plan effectively.

The priority for reforms should be giving workers and businesses greater flexibility and certainty; for example, easing the process for visa extensions and settlement, freezing (or ideally reducing) onerous fees, especially for settlement and citizenship, and reversing planned increases to the income threshold for spousal visas. Such changes would have minimal impacts on net migration, but would benefit both workers (and their families) and business overall.

The sector where connections between pay, conditions, training and workforce development on the one hand and migration on the other are strongest is health and social care. Measures to improve the former would, over time, reduce both demand and political pressures that increase the latter.

More broadly, there is a strong case for addressing exploitation and abuse in some, mostly lower-paid, sectors. While this is not exclusively a problem for migrant workers, these issues are concentrated in migrant-heavy sectors like

social care, agriculture, and delivery services, and migrant workers with insecure (or no) visa status are most severely affected. British workers may also be disadvantaged if they are ‘undercut’ by underpaid or exploited migrant workers. Here, then, improving rights, both legal and in practice for migrants will help do the same for British workers.

Similarly, on student migration, the priority should be stability and predictability. The Graduate Visa has helped universities maintain international student numbers; major restrictions would further undermine the financial stability of many universities. While the visa has been criticised for encouraging international students to come to access relatively low paid jobs, the recent [review](#) by the Migration Advisory Committee found that earnings of those on the Graduate Visa were comparable to those of domestic graduates. Moreover, since neither visa holders nor their dependents can access benefits, even those working in lower paid jobs are likely to make a positive fiscal contribution. At the same time, they are helping to address some of the labour market frictions resulting from the end of free movement (for example, in accommodation and hospitality). Meanwhile, only those who move into higher paid work are able to stay long-term. The MAC [concluded](#) that there was no case for major changes to the operation of the Graduate Visa.

Finally, and more broadly, the likely fall in net migration in coming years should help wean the political class and the media off its obsession with headline numbers - an obsession that, as the first half of this report shows, does not appear, by and large, to be shared by the broader public.

# MIGRATION POLICY BEYOND ECONOMICS: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHOICES FOR LABOUR IN GOVERNMENT

Sarah Mulley and Will Somerville

Going into a General Election that it looks increasingly likely to win, Labour finds itself [consistently leading](#) the Conservatives on immigration in public opinion polls, an unprecedented situation.

And one that has been hard-won. Labour has learned from previous political missteps on migration and discovered a new confidence in discussing the issue. It has placed ‘strong borders’ at the heart of its platform and shadow ministers have promised: tough action on people smugglers, an end to the Rwanda scheme, and a focus on effective administration – all of which find a receptive audience in the electorate.

However, much of Labour’s relative popularity on immigration stems from the failings of current government policy. Most of the public [remain sceptical](#) about the ability of any party to manage migration. The obvious risk for Labour is that the failings of the UK migration system – an asset in opposition – become a liability in government.

The first challenge for any new Labour ministerial team will therefore be to demonstrate competence and control, particularly with respect to Channel crossings and the asylum system. They will have little choice but to legislate to remove policy that is diverting Home Office capacity and money (e.g. the Rwanda plan) and creating impossible delivery challenges (e.g. the Illegal Migration Act has ended the right to claim asylum in-country, creating a growing and expensive [backlog, predicted to reach 100,000 by the end of 2024](#)). The failings of current policy are [obvious to the public](#), and changes promise immediate relief for the system as well as cost savings.

However, reasserting effective administration of the asylum system will take years and require difficult choices about scarce resources. Without agreement with its European neighbours, UK policies to reduce small boat crossings will remain partially effective at best. Any agreement is likely to involve some element of ‘burden sharing’, which will not be popular with voters unless clearly and convincingly linked to a reduction in small boat crossings.

Success ultimately requires pushing beyond the immediate challenge of competence and control. On asylum and refugees, that means working with other countries to reinvigorate international frameworks (including the Refugee Convention) for a new age of mobility, and responding to issues such as displacement caused by climate change. This may involve new approaches to pathways, safe routes, and how communities, universities and employers sponsor individual and families with protection needs. Closer to home, there is an urgent need to rethink accommodation and support for those claiming asylum, not least as it now accounts for close to a quarter of the UK's aid budget.

Successful UK migration policy will require that the Home Office works effectively with the rest of Whitehall via a formal cross-government process allowing the wider impacts and implications of migration policy to be considered by ministers from relevant departments (e.g. through Cabinet-level committees chaired by the Prime Minister). For example, no conversation about extending and securing the rights of workers should take place without considering the impacts of immigration policy - [Labour's New Deal for Working People](#) should include a plan to change features of the immigration system which make some workers more vulnerable to exploitation.

Labour must also recognise that migration's impacts are not all about economics. Migration policy can strengthen communities by promoting integration and citizenship. But in recent years, large increases in fees and increasingly onerous bureaucracy have made settlement, integration and citizenship harder. This has left [millions of long-term residents of the UK](#) unable to fully contribute, exercise their rights, or access basic services; with the Windrush scandal the ultimate demonstration of the devastating impact this can have.

A Labour government should make the promotion of citizenship a central goal of migration policy. [Polling suggests](#) that this would be popular with the public, and Labour has consistently been more trusted than the Conservatives on questions of integration. Encouraging more people to become citizens, especially those already eligible, would also help reduce problems across public services and local government where front-line services are currently hamstrung by complex entitlement rules. Local government is currently spending tens of millions of pounds providing emergency support for destitute migrant families who are not entitled to mainstream benefits, a large majority of whom are eventually granted leave to remain in the UK permanently.

Central government has largely retreated from questions of integration, leaving local government and communities to pick up the pieces. Labour has indicated that it wants to reset relationships between central and local government. Few areas of that relationship are more in need of a reset than migration, welcome and

integration, where local government currently find themselves relegated to the status of (forcibly) contracted delivery agent, juggling multiple schemes across different government departments but with very few opportunities to engage on policy or adapt approaches to meet local needs. More effective integration policies, such as lifting work bans and deepening the strategic agency of metro-mayors and local authorities, would also increase employment rates and hence tax contributions from recently-arrived migrants and refugees.

Labour will fear, not without justification, that they will both be held to higher standards (e.g. on human rights) and subject to swifter public judgement (e.g. if immigration numbers rise). One response to this would be to retreat inside the Home Office and attempt to manage the system cautiously while resisting external scrutiny. This would not only be a missed opportunity: history suggests that such an approach would fail. Successive Home Secretaries have discovered too late that a lack of scrutiny and accountability [leads](#) to bad policy, poor implementation and ultimately to political failure.

If Labour forms the next government, Home Office ministers should instead look outward - to strategic work across Whitehall, to international cooperation, to partnership with local government and communities, and to embrace [accountability](#) as part of a determined effort to strengthen institutions and delivery.

# STUDENT MIGRATION

Nick Hillman

The biggest practical challenge when it comes to the debate over student migration is not voter opinion, the fiscal impact or even the effect on university finances. These are all important, as explained below. But the biggest issue is how Whitehall approaches the topic: current arrangements guarantee uncertainty and instability, benefiting no one.

## PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion tends to [categorise students differently](#) from other migrants. This makes sense, as international students in the UK typically spend a lot (on fees, rent and other living costs) before returning home, where they often provide the UK with soft-power benefits. The latest [HEPI Soft-Power Index](#) shows, as it has every year since it began, that a quarter of the world's countries are led by someone educated in the UK tertiary sector.

On this, as so often, voters are thinking rationally. For example, international students are more likely than UK students to be on one-year courses and to live in purpose-built student accommodation. Their adverse impact on others is limited. They do not clog up roads or fill schools with their offspring (especially since January 2024 when rules on dependants were tightened), but they do spend in local shops and work at local employers - including staffing public services. They also improve the quality of discussions in lecture halls and ensure many courses are financially viable.

## THE FISCAL IMPACT

In three HEPI reports, we have shown repeatedly that student migrants bring financial benefits to every constituency in the UK, and our research has quantified this gain - just one cohort of students in the top-performing constituency, Glasgow Central, are worth £292 million. Overall, international students benefit the UK by [£41.9 billion gross and £37.4 billion net](#).

HEPI research has also shown the positive impact of having [some international graduates stay and work](#) in the UK in terms of raising government income and reducing employers' skills shortages. And we have looked specifically at the controversial [Graduate Route visa](#) which, again, has a positive fiscal impact, with beneficiaries paying more in taxes, visa fees and the NHS Levy than they use up in public services.

However we or [others](#) cut the data, the answer is always the same: the UK benefits far more than it loses by educating so many people from other nations.



## THE EFFECT ON UNIVERSITY FINANCES

Cross-subsidies inside universities ensure international student fees also flow into UK research activities. When HEPI first published research showing such cross-subsidy in 2017 it was deeply controversial.

The argument that such cross-subsidies should be exposed to sunlight was excoriated by many, including (embarrassingly) the eminent LSE professor and parliamentarian who chaired the report's launch.

We were told in no uncertain terms that such cross-subsidies were not to be spoken of in public because this wrongly implied university teaching and university research were separable. That is a nice argument in theory, but it does not survive contact with a reality in which university teaching and university research are overseen by different ministers, different funders and different regulators.

So the most interesting feature of the recent Migration Advisory Committee's [review of the Graduate Route visa](#) was their frustration with ministers' refusal to engage with one broad question: how should universities be funded if there is to be significantly less fee income from international students?

