

# Routes to resolution

Finding the centre ground in Britain's immigration debates

Jonathan Thomas

**SMF**

**Social Market  
Foundation**

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## FOREWORD

**by James Kirkup, Director of the Social Market Foundation**

As director of the SMF, my job is generally to publish research and thinking that enjoys the widest possible support from readers. We're a cross-party charity dedicated to building consensus, after all.

But there are exceptions to that approach, and I don't expect this report to be welcomed by all. In fact, I expect that quite a lot of people who engage with it will disagree with it. If you take a restrictionist approach because you believe that the mass of public opinion is against migration, your position is challenged here. If you take a liberal approach because you believe that opinion is inevitably shifting in your favour, you will also find your position tested. Whatever your perspective on immigration issues, there's something here for you to dislike.

This is quite deliberate. Not because we seek provocation for its own sake, but because of that mission to build consensus and thus durable policy. While the SMF inclines towards a liberal approach on migration, we do so in the knowledge that liberal migration policies are only sustainable if they enjoy public and political consent. Such consent cannot be wished into existence and it cannot be assumed to exist because of a lack of public dissent.

Here, I should note that I am among the people whose positions Jonathan Thomas challenges in this report. When he writes critically of those who argue that Britain's post-Brexit liberalism on immigration reflects voters' satisfaction at what they perceive as the nation's restored "control" over entry, he might well count me among his subjects. It's a good challenge and one I welcome: the analysis here has certainly made me think harder about this issue.

I hope it does the same for others too, because if there was ever an issue of public policy where entrenched thinking – on all sides – needs to be tested and shaken, this is it. Not least because, as Jonathan sets out here, the questions facing Britain over migration in the decades ahead are only going to get bigger and more complicated.

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### The future

In the year ending June 2022, long-term immigration into the UK was estimated at around 1.1 million. This is an increase of 435,000 on the previous year.

This high level of migration is often put down to the unique circumstances following the COVID-19 pandemic and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. Much political and expert opinion suggests that future flows are unlikely to reach the levels seen today.

In fact, both supply- and demand-side factors mean that the UK's future migration trend may be towards inflows remaining at historically high levels in the medium to long term.

On the demand side, skills and labour shortages may be worsened by an ageing resident population often reluctant to work longer.

And while politicians from both main parties talk about increasing the skills and productivity of the resident workforce in order to reduce the UK economy's need for migrant labour, such promises are much easier made than delivered. Even if those promises could be realised, Japan is providing a reminder that even a high-productivity polity averse to immigration might have to reconsider its position as its population ages.

On the supply side, Britain's historic ties to the most populous nations elsewhere are likely to mean significant numbers of working-age people willing and able to come to the UK. Demographic trends that are already locked in mean that, in the period to 2050, two such countries – India and Nigeria – will provide most of the world's young people actively looking for jobs and a better life.

Credible academic forecasts predict a near tripling of the number of first-generation immigrants in the UK over the next three decades. Such predictions should be given more attention by UK policymakers.

### Post Brexit liberalism

Since leaving the EU, the UK has run strikingly liberal immigration policies, with little public or political dissent. The UK agreed to grant the right to permanently stay in the UK to over 5 million EU or related citizens post-Brexit, on much more generous and straightforward terms than existed pre-Brexit. Over 5 million of Hong Kong's residents have been offered the right to permanently come to the UK.

While overall comparison is hard between pre- and post-Brexit, and pre- and post-pandemic migration statistics, administrative statistics all show large increases since 2019: 72% for work visas, 71% for student visas and 61% for family visas.



Over the last three years the rise in the student numbers coming to the UK from India, Nigeria and Pakistan has been staggering, even if it has had relatively little attention in public debate. Since 2019, Indian student numbers are 117,965 up 215%. Nigerian student numbers are 57,545, up 686%. Pakistani student numbers are 18,563, up 377%.

