

Zoe Gardner
December 2025

Time for change

*The evidence-based policies that can
actually fix the immigration system*

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Introduction

After years of declining salience as an issue of concern for British voters, the question of immigration has resurfaced in an increasingly fraught public debate. Immigration has become the number one issue of concern to voters, topping the table in Ipsos polling for 32% of the public – despite just 4% of the public saying that it actually affects them personally.¹ In a media landscape driven more than ever by the attention economy, where shock, controversy and soundbites determine the agenda, it often feels like there is a diminished space for evidence-based policy and analysis. Politicians' efforts to respond to this landscape often devolve into a competition for rhetorical ground with little public space for policy discussion.

The Labour government has made a disappointing start on immigration. Under the leadership of Keir Starmer, Labour has allowed its critics on the far-right to set the agenda, even mimicking some of the policy ideas. Plans for off-shore detention and removal hubs for asylum seekers are under consideration,² and an agenda to make citizenship and settled status much more difficult to obtain for all immigrants,³ while barring access to it entirely for many refugees,⁴ would once have been seen as radically right-wing policy.

This is disappointing for those that hoped the 2024 change in government would lead to a more humane, inclusive and realistic approach to managing migration.

This report sets out some of the key priorities for an alternative approach. A truly progressive immigration policy would not only be a morally, economically and practically superior choice, but, if well-presented, it could be far more popular with a majority of the public, too. Ironically, there is evidence that advertising the Labour government's hostility to immigrants if anything only increases support for the Reform party.⁵ Labour needs to stop following Farage and forge its own alternative path guided by firm principles and positive, truthful narratives. In this way, the party would also avoid the risk of ending up in a zero-sum game, perhaps winning back voters on the right wing of the political spectrum, but losing others on the left wing in the process.

A progressive and realistic immigration policy must be built on three fundamental pillars; first, that the UK, like almost all highly developed Western economies, needs immigration to support the development of a resilient economy with high quality, well-funded public services; second, that people from around the world either need to or are willing to come to the UK in order to find safety and opportunity, and, third, that it is vital to ensure that the fundamental rights of migrants are protected alongside the rights and wellbeing of the communities that people move into.

Unfortunately, in the present UK debate, the interests of host societies and newcomers are presented as opposed to one another, when in fact they are closely aligned. There is a clear relationship of mutual need between migrants seeking safety, stability and opportunity in the UK, and British people in an ageing society where the welfare state relies on a working age population that includes migrants. Systems that undermine the rights of migrants create a two-tier workforce that is more easily divided and exploited, while systems that protect people's rights equally create the circumstances for integrated and cohesive communities.

This report highlights three key areas of migration policy where changes must be made that would benefit both migrants and the communities that receive them, by removing obstacles to safe arrival, promoting equality in the workplace, and eliminating barriers to integration.

The three key priority areas to consider in creating a progressive immigration policy are:

1. Safe and orderly access to asylum.
2. A well-managed labour migration system that promotes workers' rights.
3. An evidence-based integration and inclusion agenda.

1 <https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2024-10/Ipsos-Issues-Index-September-2024-tables.pdf>

2 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/freylindsay/2025/05/15/uk-in-talks-for-offshore-deportation-hubs-for-asylum-seekers/>

3 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper>

4 <https://freemovement.org.uk/good-character-guidance-amended-to-block-refugees-from-naturalisation/>

5 <https://strongmessagehere.substack.com/p/what-messages-might-reform-be-vulnerable>

Key messages

The Problem

- Immigration has re-emerged as voters' top concern, but the debate is dominated by punitive rhetoric over workable policy.
- The current approach (deterrence, harder routes to settlement and citizenship, focus on reducing numbers) fuels irregular arrivals, harms cohesion, and denies the UK's economic needs, especially in the context of an ageing population.
- The work-based immigration system is not a holistic response to the UK's labour needs, but a piecemeal response to the perceived need to reduce rights, resulting in a complex and messy system that heightens the risk of workplace exploitation.
- 2024 saw at least 82 deaths in the Channel. The deaths of these innocent and vulnerable people were entirely unnecessary. They are the result of bad policies designed to signal hostility rather than to actually address the issue.

Core Principles

1. The UK needs immigration to sustain growth and fund public services in an ageing society.
2. People will keep seeking safety and opportunity here. Policy needs to manage this in a safe, orderly, fair and responsible way, and politicians must reject xenophobic and dehumanising narratives about immigrants.
3. Protecting migrants' rights strengthens, not weakens, community wellbeing, and labour standards.

Priority 1: Asylum – Safe, Fast, and Integrative

Create safe routes from Europe (a Ukraine-style model, administered with EU partners and Border Force operational input) to remove demand for smugglers and cut Channel deaths.

Restore the right to work for asylum seekers awaiting de-

cisions; international comparators grant access after 6–9 months. Estimated **£280m net fiscal gain/year** from lifting the ban.

Fast-track clearly well-founded cases (e.g., Sudan, Eritrea, Syria, Afghanistan) through a light-touch identity/documentation process to rapid long-term status.

Replace for-profit accommodation with local-authority, not-for-profit provision that also expands emergency housing for all residents; use 2026 break clauses to end outsourcing.

Expected impact

Fewer dangerous crossings and deaths; smaller asylum processing backlogs; reduction of harm; benefit to public purse from reducing temporary accommodation spend; faster integration and labour market participation; and deals with public concerns around irregular crossing through the development of a humane system.

Priority 2: Labour Migration – A Rights-First, Economy-Ready System

Reform labour inspection: meet ILO benchmarks over time; create a **firewall** between labour enforcement and immigration control to enable safe reporting.

Scrap restrictive employer-sponsored visas that tie workers to a single employer and enable abuse.

Adopt a genuine points-based visa: clear criteria (skills, experience, English, UK ties) with open work permission and freedom to change employers; stop ad-hoc, sectoral “bespoke” schemes and reliance on employer sponsorship.

Integrate asylum seekers into the points system: recognise UK-gained skills/English/training so those meeting labour needs can integrate into the workforce, while preserving Refugee Convention protections.

Expected impact

Stronger employment rights for migrant and non-migrant workers; less exploitation of the migrant labour force and increased wages; addresses sectoral shortages supporting a strong welfare state as our population ages.

Priority 3: Integration & Citizenship – Security, Belonging, Cohesion

Universal five-year route to settlement, followed by citizenship, applying equally across visa types; simplify rules so all lawful residence counts.

Reintroduce birthright citizenship (or remove cost and administrative barriers for UK-born children) and **end NRPF**

for families with children at minimum.

Positive government narrative: unequivocally rebut racist and anti-migrant rhetoric; link migration to shared prosperity and ageing-society realities.