The Committee's members noted:

**'it is the failure to properly fund the sector that has led to an increasing overreliance on immigration. Universities lose money on teaching domestic students and on research activities, and it is the fee revenue from international students that mitigates (at least in part) the current funding gap for domestic students and research. We have had no indication in our discussion with Ministers, either in Westminster or the Devolved Administrations, that there is any plan in place to address this structural under-funding. ... the [Westminster] government needs to consider the total impact of a policy change rather than simply its effect on net migration.'**

## WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

This frustration with the lack of joined-up thinking gives us a clue as to how we might proceed. The solutions are dull and procedural but, after the next election, the incoming government should take the opportunity to make three specific changes.

First, they should make it clear that policy responsibility for student migrants is best shared across Whitehall. Of course the Home Office, which is in charge of reducing migration, will generally want fewer international students but international students are relevant to many other policy areas too (such as

education, trade and foreign affairs). So policy should be properly co-owned and debated inside Whitehall rather than mandated by just one department.

Secondly, a new government genuinely interested in well-informed policymaking would put the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) on a properly independent basis more akin to the Monetary Policy Committee than a limb of the Home Office. It has taken 16 years, but the MAC have recently found their feet and this should be further encouraged.

Thirdly, we should recombine policy responsibility for the two distinct leading functions of universities, teaching and research, so that they once more fall under a single Westminster minister - and ideally, one situated outside the Department for Education, where post-compulsory education will always play second fiddle to schooling.

### **PARTING THOUGHT**

My own research as a postgraduate student focused on [the anti-migrant speeches of Enoch Powell](#). It is usually forgotten today that his most rabid speeches regarded students as different from other migrants. The infamous (and racist) Rivers of Blood speech, for example, said:

**[people coming] into this country, for the purposes of study or of improving their qualifications, like (for instance) the Commonwealth doctors ... are not, and never have been, immigrants.**

If even Powell at the height of his anti-migrant campaign did not regard students as suitable for inclusion in government goals for reducing migration, it should perhaps not be regarded as so eccentric to want them removed from any such targets over six decades later.

# HUMANITARIAN MIGRATION ROUTES

Michaela Benson and Nando Sigona

Since Brexit, the government has introduced significant reforms to the governance and management of asylum. These have made access to refugee protection [increasingly arduous](#). Alongside this, the UK has expanded its provision of bespoke ‘safe and legal routes’ for named populations, notably the people of Hong Kong and Ukraine.

Taken together, the curtailment of asylum and these new bespoke provisions signal [significant changes](#) in how the UK approaches its international obligations to provide humanitarian protection. In this context, ‘safe and legal routes’ can be characterised as a [move away](#) from the multilateral international system of humanitarian protection rooted in the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), and towards a more unilateral and case by case approach to humanitarianism. Balancing the international obligations to offer refuge to those in need irrespective of their country of origin and mode of entry in the UK, and this newer approach where only certain named populations are offered humanitarian protection will be a particular challenge for the next government.

[‘Safe and legal \(humanitarian\) routes’](#) are a prominent feature of the 2021 [New Plan for Immigration](#) and the post-Brexit migration regime. The suite of provisions includes country-specific pathways, namely the [Afghan](#) and [Syrian](#) refugee resettlement schemes, the [Hong Kong BN\(O\)](#) and [Ukraine humanitarian visa schemes](#), and the Global United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) resettlement scheme. All were justified by the government on the grounds of the need to offer emergency responses to the potential for or actual mass displacement. The numbers, however, suggest a rather selective approach.

Since 2021, [over 355,000](#) people have been granted a visa and arrived in the UK via these routes. The majority are those fleeing the ongoing conflict in Ukraine (188,200) and those leaving Hong Kong (135,400) following the imposition of the [National Security Law](#). Afghans and Syrians combined made up only 10% of the inflows and less than 5,000 refugees were resettled in five years through the UNHCR Global resettlement scheme.

Unlike the provisions offered to Afghani and Syrian nationals, where the government had set a cap on the number of potential beneficiaries, for Hong Kongers and Ukrainians there were no caps. There are also far fewer bureaucratic requirements involved in the latter schemes.

In many ways, this approach suggests a managed approach to offering humanitarian protections on the grounds of national interest. The bespoke schemes are further justified by a ‘special relation’ between the UK and those offered protections, whether the Afghan interpreters who helped British forces or [‘historical and moral duties’](#) to former colonial subjects in Hong Kong.

The UK has argued that, according to the 1951 Refugee Convention, there is no legal obligation to assess asylum cases abroad and then resettle refugees in the UK and that people are expected to seek asylum in the first safe country they meet after fleeing persecution. Yet there is nothing in the convention about applying in the first safe country. And given the extremely restrictive visa requirements imposed on most refugee-sending countries, it is impossible for their inhabitants to reach the UK via plane as a first safe country.

Establishing a bespoke humanitarian pathway for named populations has a historical precedent in the UN Refugee Convention, which allows the offer of refugee status to be made to a particular group on the grounds of ‘readily apparent, objective circumstances in the country of origin or former habitual residence ... such as persecution, conflict, generalized violence, or events that seriously disturb the public order’. While Afghan and Syrian resettlement schemes offer refugee status and therefore align more closely with this protection mechanism, the Hong Kong and Ukraine schemes are rather different. Despite sharing a five-year route to settlement with those granted refugee status, Hong Kongers must pay for the protections they receive and for their access to healthcare, and have by default no recourse to public funds. For Ukrainians, the time-limited nature of their status and the absence of a route to settlement distinguishes their status from that of refugees.

Bespoke humanitarian migration routes may be particularly effective in addressing mass displacement resulting from persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations. Yet the decision to offer these routes to particular populations remains at the discretion of the government of the day. The fear that a change of government may trigger a change in attitude vis-à-vis the protection of Hong Kongers and Ukrainians featured prominently in the interviews we recently carried out with [humanitarian visa](#) holders from these countries.

While signalling their intention to expand these routes in the 2021 [white paper](#) and the [latest report](#) on safe and legal routes, [the UK government](#) has not offered bespoke visas to other populations since the Ukraine schemes were launched in 2022. This is despite mass displacements resulting from conflicts in [Sudan](#) and [Palestine](#), and [corresponding calls](#) from the public, NGOs, academics and some political actors to make provision for these populations. The Home Office confirmed it has no plans to establish a separate route for Palestinians, stating

that people can apply for ordinary family reunion visas. Campaigners have pointed out, however, that there are significant [barriers](#) to access to such visas.

The government is also making choices about the terms and conditions offered to different populations. The conditions applied to the recent extension of the Ukrainian temporary protection scheme enable beneficiaries already in the UK to extend their stay only for two years, but still offers no pathway to permanent settlement. This [leaves](#) Ukrainians in the UK in a legal limbo and unable to make plans for the future.

For those who are not Ukrainians, Hong Kongers or among those Afghans and Syrians still eligible to apply in practice, there are [no safe and legal routes](#) for seeking asylum in the UK. Bespoke schemes, in other words, have come at the expense of others equally in need of protection.

The government has exercised greater discretion over who can come to the UK for the purposes of claiming humanitarian protection than the universalist protections promoted by the Refugee Convention intended. An incoming government will face the dilemma of whether to continue along this path or adopt a broader approach to humanitarian migration.

# THE HOSTILE ENVIRONMENT AND THE LEGACY OF THE WINDRUSH SCANDAL

Dr Mike Slaven, University of Lincoln

The term ‘hostile environment’ has, for both supporters and critics, become synonymous with the immigration positions of recent Conservative governments. A [subset of migration policies](#) that require immigration checks by social service providers, employers, landlords, banks and others, the promise to create ‘[a really hostile environment for illegal migration](#)’ has exemplified the eagerness of Conservative governments to demonstrate control over immigration, even at the risk of substantial social disruption.

The starkest expression of this was the Windrush Scandal. Thousands of long-settled people from former Caribbean colonies were wrongfully targeted as irregular immigrants. The scandal landed the government in hot water when it broke in 2018. Yet hostile environment policies have been among the most stable aspects of immigration policy during the Brexit period. They have changed little since 2014 despite the wave of criticism following the Windrush Scandal.

A new government will therefore face demands both to resolve the Windrush Scandal and revisit the hostile environment itself. These, however, will need to be balanced against a widespread desire for control and enforcement which generated the ‘hostile environment’ framework in the first place.

## FIXING THE WINDRUSH COMPENSATION SCHEME

Set up to compensate victims, the Windrush Compensation Scheme has been criticised as too slow, too bureaucratic, and arbitrary in its decisions. These shortcomings, alongside a lack of public awareness about it, may be undermining the scheme by discouraging victims entitled to compensation from applying. It does not help matters that the scheme is currently administered by the Home Office, the very organisation that perpetrated the scandal. This has diminished trust in the scheme and created conflicts of interest in how it is administered.

A new government could pass responsibility for the scheme to an independent body that could take a more supportive approach to victims through, for example, adopting more understanding evidentiary standards. There should be broad support for such measures in a context where the Post Office Scandal has underlined the long-term impacts of scandals on victims if resolution is delayed.

Allowing independent administration of the Windrush Compensation Scheme would be a straightforward way to signal a new approach.

### LEARNING LESSONS ON ACCOUNTABILITY AND SCRUTINY

When the independent Windrush Lessons Learned Review report was published in 2020, the government pledged to adopt all its recommendations. However, some recommendations challenged deep-seated Home Office culture or policies that had been introduced as political priorities, so full [implementation](#) by a Conservative government was always unlikely. Yet Home Secretary Suella Braverman provoked consternation by officially abandoning three of them: to hold Windrush Scandal reconciliation events, provide new powers to the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, and create a migrants' commissioner. A new government could revisit these, along with some of the more challenging recommendations deemed unmet in a 2022 progress review. These include a review of the 'compliant environment,' the term that the Home Office has tried to use in lieu of the hostile environment. Proper evaluation of these policies has been difficult precisely because, by design, they depend on checks by third parties, the consequences of which are often invisible to authorities. Many of the report's recommendations focus on improving immigration policy implementation through scrutiny and accountability.