## The public

UK attitudes and policies over migration in recent years show that many of the most strident voices in public debate are wrong when they suggest that the British polity is a seething mass of voters angrily opposed to all immigration. Such mistaken voices can be found in both the liberal and restrictionist camps.

Across the Red Wall, which encompasses many parts of the UK supposedly most socially conservative and resistant to more open immigration policies, there appears to be clear net positive support for multiculturalism and for the view that “having a wide variety of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures is part of British culture”, as well as for the broader view that immigration has “generally been good for the country”.

Britain stands near the top of the international league table for those countries whose public most support the idea that people ought to be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution.

## Drivers of attitudes on immigration

Academic evidence suggests voters’ attitudes to immigration are largely stable over their lifetimes. They are formed around the time of reaching adulthood and thereafter do not seem to change that much. There is no evidence of people becoming more anti-immigration as they age.

In the long term, this suggests that Britain will become steadily more open to immigration, since today’s younger cohorts are largely more liberal on migration than their older compatriots. But immigration liberals taking comfort from that thought should accept that this makes it very unlikely that immigration attitudes in the UK have undergone a significant and sustained positive shift since the EU Referendum.

This view offers an alternative explanation of “populist” anti-immigration politics across Western democracies. They are not a result of voters becoming more restrictive on immigration. They are a response to increasingly liberal positions. As more and more younger voters – who tend to have more liberal attitudes – reach voting age, older voters with more restrictive attitudes become more concerned about migration, increasing its salience.

## The importance of numbers

The decision by the UK Office for National Statistics to abandon its quarterly reporting of regular migration numbers based on the International Passenger Survey (IPS) is of huge and under-appreciated importance for UK immigration politics. Its absence has helped take debates about regular migration numbers out of media reporting and so political discourse.

In the absence of data on regular migration, attention has turned to the numbers of people entering the UK via an irregular route: crossing the Channel without authorisation. The publication of official estimates for crossings – reported by the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence – has resulted in greater attention and led to focus on sub-groups such as Albanian nationals.

## A trend towards liberal attitudes on irregular migration, and its causes

Despite the significant media and political attention being given to irregular migration, public and political attitudes to that migration are significantly more liberal and less restrictive than when UK debate was last focused on such migration in the 2000s.

Despite restrictive rhetoric from ministers promising crackdowns and strong criticism from campaigners complaining of unfair restrictions, the reality of UK asylum suggests a liberalism that does not match the description offered by either side. The UK's overall recognition rate of asylum claims in recent times has been very high, in both absolute and relative terms.

Britain stands near the top of the charts of those countries whose public support the right for those escaping from war or persecution to take refuge here. The British public are more inclined to believe asylum claimants than the public in most other countries.

Causes:

- Newspapers railing against asylum seekers do so less stridently, and have much less power to shape opinion and narratives, than they did two decades ago.
- The growth of refugee resettlement schemes in the UK in the past decade means there have been increasing opportunities for connection between refugees and ordinary British people.
- Refugees have been seen to be fleeing bad actors in Syria, Afghanistan, and Ukraine.
- Even politicians appealing to voters concerned about irregular migration have mostly focused their rhetoric not on the migrants themselves but on the gangs and smugglers facilitating and exploiting them.
- There is little official data on the overall population of irregular migrants in the UK, and as a result little public discourse on this topic.

## Has Britain become relaxed about economic migration?

It is sometimes argued that the salience of immigration in the list of the British public's main concerns now appears to have fallen because the public is now confident that the country has greater control over immigration numbers and will thus now tolerate more migrants, confident they are admitted for sound economic reasons.

Politically there is consensus that the post-Brexit ‘points-based’ work immigration system is reflective of the public mood. The narrowing divides between Labour and Conservative could help reduce the politicisation and the public profile of the issue in the UK and give cause for optimism that the UK can avoid the worst polarising effects of the immigration debate seen in the US. But it also carries risks.