Expected impact

Reduced precarity and irregularity; improved child poverty outcomes; stronger social cohesion.

Asylum

Three fundamental reforms to the asylum system are urgently necessary:

1. Safe routes
2. The right to work and faster, better asylum decisions
3. A not-for-profit asylum accommodation system

Safe Routes

The arrival of asylum seekers in dangerous and chaotic circumstances led to the deaths of at least 82 people, including 14 children, in 2024 – a record-breaking year. These arrivals are also the key driver of public opposition and dissatisfaction with immigration policy among the British public. It is hard to overstate the importance of genuinely addressing this issue. It is essential, both morally and politically, that the government tackles it head on.

The approach so far has been to propose increasingly “tough” approaches to smugglers. This involves making use of counter-terror style powers to target them, and sharing intelligence to disrupt their networks. This may plausibly

have some modest impact over the medium term, but it will do nothing to remove the need that the smuggling networks cater to: the imperative for refugees to bypass European borders closed to asylum seekers, and so will ultimately only displace or delay irregular asylum seeker journeys, not end them.

Furthermore, these measures without adequate legal safeguards, risk having the greatest impact on asylum seekers themselves. They could easily find themselves wrongfully charged as smugglers. This is the critical risk of an approach based on “smashing the gangs”.⁶

If Labour does not address the root causes that drive smuggling by offering real alternatives to the people trapped in a border limbo, they will fall into the same trap as their predecessors of raising public expectations, bringing greater visibility to the question only to then inevitably fail to deliver. The only evidence-based way of preventing irregular journeys from taking place is to put in place a realistic alternative way for people to reach the UK or find safety in Europe. We saw this approach effectively used to protect refugees fleeing Ukraine in the wake of Putin’s invasion – more than 200,000 found safety in the UK without a single one paying a smuggler to make a dangerous

⁶ University of Oxford Centre for Criminology (2024) ‘No such thing as justice here: The criminalisation of people arriving to the UK on small boats’, webpage accessed on 8 August 2024. https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/No%20such%20thing%20as%20justice%20here_for%20publication.pdf

Channel crossing.⁷ Meanwhile, over four million more Ukrainians found safety in other European countries.⁸ No country was forced to shoulder responsibility alone, and there were no scenes of border violence, push-backs, or inter-EU disputes over which country would take charge of asylum claims, as there are with refugees of other nationalities who lack the safe pathways to protection put in place for Ukraine.

The Ukrainian example also provides evidence which challenges an argument routinely raised against the establishment of safe routes to the UK: that we would be overwhelmed by arrivals. We provided an uncapped safe route to the inhabitants of a country that had been violently invaded by an imperialist, bloodthirsty dictator. We offered anyone who came to the UK from Ukraine a route to housing in our communities, immediate access to the labour market and the welfare state, and put in place English language and integration support services. Of a country of almost 38 million people offered this opportunity to reach safety, just 200,000 came. It should really be a statement of the obvious that not everyone given the safe opportunity to come to Britain will do so.

It is well established that the vast majority of people displaced from their homelands have no desire to make long-distance journeys to far away countries to rebuild a life from scratch. They often remain close to the place they have been displaced from. Many more stay within the boundaries of their own country as ‘internally displaced persons’ rather than seeking asylum abroad.⁹ Of those who do cross a border, most stay in the country neighbouring their own – proportionately very few make the longer and more perilous journey to a far-away country and those that do, according to the Home Office’s own research, do so most often because they have existing connections to the country they are trying to reach.¹⁰

The UK has forged deep and binding connections all over the world, both through military interventions and through our history of colonialism. Roughly 70% of the asylum seekers who have reached the UK in the past 20 years come from countries that were previously colonies or protectorates of the UK.¹¹ Because of this colonial history they rightly feel a familiarity with the UK, very often speak Eng-

lish, and know that they are likely to find established communities from their home countries here, who will be able to support them in rebuilding their lives in a new place. This phenomenon is not unique to the UK. We see this for many of the former colonial powers of Europe. Refugees from former French colonies often travel to France, from Dutch former colonies to the Netherlands, and from Spanish and Portuguese ones to Spain and Portugal.¹² Countries with much smaller historic empires or none should therefore be viewed cautiously as models for UK immigration policy. The Nordic and Eastern European hardline approaches to asylum seekers are often touted as good examples for the UK to follow, but they ignore this historical element that fundamentally differentiates us from many of those countries.¹³

In Spain and Portugal, the connections held by citizens of former colonies are formally recognised within immigration laws, with immigrants from former colonies subject to shorter pathways to citizenship. There is no equivalent in the UK, and in contrast, the government has announced plans to push access to citizenship back for all immigrants, and has cut refugees who travelled through irregular means to the UK off from ever obtaining it.¹⁴ By accepting the valid historical reasons why a small proportion of the world’s refugees choose the UK, and facilitating their safe arrival, instead of forcing them to take dangerous irregular routes, the Labour government could very significantly reduce the small boats crossings and save many lives. Much was made of the arrival of 20,000 people on small boats in the first six months of 2025,¹⁵ but when ten times that number arrived over the course of a couple of years from Ukraine, it was not an issue.¹⁶ As long as the arrival of refugees is regulated, orderly and safe, most people are significantly less concerned about it.

The Public and Commercial Services Union that represents Border Force officials who respond to small boats crossings has put forward a plan for how to administer a safe route for asylum seekers to reach the UK from Europe based on the Ukraine scheme.¹⁷ Their experience of managing the arrival of asylum seekers in distress on small boats and the unnecessary danger that it represents motivated them to urge the government to change their approach. In cooperation with our European neighbours based on responsibili-

7 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2023/statistics-on-ukrainians-in-the-uk>

8 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/ukraine-refugees-eu/>

9 <https://www.unhcr.org/about-unhcr/overview/figures-glance>

10 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/asylum-seeker-decision-making-in-journeys-to-the-united-kingdom-2022/asylum-seeker-decision-making-in-journeys-to-the-united-kingdom-2022>

11 <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Refugee-Action-messaging-guide-asylum-and-racial-justice.pdf>

12 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/asylum-applications-eu/>

13 <https://europa.sps.ed.ac.uk/2022/01/19/could-the-current-strict-danish-migration-policy-serve-as-an-example-for-the-eu-or-does-it-undermine-a-common-eu-migration-approach/>

14 <https://freemovement.org.uk/good-character-guidance-amended-to-block-refugees-from-naturalisation/>

15 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/people-crossing-the-english-channel-in-small-boats/>

16 <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/immigration-system-statistics-year-ending-march-2023/statistics-on-ukrainians-in-the-uk>

17 <https://www.pcs.org.uk/campaigns/fighting-racism-fascism/safe-secure-routes-refugees>

ty-sharing, the UK must put in place safe routes for asylum seekers to reach our shores.