Such mechanisms could help to prevent future enforcement scandals following a period when immigration policies have been in flux. Brexit has altered the migration status of large numbers of resident EU citizens, and the government has [sacked](#) the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration. A new pledge to implement the Windrush Review's recommendations may also provide a rationale for a broader policy review. However, a new government will need to reconcile the desire for a fresh approach with the potential disruptions likely to follow from creating and embedding new sources of criticism for the government and Home Office in an area of policy that has lately been prone to generating controversy.

### TROUBLESHOOTING NEW POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

A pair of new policy developments threaten to worsen the effects of the hostile environment. First, following the rollout of the fully digital EU Settlement Scheme, at the end of 2024 all immigration statuses in the UK [will become digital](#). Digital status checks – done by directly interfacing with Home Office systems – have been extensively piloted already, and will become the norm.

One troubling implication of this is that immigrants will no longer retain definitive proof of their own status outside Home Office IT systems. The inability of settled migrants to definitively prove their status was at the heart of

the Windrush Scandal. A fully digital migration status system puts millions of migrants at the mercy of government IT systems with a worrying track record of flaws and malfunctions.

On the one hand, the direct connection to its data systems could reinforce the ability of the Home Office to identify potential issues early. Yet proactively identifying and resolving such problems before they cause harm may require deeper changes in bureaucratic culture. On the other hand, fully digital status could generate a new pool of hostile environment victims, unable to prove their status, and once again requiring broader government action to resolve matters.

Additionally, a future government will inherit many problems stemming from the Illegal Migration Act 2023. If implemented, the refusal to even consider asylum cases from those deemed to have entered the UK illegally will simply result in thousands of people stuck in limbo, until the government changes the law or grants them status or access to some sort of process. In the meantime, this policy increases the incentives particularly for those with pre-existing family or social connections in the UK to abscond, rather than stay in limbo. This could create a group of people who later have access to legal status in principle, but get flagged by hostile environment policies.

Addressing some of the neglected Windrush Scandal legacies may be relatively simple. Others, however, require a government ready to act on the recommendations made in a number of reviews, and embrace the change and scrutiny this will entail. And fixing the broader flaws in the hostile environment approach will be a much bigger task.



# JUST HOW MUCH CONTROL DOES THE HOME SECRETARY HAVE OVER IMMIGRATION?

Colin Yeo

It has become fashionable for failing ministers to blame either or both [The Blob](#) or [The Law](#) for their lack of progress in achieving policy objectives. In the field of immigration policy, successive Home Secretaries have certainly had difficulties implementing their two key stated aims: reducing net migration and exporting refugees to third countries. How far are either The Blob or The Law really standing in the way here?

Turning first to The Blob, the oh-so-British version of America's Deep State. It is never entirely clear who or what this is. We might deduce the reference is to some combination of civil servants, university lecturers, activist lawyers, experts, foreign courts and daytime television hosts asking pointed questions.

Yet the obstacles to immigration policy success are more often real-world ones. No amount of bouncy optimism will fill labour shortages in key public services and sectors of the economy while simultaneously maintaining low levels of pay and conditions and reducing net migration. No amount of wishful thinking will persuade the French government to accept the return of refugees from British into French waters without serious, sustained negotiations. Withdrawing from the framework of international law obligations will not, in fact, make it easier to work with foreign governments.

How about that other bogeyman, The Law? New laws are always attractive to politicians – they provide a tangible-looking achievement to flag up in campaigns. To justify new legislation, politicians need to frame existing laws as inadequate. This is a hard case to make on immigration.

It is certainly true that immigration law is complex, badly drafted and fragmented. But it collectively gives the government extremely wide-ranging discretionary powers to control almost all aspects of immigration. Almost any legal rule the Home Secretary wants to change can be changed virtually at will using minister-made immigration rules or secondary legislation. The negative resolution procedure for new rules allows instant changes subject only to an annulling motion being laid in Parliament within 40 days. Other forms of secondary legislation require a positive vote in Parliament. For a government with a parliamentary majority, this is essentially a formality.

The criteria for entry, ongoing residence, settlement or expulsion on all immigration routes, the very existence of those routes, the conditions attached to legal residence such as permission to work, the level and structure of immigration fees, the level of civil penalties imposed on employers and landlords, the composition and purpose of the Migration Advisory Committee, the resourcing of workplace inspections or criminal investigations, internal decision-making processes, asylum support levels, the operation of immigration checks by public authorities and more can all be changed with ease, from a legal point of view. Whether such changes will actually work is another matter. But making the changes themselves is not difficult.

Because a Home Secretary essentially has all the legal powers they could possibly use already, more recent legislation has, unusually, resorted to limiting those powers. There was, in fact, no real need for much of the immigration legislation introduced over the last two decades. British governments have long had a wide-ranging power to deport foreign nationals based on the Home Secretary's view of what was 'conducive to the public good'. That discretion is now limited, imposing a duty to deport in certain circumstances. A change to the immigration rules could have achieved the same thing. The criteria for refugee status were set out in the immigration rules and secondary legislation; now they are embedded in an Act of Parliament. Existing laws already enabled the transfer of refugees to safe third countries; the Illegal Migration Act 2023 will *require* ministers to do so if it is ever brought into force.

Other legislation has proven to be counterproductive rather than merely pointless. The process changes in the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 were largely symbolic as they could have been delivered with existing powers. Treating different classes of refugee differently, adjustments to the non-statutory trafficking protection process and fast-tracking of appeals can all be controlled through existing procedure and immigration rules. These changes, all very minor issues compared to, say, small boat arrivals, the asylum backlog and conducting removals, have now largely been abandoned because they were slowing rather than accelerating asylum processing.

Constraints on the powers of the Home Secretary and immigration officials tend to be real-world issues rather than legal ones. Effecting change is often not so much a matter of passing a new Act of Parliament as making use of existing powers effectively. Since Theresa May moved from the Home Office to Number 10 in 2016, we have seen six Home Secretaries (seven if we count Suella Braverman's two tenures separately). One of the lessons of this period is that the resources to be allocated by an effective leader include ministerial and managerial time and energy. The ballooning of small boat crossings and the asylum backlog

took place against a background of frenetic legislative activity. But passing laws could solve neither problem. What was needed was better management of the Home Office.

Accountability matters too. Had the Home Office budget had to bear the added cost of asylum accommodation caused by the burgeoning backlog, action would surely have been taken far sooner. But the massive added costs were instead [borne by the foreign aid budget](#), which recent governments have discovered could be raided with political impunity.

All that said, there are some changes that require an Act of Parliament. Citizenship rules, hostile environment duties for third parties and data sharing laws are set out in statute, for example. These and more can and should be reconsidered. But reforms to these areas need thought, care and consultation, not quick fixes or Acts of Parliament that in reality amount to little more than an extended press release.

If a new government wants to create new work or study routes, adjust salary thresholds or other criteria, add the EU to the existing youth mobility scheme or create safe routes for refugees, they could do so literally on day one. Whether it is wise to make such changes or whether they will yield the results expected by ministers is less straightforward.

Changing immigration law is easy and often instantaneous; but deciding what to change, when and predicting the likely effects is much harder.

# WHAT CAN POLITICIANS DELIVER ON IMMIGRATION?

Madeleine Sumption

As the general election approaches, we can expect to hear more political promises on migration. We'll also hear about promises that haven't been kept - from the ambition to bring down net migration after the 2019 election to the pledge to 'stop the boats'.

So how cynical should we be about the political promises we hear? Can the next government deliver what it says it wants? And, does it really want to?

While policy choices can and do have a large impact on migration, there are reasons governments struggle to honour their promises. Not least, immigration policy tools are blunt, and they come with trade-offs.

## BLUNT POLICY TOOLS

Immigration policy is only one of several factors affecting immigration. Immigration to the UK depends on economic conditions here and in other countries. It depends on social networks, unpredictable flows of information, and conflicts abroad. Sometimes it depends on cooperation with other countries whose governments may or may not play ball. UK policymakers don't control these things, although they affect their ability to keep their word.

Take the small boats phenomenon. Both major parties say they want to stop asylum seekers crossing the English Channel in small boats, usually to claim asylum.

The tools at policymakers' disposal, however, are all imperfect. Physical enforcement to prevent people leaving France is difficult and dangerous. The French are willing to do a certain amount, but even effective enforcement might simply push people to launch boats from further afield.

[Deterrence policies](#) that make life more difficult for asylum seekers after they arrive often have only marginal impacts. The Home Office's [own assessment](#) was that there was 'little to no evidence' these policies have worked elsewhere.

Creating legal routes for people to seek asylum might have some impact at the margins if the routes were targeted at those most likely to come to the UK. But unless the legal offer was very generous (like, for example, the Ukraine schemes), people who did not qualify would likely continue to arrive without permission.

And while policymakers would like to send migrants and refugees to other countries (including Rwanda), countries with solid human rights records typically don't volunteer. Asylum policy is difficult to develop unilaterally.

Blunt policy tools are also a challenge in other areas of the migration system. The UK introduced the post-study graduate visa to attract international students. It could not reasonably have anticipated that this policy would contribute (alongside other, unexpected factors) to a more-than-doubling of student visa grants in just a couple of years, or an unprecedented increase in the number of students bringing family members.

Similarly, criteria for skilled worker visas are necessarily crude. Caseworkers have to say 'yes or no' to applications from migrants they will typically never meet, based on blunt criteria like earnings and job titles. Labour would like a more nuanced work visa system that links skills and immigration policy and incentivises employers to adopt responsible employment practices. But they will struggle to find criteria that capture which employers are truly 'responsible' and which are just ticking the boxes.