### **Risks to the trend towards liberalism**

The asylum claims received by the UK are small, both relative to those received by other countries and relative to the UK’s irregular migration population, estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands. Yet Channel crossings get significant attention in public discourse, affirming some voters’ concerns that the UK does not fully control its borders.

Ministers are making extravagant promises of policies supposed to reduce numbers and demonstrate “control”. Failure to deliver on those promises will only heighten concerns about control and numbers.

If the UK experienced asylum flows in much larger numbers than at present, in much more challenging circumstances, relatively liberal attitudes could be eroded. Given Britain’s longstanding connections to some of the most populous countries on earth – India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh – such flows must be considered a possibility.

The UK’s post-Brexit labour immigration system provides a greater opportunity than did the pre-Brexit regime for those from outside the EU not only to come to work in the UK for a period, but also to permanently settle here.

Over the longer term the UK’s deep historical connections with some of the most populated countries across the globe – India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh – have the potential to create far more sizeable flows of people to the UK than the smaller and stagnating populations of the EU ever realistically could.

### **Do recent migration changes show control is more important than numbers?**

Some argue that lack of public complaint about these things shows that control trumps numbers. But their position is effectively that the UK has now reverted to a default position for liberal democratic states of operating a liberal migration policy behind the veil of political consensus and limited official data.

This position is unsustainable. Official data on migration numbers will re-enter public conversation. And the political consensus favouring economic arguments for liberal migration policy is extremely fragile. That consensus also creates an opportunity for political disruptors, an opportunity seized by Nigel Farage and UKIP in the early 2010s.

## A new approach to asylum

Refugee rights advocates should consider supporting a fundamental change in international refugee law, to break the link between where the asylum claim is made, who determines the claim and – if the claim is accepted – in which country the refugee is then settled. Only allowing asylum claims to be considered from people who are not in a country's territory can remove the incentives that drive the people-smuggling business model.

The UK cannot bring about a new multilateral regime for asylum cases. But it could attempt its own unilateral reform to create a new approach that learns from both the “control” and “numbers” arguments.

Under this regime:

- Refugee numbers accepted could be limited by the state.
- Those arriving and making asylum claims in the UK would not be prioritised ahead of refugees elsewhere in the world.
- Fewer refugees would die making dangerous journeys.
- More refugees than currently allowed could be admitted to the UK.

Refugee advocates and those more open to the UK accepting refugees should support such an approach as a durable compromise with restrictionists, and one that is more likely to survive future challenges than the *status quo*.

On Channel crossings, the UK should accept that the France has no obligation and little incentive to help Britain on asylum, particularly during times when France has received asylum applications at roughly three times the UK rate, and accepts a greater number of refugees than the UK does.

The only way to strike a meaningful deal with France to curb the flow of migrants across the Channel is for the UK to take in refugees, from France and/or elsewhere in the EU. Such a deal would increase UK control over its borders and reduce irregular migration, with the quid pro quo of increasing the number of refugees Britain offers protection to. Liberals and restrictionists alike should support such an outcome.

## A new approach to labour migration

There is substantial common ground in the labour immigration debate. Most politicians and commentators accept the need to source skills and labour in genuine areas of shortage. There is also a widespread acknowledgement that to fulfil the needs of the UK's economy and society both now and in the future context of an ageing population, immigration will almost certainly play an important part. But is not, and cannot be, the only answer.

The case for labour immigration thus needs to be clearly presented as *supplementing*, not supplanting, what the UK domestically already has, or realistically could have, available. The value of a more open approach to labour immigration must be set out in a way that clearly acknowledges political and public concerns around the appropriate balance with other interests; is the UK investing enough in the skills base of its school leavers? Or sufficiently in its re-training its elder workers? Or in overlooked categories of the under-employed?

Much more should be done to highlight the significant costs paid by employers to sponsor overseas workers, and in particular the Immigration Skills Charge.