The right to work and faster, better asylum decisions

Most asylum seekers reaching the UK will be recognised as refugees with the right to stay, and will very likely live here for the long term.¹⁸ The hostility that runs through the asylum system – intended as a failed deterrence measure – must therefore be scrapped and replaced with a system geared towards inclusion. It is sensible to support the integration and independence of asylum seekers as quickly as possible. A prolonged ordeal in a hostile asylum system damages prospects for long-term wellbeing and refugees' ability to support themselves, benefitting no-one.¹⁹

The ban on asylum seekers working has a detrimental long-term impact on their wellbeing and creates a more costly system for taxpayers. It has been estimated that lifting the ban and allowing asylum seekers to work, as many other European countries do, could represent a net gain to government finances of around £280 million per year.²⁰

Other European countries, and particularly Spain, can be a model for a better British approach to managing the asylum system as regards the right to work. Under EU law, asylum seekers must be granted the right to work after a maximum of nine months if they are still awaiting a resolution to their claim.²¹ In practice, there are obstacles to this in many EU countries, but some countries also choose to integrate asylum seekers into the labour market faster than that. In France, asylum seekers may apply for a work permit after just six months in the system, which challenges the idea that it is the possibility of work that acts as a “pull factor” to the UK for migrants trying to cross the Channel. Meanwhile in Spain, not only are asylum seekers permitted to work after six months, but Spanish language and training courses are held in asylum seeker accommodation centres in order to support people into areas of work where there are shortages and a need for labour.²²

It was under Tony Blair's Labour government that asylum seekers were denied access to the mainstream benefits sys-

tem in 1999,²³ and had their right to work severely restricted in 2002.²⁴ These measures, along with others, were intended to reduce supposed “pull factors” that drove asylum seekers to the UK and to reduce numbers of applicants. Instead, it ensured asylum seekers are entirely dependent on the state, reliant on meagre Asylum Support payments that leave them living in poverty.²⁵ Given that the average time taken to decide an asylum claim is still well over a year, the asylum system has become an incredibly expensive and degrading ordeal.²⁶

The time taken on asylum decisions needs to be reduced, but this must not come at the expense of the quality of decision making. Since the Labour government has come to power, there has been a significant increase in decision-making, but there has also been a deterioration in standards. In the year 2022/23 72% of Home Office decisions on asylum claims were meeting its own minimum quality control standard. This dropped to just 52% in 2023/24, and the most recently published statistics omitted to include this measure at all, without explanation.²⁷ When asylum claims are rushed and wrongfully refused, the backlog builds up within the appeals process instead. As a result, claims take even longer to be determined, making the entire system costlier and more painstaking for the people involved.

The problem with speeding up the processing of claims, as undertaken by successive governments, is that it is always asylum refusals that are targeted for fast-tracked procedures. This is risky, in that a hastily reached decision potentially puts a person in harm's way if refused the necessary protection. It increases the backlog in the courts, and can end with people forced to make emergency last-minute legal interventions to buy the time to make their case for protection adequately before removal: a backstop that is then presented as a symptom of “abuse” of the system by lawyers, where in fact it is more often a feature produced by the inappropriate use of accelerated processes in complex cases.

Instead, it is the clearly well-founded asylum claims that should be fast-tracked: people coming to us from countries with very high protection grant rates and obviously unsafe countries of origin should go through a light-touch system

18 Refugee Council (2024) 'Top facts from the latest statistics on refugees and people seeking asylum', webpage, accessed on: 1st August 2024. <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/top-10-facts-about-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum/>

19 Asylum Matters (2023) 'Surviving in Poverty: A report documenting life on asylum support', webpage accessed on: 8 August 2024. <https://asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2023/12/Asylum-Matters-Surviving-in-Poverty-Report-A4-SINGLES-Dec-2023.pdf>

20 Refugee Action (2020) 'Lift the Ban: Why giving people seeking asylum the right to work is common sense', webpage accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Lift-The-Ban-Common-Sense.pdf>

21 https://ecre.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/ECRE-Policy-Paper-12_The-Right-to-Work-for-Asylum-Applicants-in-the-EU.pdf

22 Rethinking Migration: The Spanish Model, Racho & De Clerke, Forthcoming Autumn 2025

23 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1999/33/contents>

24 <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2002/41/contents>

25 <https://asylummatters.org/2023/12/06/new-report-surviving-in-poverty/>

26 <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/the-uks-asylum-backlog/>

27 https://freemovement.org.uk/latest-statistics-raise-questions-around-sustainability-of-home-office-asylum-decision-making/?utm_source=mailerlite&utm_medium=email&utm_term=Fri+29+Aug+2025&utm_campaign=Weekly+blog+updates

designed to establish their identity and provide them with suitable documentation, and then be granted a long-term status quickly that enables them to start to rebuild their lives. It is plainly irrational that Sudanese, Eritrean, Syrian and Afghan nationals currently spend months if not years waiting for decisions to be made on their claims without having the right to work or to any integration support. Even if some asylum cases from these countries of origin are refused, the applicants are often left in long-term limbo in the UK anyway, because it is difficult to enact returns to hostile countries under dictatorship or experiencing conflict.²⁸ It would be dangerous and immoral to try to send these people back to their countries of origin, even if it were practically possible. Far better to start helping them into safe, productive lives within our communities as fast as possible, seeing as that is where they are more than likely to end up at any rate.

A not-for-profit asylum accommodation system

Asylum seekers are accommodated by the state where they would otherwise be destitute. Demands to “cut off” access to shelter are both inhumane and would utterly fail as a deterrent. The prospect relies on the unsubstantiated idea that destitution and street homelessness in the UK would be so much more unappealing than destitution in any other European country that asylum seekers would simply cease to come. Of course, what would be far more likely would be that the UK would experience a dramatic increase in street homelessness and the associated societal ills that accompany it. Homelessness charities have warned against the scapegoating of asylum seekers for the housing crisis.²⁹

Establishing large tent cities of vulnerable men, women and children is not a solution to the arrival of a few tens of thousands of refugees each year. However, it is outrageous that money from the public purse is being funnelled into private firms to provide accommodation that is segregated and only available to people seeking asylum, regardless of the poor quality of the accommodation itself. A not-for-profit accommodation model managed in partnership with Local Authorities is an alternative that would not only keep resources in public hands, but have the added benefit of contributing to the creation of emergency housing that is available to any local resident on the basis of need, instead

of fuelling resentment by sectioning off foreigners for certain types of accommodation only. At the current time asylum seekers, where not segregated into hotels, are often housed in “hard to let” accommodation that is of too poor quality to be possible to rent it to British people. This means the owners of such properties are not incentivised to make improvements so that they could be dignified housing for anyone, but instead to leave the properties in a poor state, and simply house asylum seekers instead.³⁰

If, as proposed above, fewer people were being accommodated within the asylum system for long periods of time anyway, because people who are obviously refugees underwent a light-touch system, and while others were awaiting a decision they were entitled to work, accommodation costs could be drastically reduced. The funds freed up from this could be redirected into integration support to enable people to get into work, and become part of our communities, as well as towards services in areas of new arrivals that benefit the entire community.