## TRADE-OFFS

All policies involve pros and cons. There are always trade-offs, and that can make it hard for governments to realise their policy vision.

Sometimes these show up as conflicts between different policy areas or government departments—sapping policymakers' will to deal with the problems they've said they will address.

For example, politicians from both major parties have said that net migration is too high and they would like to reduce the number of work visas. There is one obvious target: the health and care sector. Care workers alone [made up half](#) of all skilled work visas last year. Many workers have suffered [serious exploitation](#), which overstretched government bodies have struggled to mitigate. The number of care workers appears to [have fallen](#) of its own accord after the government [started monitoring](#) employers' sponsorship applications more carefully in late 2023 and banned carers from bringing their partners or children. But care could remain a significant driver of migration in the future if policies remain unchanged.

That's because both major parties have been silent on addressing the core problems in the care sector: the poor pay and conditions workers of all nationalities face. Faced with a choice between spending a lot of money on care in a difficult fiscal environment, or continuing to address shortages by admitting often vulnerable workers on visas that tie them to their employers, both major parties seem to consider the latter the easier option.

Similarly, the government has allowed the value of domestic university tuition

fees to erode with inflation, implicitly encouraging universities to make up the shortfall by admitting more international students - who pay much higher fees. Students now contribute significantly to net migration, and high numbers are beginning to attract public concern. But if the government cracks down on international students to reduce migration, it could [face challenges](#) keeping some higher education institutions afloat.

In other cases, policies may help deliver policy goals in the short term but store up longer-term costs. [High visa fees](#) help the government fund the immigration system, but have significant impacts on some migrants and their families, making it harder for them to integrate. Restrictive policies for British people bringing partners to join them may contribute to lower net migration (though family makes up a small share of UK immigration currently). They also impose high costs on those citizens, who often face long separations and the financial and mental health difficulties that can ensue.

Unavoidable trade-offs and blunt policy tools mean there are rarely easy solutions, even if politicians have an incentive to imply there are. Policies can deliver *some* of what politicians promise, but rarely all.

One reasonable lesson for policymakers would be: admit the uncertainty and don't overpromise. In the political marketplace, that is easier said than done.

# HOW AI CAN HELP US UNDERSTAND PUBLIC VIEWS ON IMMIGRATION

Sam Freedman

Polls suggest concern about immigration is rising again. This time, though, the growing concern is coming almost entirely from Conservative voters, a scale of divergence we did not see in the pre-Brexit years.

To try and understand this, I interviewed 100 Conservative 2019 voters in February, using a new automated interview tool developed by Focaldata. It uses an AI chatbot to conduct 30 min interviews based on prompts, but asking adaptive follow-ups based on responses. Humans can apply judgment in a way AI cannot. However, this method does offer more nuanced insight than standard open poll questions at a fraction of the cost of using a human interviewer.

The response was positive. Responses looked similar to those given to human interviews (though respondents knew they were talking to an AI) - they engaged with the question prompts and gave detailed answers. You can read the full transcripts [here](#).

Over 80% of respondents thought immigration was too high. This is a close match with the 90% of Conservative 2019 voters who thought it was too high [in a recent YouGov poll](#).

We then asked what *types* of immigration they thought were too high, following a prompt explaining the differences between legal migration for work and study and what is often termed illegal migration. Surprisingly, 64 of the respondents specified “illegal” migration only. 22 said some variant of “all types” and 14 gave a more complex answer.

Of those who thought all types were too high, most were intending to vote Reform. In contrast, all those saying they would vote Labour said illegal migration was their main concern. Within the Conservative and ‘don’t know’ groups, there was a strong skew towards thinking “illegal” migration was the main problem.

The longer answers confirmed the clear distinction most people made between illegal and legal. Frustration over the former was driven by two core beliefs: that many of those arriving in small boats were not in real need, and that they were taking resources from British people who were.

**“It is never families who arrive on boats. It is usually young men who arrive, which is not a true representation of people wanting to claim asylum.”**

**“They are being allocated social housing that native born people are struggling to access.”**

By contrast there was much more positivity around those coming here to work. The key themes were a belief that if immigrants were willing to pay tax and contribute to society they should be welcomed, and a connected concern about skills shortages - with doctors the most common example.

**“I support legal immigration people coming here to study and get a better education or coming here for a job to work and fill high demanding areas.”**

There was very little explicit racism in responses. Overwhelmingly, concern focused on unfair resource allocation - mostly housing and public services.

Most respondents felt immigration has both enriched and undermined British culture and society, though of those who chose between the two, more said “enriched” than “undermined”. Cultural concerns were largely around *exclusion*, by closed-off immigrant communities, and not *inclusion*. It was the ideas of communities cutting themselves off and refusing to integrate that worried interviewees. There was a lot of positivity around the integration of other cultures into Britain - with a particular focus on food, art and music.

**“In the area that I live we have had immigrants moving here since the 1960s and they have very much integrated into society and have enriched our culture. But I do think there are issues elsewhere in the UK where enclaves of immigrants have developed, and integration is not so well developed.”**

Finally, we asked about the Rwanda plan. Most people supported the principle of trying to remove and deter those crossing the channel, but there were differing opinions on whether it would work in practice. Unsurprisingly those who were still planning to vote Conservative were more likely to think it would. Many of those planning to vote Reform did not think it would work.

Meanwhile people who were not sure how they’d vote or were switching to Labour were more likely to think it was “pointless” or “a waste of money.” A minority thought it was cruel.

There is nothing in these responses that [contradicts](#) findings from previous polls. But the exercise does provide a much deeper sense of why people answer the way they do.



Anyone who has sat in focus groups with Conservative voters will know that fairness, as in ‘just desserts,’ rather than equality, is key to how they think about politics. To more left/liberal voters, this can look like a lack of compassion but it is often motivated by compassion towards groups, like rough sleepers, that are seen as missing out. Respondents largely talked about others not getting housing or GP appointments, rather than themselves.

**“The money the govt give them, the hotels etc they are put up in, we don’t look after our own homeless.”**

**“There is a high amount of homelessness and poverty in the UK already. I feel we need to sort out our own problems before adding to them.”**

The Conservatives have somehow got themselves into a position where they are talking about immigration, and Britain, in a way that is unlikely even to appeal to most of their own voters.

The survey also highlights a challenge for Labour in government. Voters moving to them from the Tories are less worried about immigration overall, but do see illegal migration as a serious problem.

Starmer and his team will certainly talk about it less, with more focus on other policy areas, but they will need a [plan](#) beyond their current proposals to tackle people smugglers.

There is no easy solution. But the survey suggests that, short of stopping the boats, there are other things Labour could do to alleviate concerns. One would be faster processing to reduce numbers in hotels, or allowing asylum seekers to work and pay their way.

Labour will also need to make quick progress on showing things are improving for people already living here. Rough sleeping came up in many interviews. It is problem that can be solved without vast expenditure. Yet it is one of the most visible signs of decay, and one clearly associated with immigration in some voters’ minds.

Immigration is not the only topic on which Labour will have to manage a coalition of voters split between ‘just desserts’ and ‘equality’ conceptions of fairness. The best way to do so is to be able to point to real improvements, and make life seem less zero sum.

# BRITISH CITIZENSHIP, MIGRATION CRISES, AND THE UPCOMING BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION

Randall Hansen

To a degree unmatched among former European imperial powers, citizenship law and policy have shaped immigration politics in the United Kingdom. Since the 1960s, British politics was disrupted thrice by an interaction between the first legal definition of British citizenship and postwar Commonwealth migration: in 1968, when Kenyan Asians fled Jomo Kenyatta's racially discriminatory Africanisation policies; in 1972, when Uganda's Idi Amin expelled tens of thousands of Asian citizens; and from 2014, when the Conservatives' hostile environment policy resulted in black Britons losing their jobs, flats, social support and, in some cases, lives.

All three events defined national politics; all can be traced directly to 1948. The British Nationality Act, 1948 created two citizenships: (i) Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC), for Britons and colonial subjects (West Indians or East Africans) and (ii) Commonwealth citizenship (CC), for nationals of the ten self-governing countries of the former Empire, such as India or Canada. Holders of either citizenship could enter the UK freely until 1962, and until 1973, they had privileged access.

In extending British citizenship to 400 million colonial subjects, policymakers did not expect much migration. The scheme was purely instrumental, designed to maintain the integrity of imperial nationality in the face of Canadian nationalism. Canada's legislation made British subjects in that country citizens first and subjects second, and Westminster followed suit. The 1948 legislation nonetheless took a long-term view. As the colonies eventually became independent, the 'and colonies' portion of CUKC would fall away. After the last colony achieved independence, 'Citizenship of the UK' would remain. In its evolutionary logic, it was a very British construction.

But a construction built on weak foundations. The legislation's drafters assumed that newly independent countries would introduce inclusive citizenship policies for all residents. They often did not, leaving millions of people around the globe with only CUKC and its antecedents. When East African governments turned on their Asian citizens, those displaced became a British responsibility, which [Labour disavowed in 1968](#) and the [Conservatives accepted in 1972](#).

Other Commonwealth countries foisted the Kenyan and Ugandan Asian crises on London. The Windrush scandal, by contrast, was a crisis of choice, albeit one made in ignorance. In 2014 and 2016, the Conservatives, trying to see off a threat from UKIP, passed legislation requiring a wide range of untrained private actors to act as immigration officials. The - entirely predictable and predicted - result was that black Britons (and other CUKCs/CCs) who could not produce evidence of their right of abode were denied bank accounts, housing, and jobs. The British state deported some 83 people and at least 19 died before the Home Office could contact them. This tragedy unfolded because the British government seemingly did not realize that, under 1948 legislation, those whom they were persecuting had arrived perfectly legally before 1973 on their own or their parents' CUKC passport or as Commonwealth citizens and, if passports were lost, they had no proof of their right to remain.