A core aspect of this approach – and an important *quid pro quo* for shorter-term immigration asks being politically and publicly acceptable – would be to pro-actively engage with longer term workforce planning between key stakeholders to develop workable, strategic resourcing solutions for key sectors of the economy and society.

Building on the NHS Employers Code of Practice for International Recruitment, the UK should focus on helping to strategically shape migration sustainably on mutually beneficial terms with those countries from which the UK is receiving migrants, making sure that the story from the perspective of those countries is ultimately ‘brain gain’, not ‘brain drain’. This means, through ‘global skills partnerships’, identifying, but also actively and constructively helping to develop, *before* they arrive, the skills of the potential pool of migrant workers in a way that can contribute to the UK economy and society but also to the development of their own country.

## INTRODUCTION

There are many and varied influential numbers and statistics related to immigration into the UK. But from 2010, one number – annual net migration to the UK – has reigned supreme in British political discourse and public perception. Its quarterly reporting by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) became a regular, frequently fraught, highlight of the media calendar, bringing political turmoil in its wake. And then, having wreaked havoc, the net migration number quietly slipped away, and was gone. What happened to it? Did its departure from the scene mean that all the fracture and tension that attended it are also over? And is it now back, in different form?

Whether one believes that public concerns over immigration into the UK are motivated by numbers<sup>1</sup> of immigrants or by perceived (lack of) control over those numbers, there are few policy areas where, in recent times, numbers have been so important. What matters; numbers or control? That question still seems not only to hover over everything, but itself to generate its own tribal energy on both sides of the immigration debate. This paper argues that is the core of the problem; it is a false dichotomy, one that obfuscates rather than illuminates.

The purpose of this paper is to consider the immigration lessons of the UK's recent past, in light of where the country is now and what may lie ahead. In this respect Faulkner's famous line seems particularly apt: 'The past is never dead. It's not even past.'<sup>2</sup> The underlying factors, pressure points, and challenges that so contributed to the recent divisions over immigration have not simply dissipated. They are not only very much still present; some elements of them have the potential to become significantly intensified going forward.

This is not to promote a negative take on developments, but a realistic one, indeed one with potentially profoundly positive consequences. To cite another well-known line: 'If you always do what you always did, you'll always get what you always got.'<sup>3</sup> It is important to reflect on what just happened, to understand the key underlying factors that persist, the key pressure points that remain, and the continuity in the challenges to be faced. It can give policymakers the power to acknowledge and address those pressures and challenges.

But it is also important to understand that the path taken by immigration politics and policies in the UK was not inevitable. Things did not have to turn out the way that they did. Far from the direction of travel being only one way, the evidence suggests that the divides over immigration in British society having been overplayed. Notwithstanding the important factors, pressure points and challenges that provided the backdrop, it was the overlay of very specific decisions, actions and reactions which shaped the events and the course of immigration politics and policy in the UK. Interrogating those factors, pressure points and challenges, but also the responses to them, can illuminate important lessons for the future.

## CHAPTER ONE – IMMIGRATION NUMBERS IN THE UK; A SHORT POLITICAL HISTORY

### Immigration numbers in the UK change the course of history! A straightforward story

In a 1995 paper, *Modes of Immigration Politics in Liberal Democratic States*, Gary Freeman posited that (while there were some differences between different categories of such states depending on their history of immigration and its place in their foundation story) there were important common characteristics between them in terms of their immigration politics. In essence the core argument was that:

- States present themselves as running relatively restrictive immigration policies, in order to placate their public;
- But they do so while in fact running relatively expansionary immigration policies to placate the most powerful interests of their business community and best serve the state's economic ambitions;
- This is possible because of the temporal dimension of immigration; it builds up slowly over time, so its impact remains largely invisible to the public for a significant period;
- A key aspect of keeping immigration invisible and off the public agenda is ensuring that “there are serious barriers to the acquisition of information about immigration” including that “official data [on immigration] is not generally available to the public”<sup>4</sup>;
- This is all supported by a consensus of the major political parties which conspire to take immigration off the political agenda, making no serious binding commitments on it, shutting down debate over immigration by “subjecting those who criticize liberal policies to abusive charges of racism”, and making sure that no public vote is ever presented as a referendum on immigration policy.