Institutional accommodation in ex-military barracks and similar sites is no solution to the asylum accommodation crisis. Conditions have repeatedly been shown to be unacceptably poor in mass accommodation sites,³¹ and meanwhile hotel accommodation has become a rallying point for far-right organising and misinformation. The distressing living conditions in these facilities, including a lack of privacy, poor treatment, and isolation from services create and exacerbate mental health crises among residents.³²

Accommodation for asylum seekers – whether in hotels, barracks, or rental properties – has become a money-grabbing opportunity for corporations ever since it was outsourced to the private sector more than two decades ago. As companies compete to provide the lowest possible cost service, while squeezing out the largest possible profits for their shareholders, it is no wonder that conditions have deteriorated, with 2024 being the worst year on record for deaths occurring in the asylum estate.³³ The private asylum accommodation model has siphoned huge sums of public money into the hands of three corporations in particular, Serco, Mears, and Clearsprings Ready Homes.³⁴ While all three of these companies have profited from housing asylum seekers in substandard accommodation, it is Clearsprings Ready Homes which is particularly controversial, given the obscene profits its majority shareholder has raked in through its asylum hotel contracts. Graham King,

28 <https://freemovement.org.uk/the-home-office-is-leaving-thousands-of-afghans-in-limbo-in-the-uk/>

29 https://england.shelter.org.uk/were_committed_to_becoming_an_anti-racist_organisation/anti-racism_general_election/social_housing_not_scapegoating

30 <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/news/2022/jun/poor-housing-conditions-contributes-asylum-seekers-marginalisation-uk#:~:text=Through%20case%20studies%20of%20asylum,its%20residents%20struggle%20to%20overcome.>

31 Asylum Matters (2024) ‘Asylum Accommodation: Parliamentary Briefing’ webpage, accessed on: 8 August 2024. <https://asylummatters.org/app/uploads/2024/01/Asylum-Accommodation-Parliamentary-Briefing-AM-January-2024.pdf>

32 Helen Bamber Foundation (2022) ‘Like a prison: The negative impacts of barracks accommodation on the health of people seeking protection’, webpage last accessed: 8 August 2024. https://helenbamber.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/Like%20a%20prison_HBF%20report_Aug%202022.pdf

33 <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2025/feb/10/record-asylum-seekers-died-2024-home-office-care>

34 <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/home-offices-asylum-accommodation-contracts.pdf>

who has been a donor to the Conservative party and obtained his asylum hotel contract under the previous Conservative government, has become a billionaire thanks to the asylum accommodation crisis, and has been featured in 2024 as a new entry as one of the richest men in the UK on the Sunday Times Rich List.³⁵

An alternative, not-for-profit asylum accommodation model where Local Authorities are funded to refurbish vacant and derelict properties in order to provide dignified, community-based housing for asylum seekers as well as other homeless members of their communities is a far more sustainable and urgently needed approach. There is a break clause in the key asylum hotel accommodation contracts coming up in 2026, which the government should make use of to end outsourcing in asylum accommodation altogether.³⁶

These policy changes could produce a new asylum system which puts an end to the chaotic and dangerous smuggling trade in the Channel by providing people with safe alternatives. The system would then quickly provide support and a long-term status to those people who have obviously escaped the most pressing danger, helping them to get on their feet and start to rebuild in a place of safety. Those whose claims are more complex would also receive help to find suitable work or training so as to be able to support themselves, and where housing support is still needed, this would be provided by Local Authorities who are funded to make available sufficient and good quality housing for all residents in need. As asylum seekers are helped to integrate into our communities instead of undergoing a lengthy ordeal aimed at dissuading others from arrival, they could also be given the opportunity to move where possible into the mainstream immigration work process outlined below, accruing points that entitle them to access a formal visa pathway.

³⁵ <https://www.thetimes.com/uk/politics/article/graham-king-asylum-seekers-hostel-billionaire-l09ldxngh#:~:text=King%20made%20his%20debut%20on,a%20function%20of%20increasing%20immigration.>

³⁶ <https://www.refugee-action.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Asylum-Matters-NACCOM-and-Refugee-Action-asylum-housing-brief-October-2024.pdf>

Migrant workers' rights:

The three steps to a rights-based labour immigration strategy are:

1. Reform labour inspection and protections from workplace exploitation
2. Scrap restrictive employer-sponsored visas
3. Integrate asylum seekers into the points-based system

The British economy is and will continue to be reliant on the contributions of migrant workers. Entire sectors, including essential areas such as health and social care and food production, would be utterly unable to function without a migrant work force. Without immigration, over the next decades the UK population would be stagnant, with the number of deaths matching that of births, and the average age increasing, leading to a crisis in our ability to provide services and support our ageing population. The birthrate for England and Wales recently hit 1.41 – the lowest on record for the third year in a row.³⁷

On current predictions, all of the population growth that we are going to rely on in the decade 2022-2032 will come from immigration. While that will mean our population will grow by roughly 7.3%, over the same period, the population of pensionable age is set to grow at almost twice the speed, by 13.8%. Our dependency ratio – the number of people in work, paying tax and providing services versus the number reliant on welfare such as pensions – is therefore tilting to what without immigration would be unsustainable levels.

There is an argument that better mental health support and opportunities for training and apprenticeships for the local population could redress this balance somewhat by increasing the number of people able to work. It is also true that with improvements in pay and conditions in key areas of the economy it may be possible to attract more local workers. These measures are good things to achieve in-and-of themselves, and would help us support our population, but they are simply not enough to account for the de-

mographic deficit that we are facing.³⁸ While there are big uncertainties ahead, especially in relation to how artificial intelligence will impact the labour market, all of the available data at the moment says that our welfare state's continued existence depends on the immigration of workers.

Global demographic trends imply that the countries migrants tend to come from are predicted to experience the same fall in fertility, leading to an ageing and shrinking human population globally. This will pose global challenges around technological innovation and how to support quality jobs and pensions, which states will have to address through international cooperation. But the UK is in a still privileged position of being a destination that for a variety of reasons migrants want to come to, providing a cushion that should make it easier to support pensions in the decades ahead. This is a fact too rarely acknowledged by politicians and one that needs to be explained with great urgency.