There are three takeaways from this short history for a potential incoming government. The first is the continuing importance of the history of British nationality for contemporary citizenship and immigration policy. The residue of the 1948 imperial nationality scheme is significant. Approximately 3,290,500 people ([the largest number, at 2.9 million, in China](#)) across the world were given (because they had no option for local citizenship), a successor citizenship to CUKC at its abolition (for example, British Nationals Overseas status in Hong Kong or [British Protected Persons status in the Solomon Islands](#)). These nationals have no automatic right to enter the UK, but should they be driven out of their homes, the UK would have a moral, and possibly legal, obligation to them. Such mass movements are unlikely, but one lesson of the history of British immigration and nationality law is that the unlikely, indeed the entirely unexpected, can happen very suddenly.

If expulsions occur, the British government has an interest in defending and respecting the UK's obligations. When it did so in the past - [in 1972 with Ugandan Asians](#) and in 2019 with Hong Kong belongers - the British people supported the decision. When the UK government disavows its international responsibilities, as the current government risks doing with its current approach to asylum seekers, it raises concerns that the UK is willing to break its treaty obligations and its word.

EU nationals may be another issue for the incoming government. The Conservatives took a hardline approach to applications for residency submitted after the 30 June 2021 deadline. However, it backed down once [stories](#), reminiscent of Windrush, of longstanding EU nationals' egregious treatment emerged in the press. If EU nationals have lived in the UK since before Brexit and paid their taxes, there is no reason why there should be any deadline.

In the years to come, EU nationals in the UK will seek to naturalize (demand was low before Brexit, as they had almost all rights of citizenship), possibly in large numbers. To avoid administrative overload and interminable wait times, the Home Office will need appropriate resources. The government might also wish to reconsider residency requirements, currently six years for regular applications and 5 for those with a UK spouse. Lower requirements – five years for regular applicants as in Ireland and the US, or four as in Australia, and three years for spouses as in Ireland and Germany – would help integrate EEA nationals fully into British politics and society.

The British Nationality Act, 1981 was a valiant effort to rationalize the complex heritage of empire. It is broadly liberal, accepting dual citizenship and placing an accent on positive decisions when the basic requirements are met. No great overhaul is required or advisable. Nationality law itself did not generate hardship for migrants and the Windrush generation: rather, the Conservatives failed to understand its content, history, and how it interacts with immigration policy. That is a ray of light in an otherwise dark story: a citizenship regime designed to draw a line under Britain's first experiment of mass postwar (Commonwealth) immigration unintentionally left it well prepared for the next.

# INTEGRATION: HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME US?

Sunder Katwala

## INTEGRATION: HOW DO PEOPLE BECOME US?

The most prominent sceptical political and public arguments about immigration involve several recurring themes. There is invariably an argument about numbers - 'there are too many of them' - which may be about migrants, asylum seekers and refugees, specific groups or the level of diversity in general. That is linked to concerns about resources - 'they are taking things that could be ours' - jobs, housing or public services. There is often an argument about identity, culture and integration - 'they are not like us' - and may not want to become so. Finally, if these arguments do not prevail in the political arena, they often become linked with a frustration about voice and democracy - that 'we are not even allowed to talk about it.' This is often a complaint directed not only (or mainly) at migrants themselves but instead at political, business and media elites, accused of ignoring popular sentiment to pursue pro-immigration policies which reflect their own distinct interests and values.

Shifts in attitudes towards immigration after Brexit had many and complex causes, as this report demonstrates. It became much less credible to argue that people could not talk about immigration at all. More control means new choices too. Considering the trade-offs between the costs and benefits of immigration can help to normalise discussions about immigration, rendering more similar to those about, say, taxation and public spending.

Yet immigration and integration are existential issues too. They are not only debates about 'them and us' - but are ultimately about how new people can become 'us'. This may work at two levels - in principle and in practice. Different societies have had different intuitions about citizenship and national identity. The United States of America had a long tradition of celebrating how new arrivals could become American. Like Australia and Canada, it has sought to champion a 'civic' idea of citizenship, where the willingness to declare a commitment to constitutional principles and values matters most.

By contrast, Japan was among the developed countries which placed most weight on shared ethnicity and national heritage - being more sceptical of how rapidly migrants and their children could become Japanese. A society which leans towards this more 'closed' conception of national identity is likely to be more comfortable

with temporary migration - welcoming visiting guests, whether in high status roles in academia and finance, or low paid work, such as on construction sites, perhaps with precarious rights - and less likely to encourage incomers to be citizens. The Federal Republic of Germany was the most prominent convert as this century began from a primarily ethnic to a more civic conception of national citizenship. Its *Gastarbeiter* (guest-worker) model welcomed hundreds of thousands to come and fill labour gaps on the assumption that most would later return home. This had the unintended consequence that even the German-born children and grandchildren of migrants from Turkey were not eligible for citizenship. Germany switched at the start of this century to the 'civic' model - and has a good claim to now be the liberal democracy which puts most [proactive resource](#) into migrant integration today.

One way to promote citizenship is to have clear policies and rules about what long-term migrants need to do to. But a sense of 'joining the club' is about more than that. One test of how well this ideal works would be tangible social measures of equal opportunity - how far migrants and their children have fair chances and good outcomes in education and employment. Britain [scores](#) relatively well on these metrics.

Yet there is another, less tangible, sphere - equality of status. This could prove just as important in whether equal citizenship feels real enough that the legal acquisition of citizenship does transcend 'them and us' categories, for example for citizens from different ethnic or faith backgrounds from the majority group. Equal status depends upon reciprocal relationships: the new citizen needs to feel that British identity is just as open to them - and that citizens of every background are seen by their fellow citizens as full and equal members of their new society. If that is how it feels, then people can truly 'become us'.

The potential power of citizenship as a signal was demonstrated in a striking recent YouGov research finding, [reported](#) by Labour Together. Asked about somebody from Nigeria who had come to Britain in 2000 and who had worked as a building contractor, without becoming a citizen, 62% of the public felt he was likely to have made a meaningful economic contribution. That rose to 83% where a similar description added that he had become a British citizen too.

Public policy can strengthen the bonds between those who settle in Britain and the communities they join. That a common language is essential for integration commands the broadest consensus across all political and cultural viewpoints. Delivering universal English fluency would involve a range of roles and responsibilities - for governments, employers and migrants themselves.

Making civic welcoming efforts, such as local conversation clubs to supplement formal classes, could invite existing citizens to play their part - and so catalyse the meaningful social contact that can broaden social confidence, reciprocally, between incomers and the society they join.

The citizenship processes itself could do more to encourage those settling long-term to become British. And it would be good for inclusion and confidence to do more to celebrate that they do so. There are citizenship ceremonies every week across the country. Once a year these could take place in the Downing Street Garden or Buckingham Palace, and in cathedrals of sport and culture across the nations and regions. That would be one way to communicate and celebrate an everyday reality with powerful symbolic resonance: people choosing to become part of 'us'.

While managing tensions over numbers and resources are essential for addressing short run pressures over immigration, successful migration policies also depend on a shared perception that change is managed fairly both for newcomers and the communities that they join. And, in the long-run, what will make migration work well is less the question of whether 'they' are good for 'us' - but how far our societies can turn the aspiration that people can "become us" into a reality.

# PUBLIC OPINION AND THE NEED FOR BOTH COMPASSION AND CONTROL ON ASYLUM

Steve Ballinger

Public dissatisfaction with the government's handling of immigration has never been higher. Some 69% of respondents to the latest British Future-Ipsos Immigration Attitudes tracker, including 55% of Conservative supporters, are unhappy. When asked why, the problem of asylum and small boats looms large: 'Not doing enough to stop channel crossings' is chosen by 54% while 49% say 'Allowing too many people to claim asylum in Britain'.

Why are Channel crossings causing such consternation? Not due to the contribution small boats make to the overall numbers. As a recent [BBC Panorama](#) pointed out, [just under 30,000](#) people arrived in the UK on small boats in 2023, in a period when the UK issued 340,000 work visas and nearly 460,000 student visas. Nor is the public opposed to humanitarian migration *per se* - as evidenced by ongoing popular (and political) approval of the UK's offering a place of safety to those fleeing war in Ukraine or repression in Hong Kong.

One key factor may be the importance of public perceptions of control. Migrants from Ukraine and Hong Kong are inflows that the UK government has actively chosen to enable through the creation of bespoke visa routes. Other regularised, safe routes have been closed or have declined: the [Refugee Council](#) recently highlighted that only 766 refugees were resettled under the Government's global resettlement scheme in the year to September 2023. Small boats embody a lack of control, arriving without authorisation and despite a well-publicised government commitment to stop them.

Images of people arriving on Britain's beaches in dangerously overcrowded dinghies, facilitated by criminal gangs of people smugglers, are a stark and emotive demonstration of a failure of government control. That the numbers are comparatively small matters little: what matters is the principle.