In another paper though, written around the same time, Freeman suggested that the UK specifically might be something of an outlier, its more restrictive immigration policy being in fact much more aligned than most states with its public opinion; a ‘deviant case’ as he put it.<sup>5</sup>

That said, even he could surely not have envisaged how spectacularly and wilfully deviant the UK would become over the following two decades, when the UK was to do everything that he had argued liberal democratic states categorically do not do in respect of immigration politics. In short:

- Instead of immigration being taken off the political agenda, it was increasingly, and very deliberately, thrust centre-stage by politicians of both major parties;
- Instead of vague/no promises, politicians began to offer clear commitments on restricting numbers;



- The fact that the immigration to the UK most in the spotlight was from Europe meant that, while there were indeed accusations of bigotry aimed at those raising concerns, the debate was less muted by allegations of racism;
- Instead of the British public being provided with no meaningful information on immigration, they were suddenly inundated with official immigration statistics, on a quarterly basis;
- Finally, instead of never being given a say on immigration policy, the public were then invited to vote in a referendum on continued EU membership, which the major political parties allowed to be hijacked by those who wanted to make this a referendum on the EU's freedom of movement rules.

Fundamental to the political impact of these developments was the visibility of immigration numbers. In two senses, real and statistical:

First, the combination of politics and economics resulted in the UK experiencing such a rapid and unprecedented inflow of workers from Eastern Europe that Freeman's temporal dimension was dramatically foreshortened. There was no incremental slow build up which masked what was happening. In fact, allied to the fact that significant amounts of this Eastern European workforce went to work in low-paid sectors of the economy in areas of the UK that had not previously experienced very much immigration at all, some towns in eastern and middle England, such as Boston<sup>6</sup>, experienced a rapid, significant, and very visible change to their locale.

Second though, was the fact that from August 2010 the ONS, which had long issued Long-Term International Migration statistics, began to issue a quarterly release of the provisional rolling estimate of the annual long-term international migration for the UK, including immigration, emigration, and net migration figures.<sup>7</sup> Media interest in immigration numbers, which had been growing since the early 2000s<sup>8</sup>, now had regularly released official numbers on which to focus their attention. Which in turn quickly began to provide both a focus to, and a corroboration of, the growing concerns amongst some sections of the public about increasing levels of immigration into the UK.

But it was two televised political events in the first half of 2010 that really helped to establish, indeed to frame, the status and importance of these reported numbers.

10 January 2010: the then leader of the opposition, David Cameron, answered a BBC television interview question by stating that, on an annual basis, he "would like to see net immigration in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands".<sup>9</sup> Following the general election in May this statement de facto became the new Government's net immigration target. For large portions of the media, the existence of this target was to electrify the impact of the quarterly announcement of the net migration number.

28 April 2010: the then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, in the final week of campaigning for the General Election, engaged in a street 'walkabout' in Rochdale, during which he engaged in conversation with retired council worker and lifelong Labour voter, Gillian Duffy. She did not waste the once in a lifetime opportunity this presented, questioning him on a range of matters. But one in particular<sup>10</sup> was to have explosive repercussions:



**“You can't say anything about the immigrants... but all these Eastern Europeans that are coming in, where are they flocking from?”**

The Prime Minister initially reacted politely. But he completely sidestepped her concern in his answer, instead focusing on the benefits to young Britons of enjoying freedom of movement to the Continent. Then, after the event, not realising that he was still being recorded, he referred to her as a ‘bigoted woman’, intimating that this was because she had raised the topic of immigration with him.