Large-scale net immigration of the type the UK benefits from must be well-managed and that means planning for and funding the infrastructure to support a growing population where many of us are older. With well-managed immigration, we are capable of delivering a well-funded health service and ambitious house-building and community-building targets. The idea that we can stick our head in the sand and pretend that the creaking public services infrastructure we currently have would be sufficient if only it weren't for the arrival of foreigners is simply false and must be roundly rejected. The primary challenge to our public health infrastructure is the result of our own growing elderly share of the population who will need to make greater use of the welfare state and health and care services, not the relatively younger and economically active immigrant population who sustain them.³⁹

Managing immigration for work therefore needs to be well-planned and well-managed, and the current system – which has arisen piecemeal out of ad hoc attempts to signal ever greater hostility, rather than designed as a comprehensive system that meets the country's needs – must be completely overhauled.

37 <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/bulletins/birthsummarytablesenglandandwales/2024refreshedpopulations#:~:text=In%202024%2C%20the%20total%20fertility,3rd%20year%20in%20a%20row.>

38 <https://obr.uk/frs/fiscal-risks-and-sustainability-july-2025/#:~:text=Over%20the%20long%20term%2C%20the,has%20taken%20in%20the%20interim.>

39 <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/the-uks-changing-population/>

Migrant workers are more vulnerable than locals to workplace exploitation and abuses for multiple reasons, including risk factors that are hard to mitigate such as the types of work that migrants are more likely to do in higher-risk sectors, or the lack of familiarity with labour standards regulations and pathways to redress in the host country context. However, the current UK work immigration system increases this vulnerability significantly because it is structured in such a way as to create a systemic risk of exploitation, running the spectrum from harassment to modern slavery.⁴⁰ The key factors driving this systemic risk are, employer-sponsorship of visas; short-term, inflexible visas; and the poor structures for labour inspection, including most worryingly the combination of immigration enforcement and inspection raids or shared data.

Reform labour inspections and protections from workplace exploitation

The UK's labour inspection structures are insufficient in general, falling well below the ILO recommended benchmark of one inspector per 10,000 workers.⁴¹ The effectiveness of labour inspections is also severely undermined, however, by the sharing of data and in some cases operation of joint raids between the Home Office and labour inspection. This means that a migrant worker has reason to fear reporting unsafe or exploitative working conditions as they may be targeted by immigration enforcement if they come to the attention of the authorities. This forces migrant workers across a vast range of informal areas of work in particular to endure poor conditions and sometimes severe abuses without the prospect of help. Protections for migrant workers, such as secure reporting procedures including a firewall between labour inspections and immigration enforcement are largely absent from the Labour government's flagship Employment Rights Bill.⁴²

Under the recently-closed Social Care Workers' Visa, for example, migrant workers who depended on their placement with a care home for their right to continue to live in the UK felt unable to complain about extremely poor conditions, for fear that they would be the ones to lose their only livelihood and potentially be forced to leave if they did speak up.⁴³

This fear was not unfounded, as where inspections were carried out and uncovered abuses, the care home's licence

to sponsor visas was revoked, leaving the migrant workers to scramble to try to find an alternative sponsor within the tight deadline, or face losing their right to stay in the UK. This restrictive visa is a perfect case study of how it is stringent visa conditions that disempower migrant workers, leading to a reduction in accountability for employers and so drive down standards in key industries.

By protecting the rights of those workers to submit complaints and have minimum employment standards adhered to without it impacting their immigration status, we could have seen migrant and local workers stand together to achieve better pay and conditions for all instead.

Scrap restrictive employer-sponsored visas

The Care Worker Visa has now been scrapped, but the same logic and conditions that created a systemic risk of abuse on that pathway exists still throughout the work-based immigration system. There needs to be an overhaul of the entire system based around clear principles to promote equal, safe, and dignified working conditions for all, especially in areas of lower paid work, where exploitation risks are higher.⁴⁴

The government must abandon the current model of short-term employer sponsorship for working visas. These visas tie migrant workers to a single employer, putting them in a much greater power imbalance with their employer than usual. On top of the issues outlined above with limiting migrants' access to redress from exploitative working conditions, they limit the flexibility of workers to move freely through the labour market, seeking better pay, conditions, and developing their potential.

The employer sponsorship model suffers from its own rigidity, with minimum salary thresholds meaningless as they require a list of "shortage occupations" where salaries are lower, but demand for skills so intense, that loopholes and bespoke schemes for each area of employment are used to fill the gaps. These bespoke schemes have proliferated since Brexit, with the resulting increase in exploitation documented among migrant care workers,⁴⁵ domestic workers,⁴⁶ and farm workers.⁴⁷ But the risk of exploitation pervades the entire work-sponsorship system as the same restrictions are baked in throughout.

40 <https://www.workrightscentre.org/media/1gxlxig2/final-systemic-drivers-of-migrant-worker-exploitation.pdf>

41 <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2021-05/Enforce%20report%20draft%20Final%20Version%202020%20110521.pdf>

42 <https://labourexploitation.org/publications/employment-rights-bill-tackle-restrictive-visas-or-increase-inequality/>

43 <https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/policy/publications/spotlight-report-no-1-how-work-visa-design-is-driving-exploitation/>

44 <https://labourexploitation.org/publications/blueprint-for-safer-and-fairer-migration/>

45 Unison (2024) 'Expendable labour: The exploitation of migrant care workers', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://www.unison.org.uk/content/uploads/2023/11/Expendable-labour-report.pdf>

46 Kalayaan (2024) '12 Years of Modern Slavery: The smokescreen used to deflect state accountability for migrant domestic workers', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. http://www.kalayaan.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Kalayaan_Report_2024_.pdf

47 Modern Slavery and Human Rights Policy and Evidence Centre (2024) 'UK agriculture and care visas: worker exploitation and obstacles to redress', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://labourexploitation.org/app/uploads/2024/03/Visas-full-report.pdf>

We should not rely on ‘bespoke’ and ad-hoc visa schemes for different groups of workers. This chaotic approach creates a two-tier workforce. It should be streamlined to ensure the rights of all workers, whether migrants or locals, are better aligned.