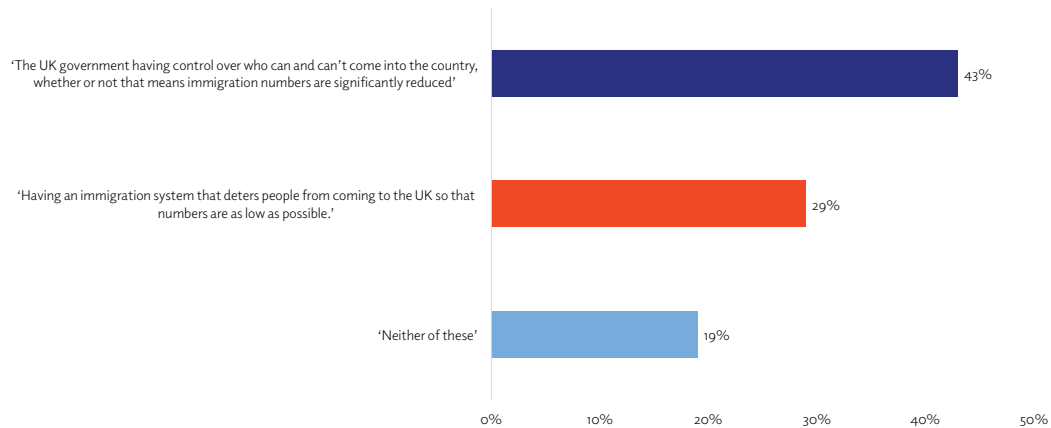
We know that control matters to the public. Asked to choose between the two, people prioritise control over who can and cannot come to the UK more than reducing overall numbers: 43% back control while 29% prioritise keeping numbers as low as possible (19% choose 'neither of these').



Figure 21

### The public prefers control over deterrence from the UK immigration system

Responses to the question of which is most important, the UK government have control of immigration or deterring people from coming to the UK



Source: 2024 MORI/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker. Conducted 17-28 Feb 2024.

Yet while the failure to deliver control upsets many voters, so do policies designed to assert control too zealously, at the expense of compassion. While three quarters of dissatisfied Conservatives are unhappy because the government is ‘not doing enough to stop channel crossings’, only 41% of dissatisfied Labour supporters cite that as a reason. For Labour supporters, the biggest driver of dissatisfaction with the government’s handling of immigration is instead ‘Creating a negative or fearful environment for migrants who live in Britain’ (42%).

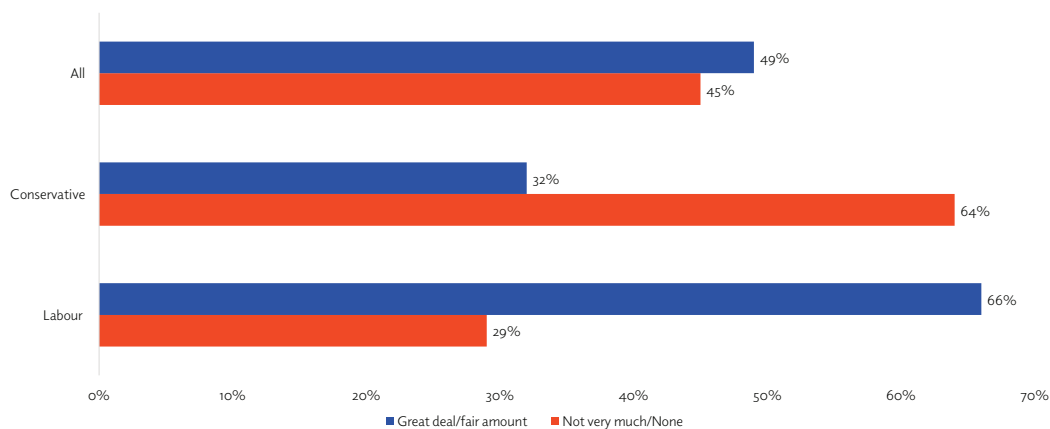
The government is unpopular on the issues of immigration and asylum because it is angering people at both ends of the attitude spectrum. Promising control with the pledge to ‘stop the boats’, then failing to deliver, has lost the trust of those with tougher views. But authoritarian policies designed to assert control at the expense of compassion - most notably through the Rwanda scheme - has cost them the support of more liberal voters and the softer end of the ‘Balancer middle’.

While most voters value both compassion and control, they vary a lot in terms of how they prioritise these goals. Two-thirds of prospective Labour voters (66%) say they have a ‘great deal or fair amount’ of sympathy for migrants attempting to cross the Channel, while only 29% say they do not feel sympathy for channel migrants. Attitudes among Conservative supporters are the mirror image: nearly two-thirds (64%) are unsympathetic towards people crossing the channel, including 31% who say they have no sympathy for them at all.

Figure 22

**While the general public favour sympathy to migrants coming in small boats, support falls along party lines**

Responses to the question, “how much sympathy, if any, do you have for the migrants attempting to cross the English Channel by boat to come to Britain?”



Source: 2024 MORI/British Future Immigration Attitudes Tracker. Conducted 17-28 Feb 2024.

The dilemmas of compassion and control are most starkly demonstrated in the long and heated debate over the Rwanda scheme. The government sees this as a mechanism to assert control and deter those crossing the Channel by small boat. Its opponents see the scheme as a failure of compassion, putting asylum seekers at risk by sending them to a country where their safety cannot be guaranteed.

The Rwanda scheme deeply divides public opinion, splitting those who prioritise control and those who prioritise compassion. A range of polls over the last two years has found no majority either for or against the policy. The immigration attitudes tracker follows suit, finding 47% support and 29% opposition overall. Again, the political breaks show how the initiative is politically polarising, with support among Conservatives (75%) more than double that among Labour supporters (31%).

A new question in this year’s survey probed more deeply into attitudes to the Rwanda scheme and uncovered something interesting. The current iteration of the policy, often misreported, is heavily tilted towards control over compassion: it circumvents the UK asylum system altogether, removing people to Rwanda to lodge an asylum claim in the Rwandan system. But when respondents were asked about an alternative version of the scheme that strikes a different balance, by hearing people’s asylum claims first in the UK, then considering removals to Rwanda for those who were unsuccessful, 25% of the public said they would prefer that approach. Some 32% chose the actual Rwanda policy as it stands, while another quarter said, ‘no removals to Rwanda at all’. Priorities in the public vary widely, meaning no policy on this thorny issue is likely to satisfy everyone.

The public wants an immigration and asylum system that provides control but also one that offers fairness and compassion. Where people stand politically determines how they would combine those ingredients: Conservatives want more control, while Labour supporters want more compassion. The Rwanda scheme is so polarising because it forces stark choices between the two.

The Labour Party has [promised](#) to abolish the divisive Rwanda scheme ‘straight away’ if it comes to power. Our findings suggest that Keir Starmer need not fear a backlash from core Labour voters, but much of the electorate will also expect an asylum policy which addresses their concerns on control. Whatever alternative approach Starmer pursues on Channel crossings will need to combine control and compassion if it is to command broad and stable public support.

# SELLING IMMIGRATION TO THE UK PUBLIC: A NEW POLITICAL AND POLICY APPROACH

Jonathan Thomas

The 2019 UK general election saw the two major parties espouse very different visions of immigration. [Having committed](#) to a pro-immigration ‘levelling up of rights’ and ending the ‘two-tier system’, a Labour government may well have liberalised and equalised the rules between EU/non-EU immigration – with lower salary and skill thresholds, an expansive Shortage Occupation List, opening up the care sector to migrant workers, and restoring greater opportunities for international students to stay on after their studies.

These are all in fact things [the victorious Conservative government did](#). But it did so under totally the opposite rhetorical framing – a promise to end freedom of movement and impose tough controls on immigration.

In liberal democracies, different political visions and rhetoric around immigration often do not translate into material differences in policy. Once in power, the [needs of the economy](#), society, and pressures at home and abroad drive immigration policy, regardless of campaign trail promises.

Many consider [‘selling’ a dirty word](#), but it shouldn’t be. The more important a product, the more it needs a sales effort to support it. This is the case for immigration. But the importance of ‘selling’ immigration to the public lies not only in selling a vision *to get elected*, but also in selling the approach taken *once elected*.

Politicians generally do a poor job of this. And this matters. Public concerns over immigration, if ignored and left unaddressed, can have seismic repercussions far beyond immigration policy. In the US, the current President’s [ongoing refusal](#) to sell immigration to the public – in a way that takes credit for what his administration has actually done to control immigration – is hampering his re-election campaign and therefore putting his broader policy agenda, including major US action on climate change, in jeopardy. In the EU referendum, the failure of the Remain campaign to sell the benefits of EU free movement proved crucial and the consequent result impacted on many other areas of policy.

When faced with public disquiet about immigration, rather than selling what they have decided to do, politicians in power tend to do the opposite – distancing themselves from it, reaching instead for a new vision to sell: stopping the boats, tougher border measures, extracting a special deal from the EU. How can we change this?

If done wrong, attempts to sell immigration can backfire. So those selling immigration must recognise that:

- Society's divisions over immigration are natural; concerns about immigration are rarely standalone, but stem in part from differences in how people perceive its impact on their access to things such as good jobs, affordable housing, and core public services.
- Addressing concerns in these areas is not only a matter of immigration policy – indeed, constant changes in immigration policy tend to undermine, rather than build, public confidence – but in making those most concerned with immigration feel better about their own lives in their own communities.
- Changing people's attitudes towards immigration itself [is difficult](#), and the very act of trying runs the risk of [further stoking](#) concerns, so the aim should not be to convince those most concerned about immigration that they are wrong, but to reassure them so they feel less animated by immigration.
- Differences over immigration provide the perfect breeding ground for a super-divisive form of the [tyranny of merit](#); which can see the 'winners' from more open immigration policy trumpeting their evidence-based rightness and righteousness, lauding the immigrant work ethic, and dismissing those concerned about immigration as doubly deplorable – xenophobic and lazy.
- Concerns over *immigration* are frequently mischaracterised as concerns over *immigrants*, yet evidence shows the UK public among the [most accommodating worldwide](#) in terms of their openness to accepting, and living alongside, immigrants; even in the most deprived areas, concerns over immigration often stem from the locals [looking up to](#), not down upon, immigrants.