Nothing could have more starkly exposed the chasm between two very different worldviews on immigration. On the one hand, a technocratic political approach intent on focusing on what appeared to make most logical sense to the economy and society at the big picture level. And, on the other, an individual voter concerned about what all that meant at the personal level of her own life and experience in her community. In front of viewers’ eyes, the impersonal statistics of immigration numbers were transformed into something very personal. And for those of the British public worried that their concerns over immigration numbers were not only not being listened to by their political masters, but indeed that they were increasingly being regarded with contempt for even raising the question, it is hard to think of a vignette that could possibly have been better staged to confirm that impression.

It might have been thought that the impact of the ‘Ms Duffy incident’ would be short-lived, any concerns doused by the election of a new government explicitly focused on controlling immigration flows and determined to restrict net annual immigration numbers into the UK to ‘tens of thousands’. Instead, the opposite happened. Rather than being consigned to the dustbin of history, the incident became an important part of history. In fact, in the words of John Rentoul, “Ms Duffy turned out to have been a harbinger from the future”<sup>11</sup>.

Concerns over immigration numbers became amplified, not dampened, ratcheting up to a whole new level. For all the tough talk of a ‘hostile environment’, and a succession of more restrictive immigration policies around the edges, curated by Theresa May as Home Secretary, the government’s net immigration target only served to create a regular-as-clockwork media-ready story. Every three months, voters were told that the net immigration target was not even close to being hit, and that immigration numbers to the UK were not in fact in the government’s control at all.

As it became widely argued that one of the fundamental reasons for this was that the government had no control over the numbers of EU workers entering the country to work, taking advantage of EU freedom of movement rights, the issue of immigration numbers began to feed into an even bigger question – that of EU membership. Where the Conservative Party’s 2010 election campaign had featured the promise of a net migration target, its 2015 election campaign included the promise of a referendum on the UK’s continued membership of the EU.

The ONS' quarterly net migration number for the UK, allied to the chaotic scenes of the refugee crisis of the summer 2015 across Europe, played into overlapping concerns around immigration control that were not all related to the UK's relationship with the EU, but, in the UK, increasingly became focused on it. It was thus that the net migration number was about to significantly contribute to a radical reordering not only of the UK's entire relationship with the EU, but, at least in the short term, to the very alignment of the voters and parties within the UK political system.

Only after Britain had formally left the EU was there sufficient political space for Prime Minister Boris Johnson, to quietly abandon his party's net immigration target. This might seem completely counterintuitive. For this was the very moment when, in taking back control of immigration from the EU, the government now at last had control over the total immigration numbers that it was seeking to target. So having a net immigration target might therefore at last actually make sense. But from a political perspective, that was exactly the problem. Outside the EU, there would now be no excuse or hiding place if and when, the target was not met. Ironically, therefore, the very moment when the government had acquired the levers of power to actually achieve the net immigration target was the very moment when, from a political perspective, it had to go.

### **Immigration numbers in the UK change the course of history? A not so straightforward story**

So far so, seemingly straightforward. Far too straightforward. There are many other important stories to be told about the politics of the UK's immigration numbers, which seem to tell quite a different tale.

Here are some other recent immigration numbers. The UK agreed to grant the right to permanently stay in the UK to over 5 million EU or related citizens post-Brexit, on much more generous and straightforward terms than existed pre-Brexit. Over 5 million of Hong Kong's residents have been offered the right to permanently come to the UK. Both of these big numbers have elicited scarcely a murmur of disapproval or dissent from the British media or public.

Many questions: In terms of the perceptions and the politics of the UK's immigration numbers is it a good thing that these numbers have gone largely unremarked? Or is it a sad reflection of the UK's recent divisive experiences of immigration that such numbers are not actively reported and debated as positive outcomes? Might the non-reaction to these numbers suggest that a lot of the British public is now fairly relaxed about immigration? May it in fact suggest that the dividing line in UK immigration politics is nothing like as stark as is commonly represented, and is, instead, between:

- On the one hand, those who think that multiculturalism and immigration have been good for Britain, and who do not want more control over immigration: and
- On the other hand, those who think that multiculturalism and immigration have been OK for Britain, but would now like more control over immigration?