The current work visa system is points-based in name only, as the sponsorship of an employer (whether through sectoral sponsorship bodies as in the farming sector, or direct individual employment) is the real criteria without which sufficient points cannot be obtained. A better system would allow people to obtain a visa to enter the UK on an equal basis if they fulfil agreed criteria, without seeking to impose sector-by-sector restrictions of length of time, possibility to change employer, and other rights separately on each group. A migrant worker could obtain a visa on the basis of points accrued for skills, education, work experience, connections to the UK, and other relevant factors, without the need for sponsorship from a specific employer. Anyone with a visa permitting them to live in the UK should then be entitled to work, change employer, and bargain for improved pay and conditions on an equal footing to anybody else. The example from immigrants who entered Australia on such a ‘true’ points-based visa saw people entering without a pre-approved job offer had employment rates of over 90% after 18 months. They also commanded higher average salaries than migrants who had entered Australia on employer-sponsored visas.⁴⁸

Integrate asylum seekers into the points-based system

As argued above, asylum seekers must be given the right to work if they are waiting for a decision to be made on their claim. Many asylum seekers bring valuable skills with them – people from all walks of life, including often highly educated people, are sometimes forced to flee their homes. However, people coming from a background of poverty and of fewer educational and training opportunities may also have incredible potential, and should be assisted to access the opportunities that would allow them to do so. Matching asylum seekers with training and support to help them into areas of work where we are specifically in need of support in the UK is an obvious way for asylum seekers and host communities to mutually benefit from their arrival.

However, it is counter-intuitive to run an integration, training and skills-building programme for asylum seekers if the system is designed so as to later reject their claim and spend a huge amount of money on pursuing their deportation from the UK. A system that provides the opportunity for asylum seekers to gain needed skills in order to work in the UK therefore ought to be integrated into the broader points-based work immigration system, in order to provide flexibility and the best return on the training investment that has been made. As asylum seekers accrue skills – whether ability in the English language, skills in shortage areas, and work experience in key areas of our economy – such as food production, care work, hospitality, or construction – they should be able to use those skills to accrue points within the points-based system for attracting workers to the UK described above. This would further incentivise the accrual of valuable skills, while allowing people arriving in the UK to have the flexibility to stay, regardless of the outcome of their asylum application, if they were fulfilling the needs of our economy in other ways.

There would need to be clear safeguards on any such a system to ensure that a person with a claim under Refugee Convention grounds still receive the protected status that they need. However, if managed well, this approach could serve to replace the current nonsensical system we operate, of keeping some people in forced economic inactivity within the asylum system for long periods, or spending immense sums on their detention and deportation, all while we simultaneously spend a significant amount of money recruiting and seeking to attract other workers into areas of the economy that they could have been integrated into instead.

The recruitment of immigrants to fill various areas of work, from healthcare to farming in the UK, is a huge industry beset by problematic processes. These range from dishonest recruitment practices that trap workers unknowingly in exploitative contracts,⁴⁹ to practices that create a ‘brain drain’ impact on developing economies that struggle to fulfil their own health care needs.⁵⁰ Training asylum seekers who are already in the UK is not a silver bullet to replace our demand for foreign workers, but it is irrational not to treat them as the resource that they clearly can be in these areas and instead spend a fortune trying to push them away,⁵¹ all while aggressively seeking out others to bring over in their place.

48 <https://www.homeaffairs.gov.au/research-and-stats/files/csam-cohort3-report-change-in-outcomes-2016.pdf>

49 <https://www.workrightscentre.org/publications/2025/defra-s-survey-of-seasonal-workers-demonstrates-exploitation-risks-of-short-term-sponsored-visas/>

50 <https://www.bmj.com/content/388/bmj.r605>

51 <https://sheffield.ac.uk/news/new-research-reveals-billions-made-companies-involved-uk-border-security>

Integration

1. A simplified, universal pathway to settlement after five years
2. Reintroduce birthright citizenship and reduce integration barriers for children
3. Embrace a positive narrative about immigration, diversity and belonging

Up and down the country our communities feel divided and tense. Race relations are at their lowest and weakest point in decades in the wake of racist riots in the Summer of 2024 that spread into a wave of anti-asylum-seeker protests in the Summer of 2025. The normalisation of far-right narratives, conspiracy theories and fear of migrants, particularly men of Muslim faith, was shockingly evident at the so-called “Unite the Kingdom” rally on 13th September 2025, organised by Stephen Yaxley-Lennon, alias ‘Tommy Robinson’, and openly backed by the world’s richest man, Elon Musk. This street mobilisation sits alongside the entry of Nigel Farage and other Reform politicians into the House of Commons and their current commanding position in opinion polling. Not only has the Conservative party been completely overtaken by the same nativist, hard-right agenda, but even the Labour Party has spent much of its first year in power echoing these narratives and promoting hostile policies. There is an urgent need to address and to counter the rise of a racist and hate-filled discourse, and to understand how systemic failings in our immigration system have contributed to a lack of community cohesion.

The immigration system we currently operate is a major obstacle to successful integration for all immigrants and refugees, based as it is in the case of the asylum system on the logic of deterrence, and in the rest of the immigration system increasingly on a ‘guest worker’ system of temporary and restrictive grants of leave to remain. This means that, whether refugees, workers, or families, immigrants who are going to settle in the UK for the long term must often first undergo many years of being an outsider, navigating a system that causes stress and economic hardship

and which is designed primarily for hostility. Pathways to citizenship and a stable status in the UK have been pushed further out of reach from migrant communities,⁵² while racist narratives about whether people belonging to ethnic minorities can ever “truly” be English have entered the mainstream discourse.⁵³

Citizenship ought to be celebrated and promoted by the government as the ultimate symbol of integration of migrant communities. There is strong public support for the notion that long-term immigrants to the UK should naturalise as citizens and embrace the rights and responsibilities of full and equal membership of the nation.⁵⁴ Instead, this government has followed in the footsteps of previous ones in taking steps to make citizenship, or even permanent settlement, less accessible, forcing more people to live for the long term with a precarious, temporary status in our communities. This is intended to enable the government to point at an overall net reduction in the number of immigrants living here, but it does no such thing, it simply means the people who are building their homes here are forced to do so on shakier ground.

When Theresa May was Home Secretary from 2010-2016, the then government pledged to reduce net immigration to under 100,000. The immigration system was thus redesigned to reduce the rights of immigrants, not only in the workplace as discussed above, but in terms of settlement and access to services, in order to encourage them to leave, thereby reducing overall numbers. This is the infamous “hostile environment” policy, which resulted in the Windrush Scandal.⁵⁵ Despite the scandal, and clear evidence that the hostile policies exacerbated racial discrimination, let alone their failure to reduce immigrant numbers in any case, none of the hostile environment policies have been repealed to this day.⁵⁶

This government has failed to learn the lesson from this failed experiment, and is instead apparently keen to repeat it beat for beat. In her white paper on immigration, the then Home Secretary Yvette Cooper promised to extend the time before most immigrants would be eligible to apply

⁵² <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restoring-control-over-the-immigration-system-white-paper>

⁵³ <https://www.suellabraverman.co.uk/news/i-will-never-be-truly-english-here-why>

⁵⁴ <https://www.britishfuture.org/fewer-than-1-in-10-people-support-badenochs-proposed-15-year-wait-on-citizenship-poll/>