Instead of falling into these traps, selling immigration to the UK public should mean, for each aspect of immigration policy, clearly communicating:

- why we need/are accepting of this form of immigration,
- how it fits into the overall picture of what we need/accept,

- what are its acknowledged challenges and trade-offs,
- how are we managing those,
- every interest group should sacrifice something to gain something.

For work immigration: this means presenting the recruitment of migrant workers as just one component part of a broader policy package making the most effective use of all available resources, both domestic and from overseas, to support the UK's society into the future, using, for instance, the [Immigration Skills Charge](#) - levied from employers who hire immigrant workers - to help fund investment in local training and skills.

For asylum seekers: this means explaining that going it alone makes control harder, and making the case for international cooperation to achieve a tougher, but fairer, and more orderly, approach to the responsibility for refugees, while, in the meantime, at home, investing upfront to ensure fair assessment of asylum claims, but also in more concerted and collaborative efforts to deliver an effective returns policy for those whose claims fail. Without these things the public's faith in the asylum system, and therefore degree of support for refugee arrivals, will never be what it could, and should, be.

For international students: this must start by acknowledging the trade-offs here too, that while immigration concerns must not on their own drive the policy approach, given their potential impact on the financial viability of, and the UK's global ambitions for, the higher education sector, these concerns should not be ignored either, given the potential consequences of admitting large numbers through this route.

Immigration policy should be aggressively framed as something that is not at all divisive, not standalone and 'other', but part of a balanced and rather boring whole package of policy. As a country we should debate different views on how, why and where immigration should best fit in to how our economy and society operate, and tilt our immigration policy accordingly. But immigration will be needed somewhere in it, in some shape and size. Boring but true. And on immigration, boring is better.

# IMMIGRATION AND REFORM UK

Paula Surridge

## IMMIGRATION AND REFORM UK

Reform UK are perhaps the party with the clearest position on immigration. They are certainly the party with the most restrictive policy. Policy statements make ‘net zero immigration’ their aim, coupled with ‘zero tolerance’ towards illegal immigration. To achieve this, they [propose](#) creating a ‘new Department of Immigration staffed with people who believe in the task at hand’.

The public, however, are unclear what their policy is. The [British Election Study Internet Panel](#) (BESIP), asked people last year to place each party on a scale from 0 to 10 where 0 represents ‘allow many fewer immigrants’ and 10 represents ‘allow many more’. While many voters struggle to place any of the parties, knowledge of Reform UK’s policy was particularly low - with more than 4 in 10 unable to place them, including nearly three out of ten among voters prioritising immigration - presumably the target audience for Reform UK’s hardline policies.

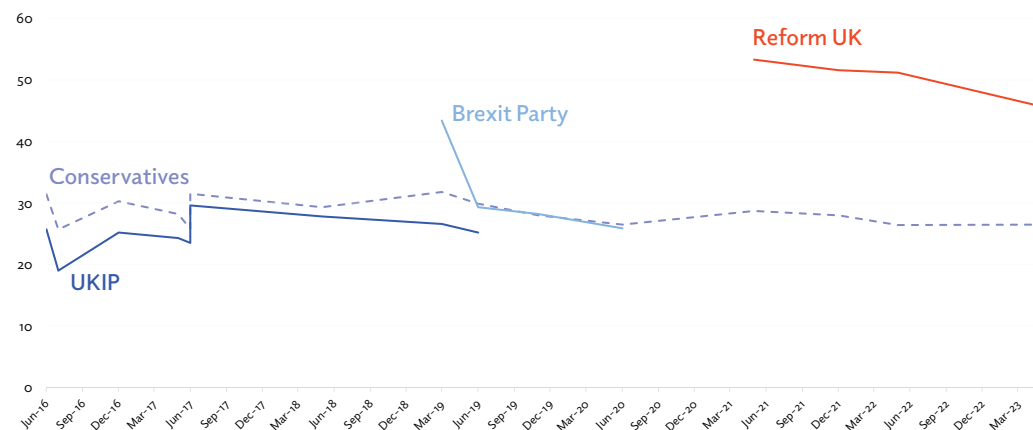
Unlike their predecessors, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) and the Brexit Party, Reform UK have failed to send a clear signal to voters about their policy profile. Again, asking voters to place parties on a 0-10 scale, both UKIP and the Brexit party had the most recognisable positions on the issue of immigration, in sharp contrast Reform UK has one of the least recognisable.

Figure 23

### Unlike their predecessors, Reform UK have failed to send a clear signal to voters about their policy profile

*% of people saying don't know when asked to place each party from 0-10 where 0 represents 'allow many fewer immigrants' and 10 'allow many more'*

UK IN A  
CHANGING  
EUROPE



Source: British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP)

Reform’s profile has risen a lot in the past year, but the same pattern holds true in

more recent [data](#). People were asked whether the policy was to reduce or increase immigration but were also given the option of saying the party had ‘no clear policy’, on this measure 12% said Reform UK had no clear policy and a further 3 in 10 did not know what the party’s policy was.

Nonetheless, those who say they will vote for Reform UK have distinctive attitudes to immigration. In the BESIP, just over half of those backing the party said that immigration was the single most important issue facing the country, compared with 20% of those intending to vote Conservative and 10% in the electorate as a whole. Immigration is clearly a top priority for Reform UK voters.

Reform UK are also distinctive in their attitudes to particular migrant groups. For each of five groups, the BESIP asked people to say, on a scale where 0 is many fewer and 10 is many more, whether they thought ‘Britain should allow more or fewer of that group to come and live in Britain’. The survey asked about five groups: asylum seekers, workers from other EU countries, workers from outside the EU, foreign students and the families of people who already live here.

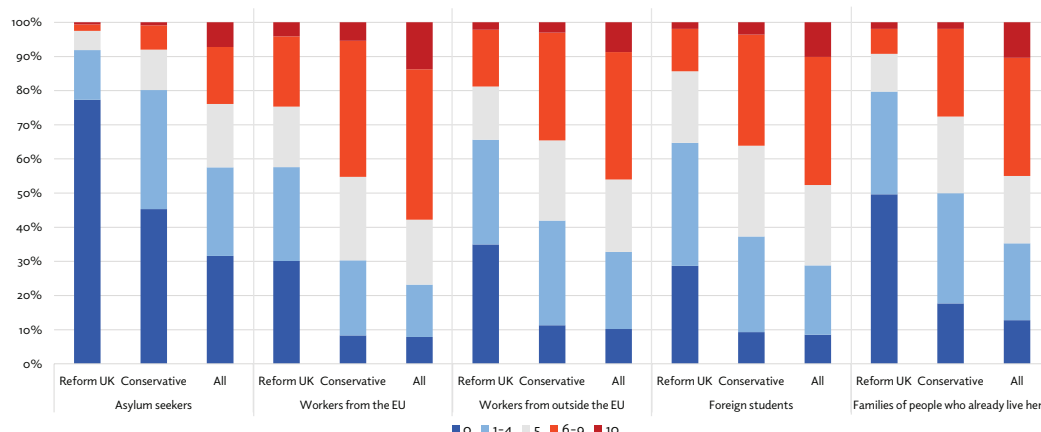
For each of the five groups of potential immigrants, those intending to vote Reform UK took a more restrictive position than Conservative supporters or the electorate as a whole. But there were key differences in their attitudes to each group.

**Figure 24**

**Reform UK voters hold especially hardline attitudes regarding asylum seekers**



*Responses to 0-10 scale (many fewer, many more), should Britain allow fewer or more of (group) to come and live in Britain*



Source: British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP)

Reform UK voters hold especially hardline attitudes regarding asylum seekers. More than 9 in 10 thought Britain should allow fewer asylum seekers, with nearly 8 in 10 giving the most restrictive response possible. In comparison, while 80% of Conservative voters took the position that fewer asylum seekers should be admitted, less than half took the most restrictive position.



For the other groups, Reform UK voters were a little less hardline. Fewer Reform UK supporters took the most hardline position (0/10) in the case of workers and foreign students. In all cases, however, Reform UK voters were more restrictive than Conservative voters, and a significant majority favoured reducing immigration from every group.

Reform UK voters are both concerned about immigration and want much less of it. However, if we turn this question around and instead ask what the party preferences are of those who are concerned about immigration, or who want to see immigration reduced, the picture becomes more complicated.

Almost half of those who rated immigration as the most important issue facing the country (48%) said they would vote Conservative at the next election, with around a third opting for Reform UK. Among those with the most restrictive attitudes to the immigrant groups described above, the highest vote share for Reform was 30% for those wishing to see far fewer immigrants from the European Union (compared with 34% intending to vote Conservative and 21% intending to vote Labour). But this is very much a minority view among the electorate - just 8% take the most restrictive position towards EU immigration and more than half the electorate would prefer to see the same or more immigration from the EU.

The electorate at large are most concerned about asylum seekers, with a small majority wanting to see numbers reduced. But among the group with the most restrictive attitudes to asylum seekers, the Reform UK share was 19%, behind both the Conservatives (44%) and Labour (25%).

Reform UK have increased their standing in the polls since these data were collected. However, their recent rise is not likely to change the key conclusions presented here. Those intending to vote for Reform UK are concerned about immigration and are the only group of voters more concerned about immigration than about the economy or the health service. They are the voter group which feels most strongly that immigration should be reduced across the board.

Reform UK may be able to increase their vote share using immigration as a key dividing line. But this comes with challenges as well as opportunities. Most voters do not see immigration as a key issue and among those who do, fewer than half choose Reform UK. Increasing the salience of immigration and winning more of the voters focussed on immigration provide both a challenge and potential for growth. But to capitalise on this, more voters will need to know where Reform UK stand. Immigration has provided Reform with a route back into the political conversation - now they need to show they have something to say.