A final question: might the actions of the most vocal on both sides of the immigration debate in the UK be obscuring the existence of a large amount of common ground in public attitudes on immigration?

Indeed, an alternative perspective begins to emerge if you interrogate the reality rather than the rhetoric of the British public's engagement with immigration. Some examples:

- Across the Red Wall, which encompasses many parts of the UK supposedly most socially conservative and resistant to more open immigration policies, there appears to be clear net positive support for multiculturalism and for the view that “having a wide variety of different ethnic backgrounds and cultures is part of British culture”, as well as for the broader view that immigration has “generally been good for the country”.<sup>12</sup>
- Britain stands near the top of the international league table for those countries whose public most support the idea that people ought to be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution.<sup>13</sup>
- Steven Woolfe's report on post-Brexit immigration policy for ‘Leave Means Leave’ argued that the UK should continue to encourage skilled worker immigration, particularly into those industries with shortages, and highlighted the potential benefit that a ‘more manageable level [of economic migration] will turn the tide of public opinion towards offering more help to genuine candidates for asylum’.<sup>14</sup>

For those arguing for more open immigration policies, assuming that divides over immigration are significant, and must be bridged by forcefully elucidating the logic of their own perspective, might in fact be the most counterproductive approach they can take. And catastrophising those divides, particularly the alleged cultural aspects of them, may only serve to significantly increase that danger. Migration liberals who speak and act as if the British public is a seething mass of voters angrily opposed to all immigration do their own cause no favours.

As set out in the straightforward version of the story – the story of the perfect storm of the combination of the publication of the quarterly net migration statistics and the very visible failure of the Government's net immigration target – it is of course hard to deny the importance of immigration politics in the UK in the period leading up to the EU referendum. Certainly, the divides over immigration that there were in British society came to the fore, and its salience as an issue dramatically increased for key elements of the British voting public.<sup>15</sup> But we should be careful about extrapolating what that tells us about immigration attitudes. By ‘attitudes’ we mean a person's views about immigration – their preferences – and by ‘salience’ we mean how important that person deems immigration as a political issue that influences how they actually cast their vote.

In recent times the British public have been bombarded with ever-increasing numbers and variants of questions by pollsters seeking to track the evolution of immigration attitudes and salience. At the same time, a number of academics have conducted often multi-country studies to seek to do the same. The results of the two are not necessarily aligned. Recent polling, reporting a noticeable liberalising in the British public's views on immigration since the EU Referendum, has suggested that *both* immigration attitudes and salience can move around quite a lot and very quickly.<sup>16</sup> Whereas recent academic studies, while agreeing that immigration's salience is volatile, have concluded differently about immigration attitudes, finding that “individual views towards immigration are remarkably stable across time”.<sup>17</sup>

Across Global North countries including the UK, the academic evidence “provides more support for explanations that emphasize the role of stable predispositions”. They suggest that, while younger people’s attitudes towards immigration are more likely to change as their attitudes form, these attitudes tend to form in/by late youth, and thereafter do not seem to change that much. And, even if they do, particularly in the face of large political or economic or immigration-specific shocks, this change will often be only temporary. Immigration attitudes therefore tend to exhibit a cohort, rather than a generational, effect. There is in fact no evidence of people becoming more anti-immigration as they age. Rather, if older people tend to be less open to immigration, and younger people to be more open to immigration, as one finds in many countries, including the UK, this is a reflection of their experiences at the time they came of age, in terms of their experience of “a unique set of common circumstance constituting a shared political socialization that has long-lasting impact on their attitudes towards immigration”.<sup>18</sup>

If correct, this has fundamental consequences for those immersed in the politics and advocacy around immigration policies. Through a longer-term lens, the existence of such a cohort effect should mean that policies that reduce salience and relax tensions around immigration now can have lock-in benefits far out into the future in terms of securing greater public support for more open immigration approaches. Through a short-term lens though, this evidence would also suggest that, while it is not impossible that immigration attitudes in the UK have undergone a significant and sustained positive shift since the EU Referendum, this is unlikely.