⁵⁵ <https://jcw.org.uk/reportsbriefings/windrush-scandal-explained/>

⁵⁶ Crisis (2019) ‘The High Court made the right call with ‘Right to Rent’: Now it’s time for government to act’, website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://www.crisis.org.uk/about-us/the-crisis-blog/the-high-court-made-the-right-call-with-right-to-rent-now-it-s-time-for-the-government-to-act/>

for settlement or citizenship, doubling the period of precarity from five to ten years. She also removed the right to ever obtain citizenship at all from refugees who enter the country through irregular means. This means that people recognised as victims of persecution, who we have a legal duty to protect and offer a place to rebuild their lives to, will never now be able to become British, even if they live here for the rest of their lives.⁵⁷

There are ways to reduce immigrant numbers, but this should never be achieved – and indeed has demonstrably not been achieved – by reducing the rights of those who do come to the country. Whatever the number of people we allow to enter the country, those people should enjoy equal rights and dignity when here and be supported to become full members of our communities. Instead, we have a system that brings in high numbers of immigrants with very limited rights, creating a two-tier society and exacerbating poverty and divisions.

A simplified, universal pathway to settlement after five years

The immigration visa system is unnecessarily complex and punitive. Different categories of worker have differing lengths of leave, differing limitations on their pathways to settlement, and differing opportunity to work or change employer. These disparities result in a byzantine, inefficient system where poorer and racialised migrants are most adversely affected.⁵⁸ This complexity reflects the fact that the immigration system was never designed to meet the UK's immigration needs as one coherent whole, but developed over decades of successive governments responding to the perceived need to limit migrants' rights on the one hand, while maintaining the flow of labour on the other, resulting in a terrible mess. In addition to the simplified points-based visa system for work proposed above, there should be one, uniform process for access to settlement and citizenship for all migrants. This should comprise a secure, permanent status guaranteed after five years' residence, followed by a route to citizenship. Such an approach has been shown to enjoy strong support from the public.⁵⁹

A universal five-year route to settlement would significantly reduce the instability and exclusion of migrant families forced to remain in an arbitrary "temporary" status for extended periods, which can lead to lost work, study and development opportunities and have a negative impact on mental health.⁶⁰ Secure and accessible pathways to settlement would also reduce the number of people who become undocumented when they are unable to renew their leave and lose their formal immigration status.⁶¹

All forms of residence in the UK ought to count equally towards the required five-year period for settlement, replacing the current situation where certain types of leave, for example as a student or worker on a temporary visa, does not "count" towards the accumulated residence years' requirement. Taking this logic a step further, the UK should take the example of other European countries by introducing accessible pathways to a regular status and settlement for people who currently have no formal immigration status as well. While factors such as participation in the workforce or family ties enable the regularisation of undocumented migrants in France and Spain, routes to regain a regular status for someone who has lost it in the UK are incredibly restrictive.⁶²

Trapping people outside of the regular immigration system with no route to redress does not make them disappear, for all of the hostility that people in those circumstances face. Indeed, research suggests that the undocumented migrant population in the UK is largely made up of long-term residents with about a third estimated to have been living in the UK more than a decade.⁶³ The Spanish have undertaken major regularisation drives to bring undocumented migrants in this situation into the formal economy on several occasions over the last decades, gaining significantly in economic terms from their integration into formal systems. The Spanish experience also provides strong evidence against the idea that such regularisation drives act as a "pull factor" for more migrants to enter or stay on an irregular basis, hoping for the chance of regularisation down the line. In Spain, no change in the rates of undocumented residents have been observed in the years following large regularisation programmes.⁶⁴

57 <https://migrantsrights.org.uk/2025/06/11/refugee-citizenship-ban-good-character/>

58 Oxford University Migration Observatory (2021) 'Migrants on 10-year routes to settlement in the UK', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/migrants-on-ten-year-routes-to-settlement-in-the-uk/>

59 UK in a Changing Europe (2024) 'Migration to the UK after Brexit: Policy, politics and public opinion', website last accessed: 8 August 2024 <https://ukandeu.ac.uk/reports/migration-to-the-uk-policy-politics-and-public-opinion/>

60 IPPR (2023) 'A punishing process: Experiences of people on the 10-year route to settlement', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://www.ippr.org/articles/a-punishing-process>

61 JCWI (2021) 'We Are Here: Routes to regularisation for the UK's undocumented population', website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://jcw.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/JCWI-We-Are-Here-2021-A4-web-ready-1.pdf>

62 https://picum.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Regularisation-mechanisms-and-programmes_Why-they-matter-and-how-to-design-them_EN.pdf

63 <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/fact-sheet/unauthorized-immigrants-in-the-united-kingdom/>

64 thinking Migration: The Spanish Model, Racho & De Clerke, Forthcoming Autumn 2025

Reintroduce birthright citizenship and reduce integration barriers for children

Most of the public mistakenly believe that a child born on British soil is automatically entitled to British citizenship,⁶⁵ as is the case in the USA and France among other countries. This has in fact not been the case since the 1981 British Nationality Act which ended automatic birthright citizenship in the UK. This act was one of several in the post-World War 2 period (1962, 1968 and 1971) that gradually restricted the rights of immigrants from the British Empire and Commonwealth to move to the United Kingdom. The 1981 Act should be put in the context of the fraught race relations of the time, with rising National Front marches and systemic police racism terrorising minority communities. The Act and associated policies have subsequently been found by a 2024 independent Home Office investigation into the origins of the Windrush scandal to have had the intention of limiting the number of people who were not white who would be able to settle here.⁶⁶ John Tilley, the left wing Labour MP who represented constituents in Lambeth who would be affected by these changes, argued in 1982 that it would disproportionately impact black communities, pointing out these children were already experiencing racism and economic disadvantage more widely.⁶⁷

Today, more than four decades later, the process for obtaining British citizenship, even as a child born in this country and who has never known another home, is expensive and bureaucratically complex.⁶⁸ Barriers to citizenship for children and young people often aren't even known to them until such time as they plan to travel, or to attend university and find themselves ineligible for student loans.⁶⁹ This can have a severe impact on the mental health of young people who consider themselves British, and can impact their career paths, and ability to reach their potential.

The government should restore the automatic right to be considered a British citizen to everyone born in this country, and remove the economic barriers that prevent people from lower income families from registering, even when they are eligible for citizenship. This would not only reduce hardship unnecessarily faced by young people whose home is the UK, it would send a strong message about what citizenship means, pushing back against racist and exclusionary messaging and making it clear: if you build your life here, you and your children will belong here.