# CAN A NEW GOVERNMENT WIN OVER A DIVIDED PUBLIC?

Robert Ford

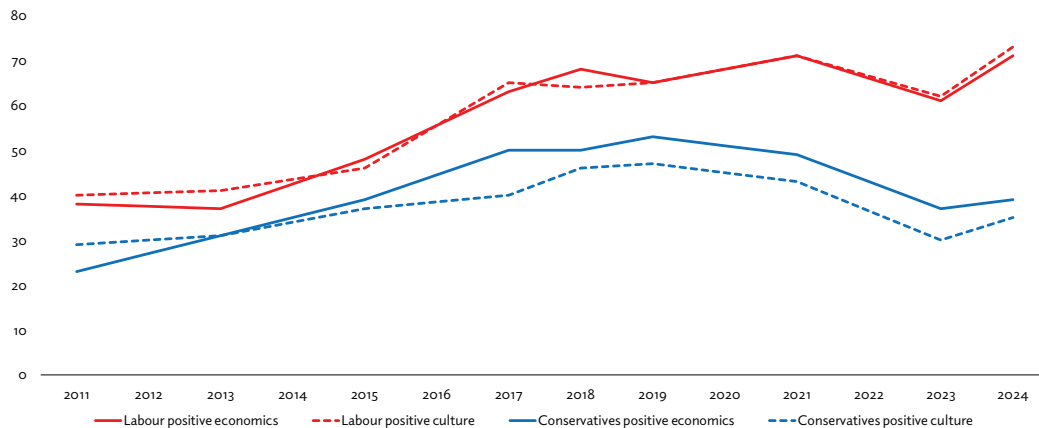
As the election approaches which may draw this period of Conservative government to a close, Labour and Conservative supporters are more polarised over immigration than ever before. This is not because Conservative supporters have become more negative about immigration – if anything, they are a little more positive now than in the early days of the Coalition. It is because of major shift among Labour supporters, who have come to see immigration as economically and culturally beneficial (see figure below).

Figure 25

## Voters are more polarised over immigration due to more Labour supporters seeing immigration as beneficial

Share of Labour and Conservative supporters with positive views of the economic (solid lines) and cultural (dashed lines) impacts of migration

UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE



Source: British Social Attitudes 2011-2023; NatCen Panel 2024

The shift in attitudes, and the demographic trends underlying it, have enabled Labour to grow its support while retaining a strongly pro-migration electorate. The public overall are more positive about migration, and the groups more positive about migration are more strongly aligned with the Labour party. This, in turn, helps to explain why recent divisive Conservative campaigns over immigration control have not changed the political weather – there are no longer many strongly migration sceptical Labour to appeal to. The main effect of the recent campaign for migration control has instead been to open up the latent divide within the Conservative support base by mobilising immigration hard-liners and putting them at odds with moderates.

For most of the post-war period, a majority of supporters of both parties took a sceptical view of immigration. If Labour wins a majority at the next election, this will be the first post-war government whose voter base is clearly pro-immigration. But this does not mean a shift towards more open migration policies would be plausible or advisable. There are two reasons for Labour to take a more cautious approach.

The first is political geography. The voters Labour needs in marginal seats are substantially more negative about immigration than Labour voters overall. Pro-migration groups tend to cluster in safe Labour seats, while migration sceptics are more evenly spread, and over-represented in battlegrounds. Labour thus has a strong electoral incentive to move cautiously on immigration, pursuing policies which more sceptical voters can accept, even if this means disappointing migration liberals.

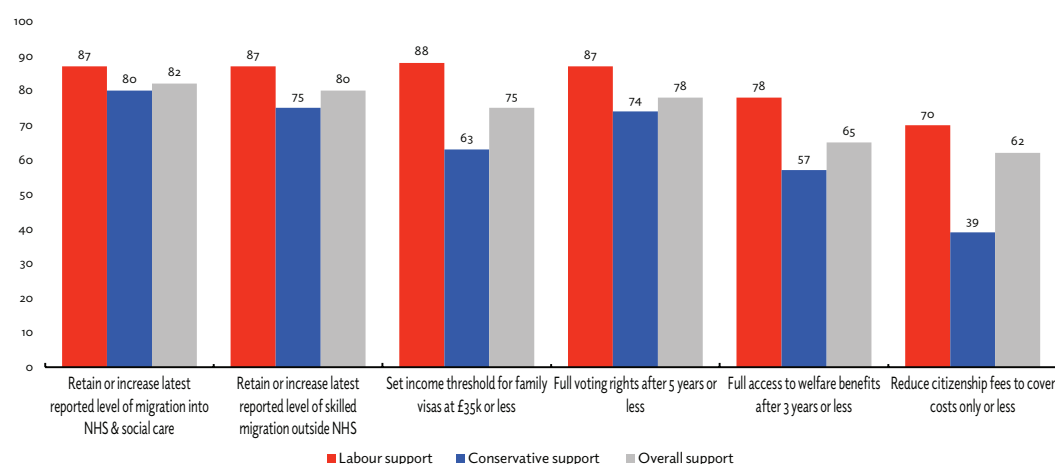
The second reason Labour must tread carefully relates to competence and trust. For much of the past fifty years, the public have regarded the Conservatives as more likely than Labour to deliver effective immigration policy. The last Labour government reinforced this divide, as migration levels rose sharply despite strong voter demands for stricter control. Public [dissatisfaction](#) with the Conservatives performance on immigration is now at record highs, but there has been little or no recovery in Labour’s reputation. A [majority](#) no longer trust either party to handle immigration competently. A government confronting public trust at rock bottom needs to proceed with caution and rebuild consensus.

**Figure 26**

**Certain migration policies have broad support across the political divide**



*Support for liberal migration policies by political party support*



Source: NatCen panel January 2024

Some easy wins may exist (see Figure 26). There is strong support across the political divide for recruiting migrant workers into the NHS and social care, and for continuing to issue large numbers of skilled worker visas in other

areas where labour market pressures are clear. There are areas where a Labour government could pursue a liberal agenda with broad public support, for example reducing minimum income thresholds for family reunion visas; reducing fees for citizenship applications; and reducing the qualification period before settled migrants gain access to welfare benefits and voting rights. Such reforms would be popular across the political spectrum, enabling Labour to offer a distinctive reform agenda without taking political risks.

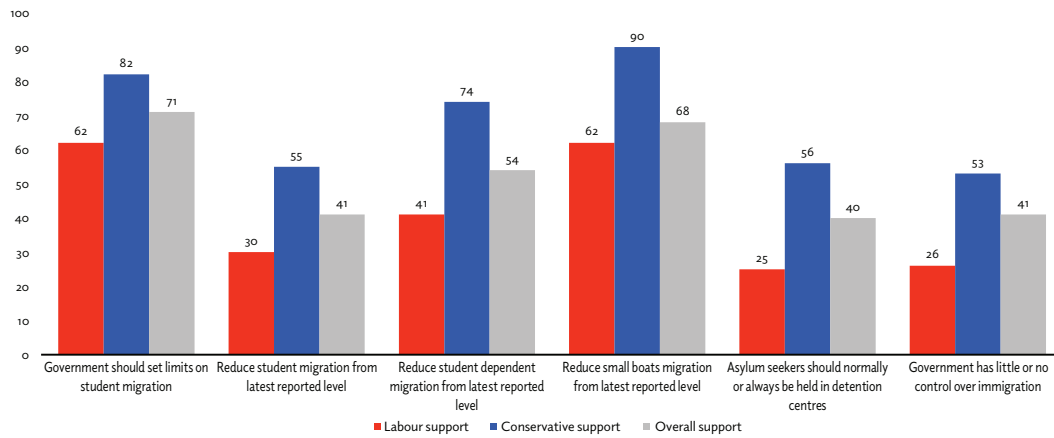
But consensus is not always possible, and a new government will face more difficult and divisive choices. One concerns student migration, where two decades of political and public consensus is now breaking down. Conservative supporters complain the current system leaves universities dangerously [reliant](#) on the high fees foreign students bring, and that both high inflows of student dependents and the growing use of post-study work visas suggest a system [no longer working](#) as originally designed. A majority of both Labour and Conservative supporters now back central government control over student migration, but there are deep divides between the parties over current student migration levels. Yet while high student migration has become contentious, higher domestic student fees, or higher taxes - which would be [needed to replace universities' lost income](#) if student migration falls - would be unpopular too. A new government can cut student migration, or it can keep strict controls on higher education spending. But it cannot do both.

There are other areas where a new government will struggle to resolve basic tensions between what voters say they want and what government can realistically deliver. Take the argument about 'small boats'. Cuts to illegal arrivals on small boats are popular across the political spectrum, but this does not make such an outcome any easier to deliver. Over-promising risks failure and backlash, but more modest promises or achievements risk stoking concerns that the new government is incompetent or a 'soft touch.'

Figure 27

## Labour and Conservative supporters are more deeply divided over student migration and asylum

Support for migration policies by political party support



Source: NatCen panel January 2024

Fundamental value divides polarise voters on many questions relating to asylum. On the use of detention centres for refugees, while the public as a whole are evenly divided, Labour and Conservative supporters are poles apart. A majority of Conservatives believe asylum seekers should normally be held in such centres, while a large majority of Labour supporters say they should be used rarely or not at all. Similar divisions regularly recur in asylum discussions – Labour supporters sympathise with small boats migrants, Conservatives do not; Labour supporters would hear all claims on their merits, Conservatives would not; Conservatives back the Rwanda scheme despite reservations, Labour supporters would ditch it. On these questions, and many others, there simply is no answer that will satisfy everyone. Finding a way to disappoint voters while retaining their trust may be the toughest challenge of all.

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