Children who are British in all but paperwork are also negatively impacted by harsh and counter-productive immigration policies in other ways, despite the fact that they are in no meaningful way “foreign” to this country. Policies like the ban on migrant households accessing state support including universal credit – the No Recourse to Public Funds (NRPF) condition – has been named as a major barrier to ending child poverty.⁷⁰ The exclusion of households with children from access to the welfare state is responsible for trapping families in cycles of poverty and debt, and has been found to represent no savings at all to public finances anyway, because it forces people into dire situations where they are more likely to have to rely on emergency support, which is more expensive.⁷¹ Ending NRPF entirely in favour of a universal state support system available to all residents at the time of need would greatly decrease financial hurdles that keep migrant communities as “outsiders” in our communities for the long term. At the very least in the interim, the exemption of families with children from NRPF would allow us to overcome the arbitrarily imposed long-term impacts of child poverty on young people who are highly likely to end up living in the UK for their entire lives.

Embrace a positive narrative about immigration, diversity and belonging

Beyond the practical policy barriers, we are also seeing a significant deterioration in community relations and a sharp rise in hostility and outright racism aimed at immigrants. This has, shamefully, not been robustly responded to by the Labour government. The communications from the government has often been disastrous – playing into false anti-migrant and xenophobic narratives. In a particular low point, the Prime Minister's flagship immigration speech in March 2025, even appeared to echo the language of Enoch Powell's infamous Rivers of Blood speech. Government Ministers have repeatedly failed to condemn violent and racist anti asylum-seeker demonstrations, at times even expressing their sympathy for the angry mobs who have terrorised innocent refugees. The government's white paper on immigration claimed, contrary to the evidence,⁷² that immigration has a negative economic impact, and shockingly went further in describing immigration over the last decade as having done “incalculable harm” to the country. This represented an appalling and demeaning capitulation to xenophobic lies about immigration. It is well past time to change this broken approach to far-right radi-

65 <https://www.britishfuture.org/citizenship-inquiry-report/>

66 <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-historical-roots-of-the-windrush-scandal/the-historical-roots-of-the-windrush-scandal-independent-research-report-accessible#:~:text=Major%20immigration%20legislation%20in%201962,half%20of%20the%20twentieth%20century.>

67 It should be noted that it was common among anti-racists at the time to refer to all minority ethnic communities as “black”, a more general use of the term that that has fallen out of favour today. Source: Hansard, Immigration, Volume 31: debated on Thursday 11 November 1982. <https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/1982-11-11/debates/8e460419-68e7-4c3d-8225-ff832a68139e/Immigration>

68 <https://prcbc.org/why-is-british-citizenship-important-to-children-and-young-adults/>

69 We Belong (2021) ‘The deintegration generation’, website last accessed: 8 August 2024. <https://www.welbelong.org.uk/issue/deintegration-generation-we-belong-report>

70 <https://www.ippr.org/articles/every-child-is-equal>

71 <https://www.lse.ac.uk/geography-and-environment/research/lse-london/documents/Reports/Social-Cost-Benefit-Analysis-of-the-NRPF-policy-in-London.pdf>

72 <https://obr.uk/box/the-impact-of-migration-on-the-fiscal-forecast/>

calisation that mimics and legitimises it.

There are no doubt genuine policy challenges to integrating immigrants. Provision must above all be made for the infrastructure needs that arise from population growth. However, the rhetoric and public communications embraced by the government are making the lives of not only migrants, but non-white British people too, much harder. The level of racist activity on our streets is leading to a feeling of oppression, fear and exclusion among our communities, the government's job is to represent all of us, and to actively work to make clear that all residents count equally. They are failing utterly in this task.

It is obvious to all observers that the perceived need to respond to and represent growing anti-migrant sentiment and head off the gains of the Reform Party are what is motivating Labour's hardline approach. This is morally abhorrent to many of the party's traditional base of voters, let

alone the party membership. However, it is also unlikely to have any positive impact in electoral terms either, as we saw when the exact same approach was attempted by the last Conservative government, who pursued anti-migrant rhetoric and policy almost as if it were a religion, and suffered the electoral consequences in July 2024. Research has repeatedly demonstrated that attempts by centrist parties to echo the language and policies of the anti-migrant far right does nothing to win back their supporters, and in fact drives them further away.⁷³ One recent study found that directly after being shown a video put out by the Labour government showing the deportation of immigrants, respondents were more likely to say they would vote for Nigel Farage than before they were shown it.⁷⁴ By reinforcing the negative messages about immigrants, Labour raises the salience of the issue, reinforcing the idea that these are the types of questions we should be asking about Britain's problems and implicitly pushing voters in the direction of far right parties that prioritise these issues.

Conclusion

The seriousness of this political moment cannot be overstated. The UK's approach to immigration, humanitarian law, and the wellbeing of our diverse populations is up for debate like never before. The country is crying out for leadership that can take the heat out of the migration issue and take steps to manage immigration humanely and responsibly. The current government has so far been a crushing disappointment to its own core voters, and has comprehensively failed to win the trust of the voters of parties to its right either. But Labour still ultimately controls the levers of power, and can use them to rebuild confidence in our democratic institutions and address the many social injustices and challenges that the country faces. To do this,

getting a handle on the question of immigration and prioritising the development of a functional and humane system is vital. There is still time before the next election, and it remains perfectly possible to turn the moment and the messaging around, to give hope to the large democratic majority that reject the politics of Farage and 'Tommy Robinson'.

The stakes could not be higher. If Labour does not learn to tell a different story about immigration, they will gift the country to the hands of the far right, with disastrous consequences for all. It is time for change.

⁷³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/commentisfree/2022/apr/13/copying-far-right-doesnt-help-mainstream-parties>

⁷⁴ <https://strongmessagehere.substack.com/p/what-messages-might-reform-be-vulnerable>

About the Author

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Time for change



Immigration has re-emerged as voters' top concern in the UK, but the debate is dominated by punitive rhetoric over workable policy. The current approach of deterrence, harder routes to settlement and citizenship, and the focus on reducing numbers, fuels irregular arrivals, harms cohesion, and denies the UK's economic needs, especially in the context of an ageing population.



All the while, the UK needs immigration to sustain growth and fund public services in an ageing society. Furthermore, people will keep seeking safety and opportunity here. Policy needs to manage this in a safe, orderly, fair and responsible way and politicians must reject xenophobic and dehumanising narratives about immigrants.



Policies are required to promote migrants' and workers' rights to strengthen cohesion and integration, and overall community well-being and labour standards. With safe routes, stronger workers' rights, a reformed asylum and visa system, and a robust and solidarity-based integration strategy, it will save lives, address dissatisfaction in the population, promote growth and end the catastrophe and loss of life that has been allowed to develop in the channel and elsewhere.

Further information on this topic can be found here:

➔ uk.fes.de