As important, on the flipside, is the evidence that the success of more ‘populist’ anti-immigration politics across Western Europe in the past decade has been built not on worsening attitudes to immigration, but, counterintuitively, to the opposite; that slowly *improving* attitudes to immigration across the voter base as a whole – as cohorts with more liberal attitudes to immigration reached voting age – significantly raised the salience of immigration for those who did not hold those more liberal attitudes.

That is:

- Immigration attitudes liberalised across the population as a whole,
- Those people who did not share those attitudes felt increasingly that they were a threatened minority
- As a result, those people became increasingly susceptible to political messaging targeted to their concerns, and animated to regard immigration and immigration policy as a prime motivating factor for whom they cast their vote.<sup>19</sup>

Thus it was that an overall *positive* shift in immigration attitudes raised the salience of immigration for those who did not share those attitudes and, counterintuitively, fed the popularity of anti-immigration politics.

The most important takeaways from this line of argument would be:

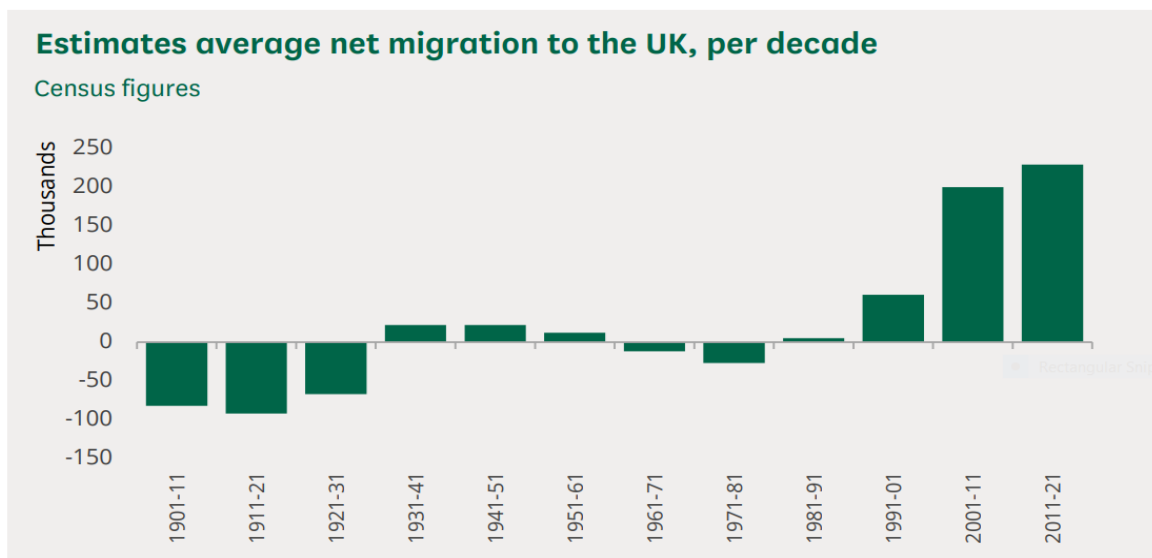
- The best strategy to support more liberal immigration policies is to seek to allay people’s fears and concerns about such policies, as salience is volatile and can be reduced.

- Reducing salience is a better approach than to trying to actively change people’s attitudes about such policies, as people’s attitudes towards immigration are not easily changeable, or for very long.
- The very act of trying to convince someone to change their attitudes towards immigration runs the risk that fears and concerns are thereby raised, not allayed, and the salience of immigration only increased.

The immigration focus group scene in the film *Brexit: The Uncivil War*<sup>20</sup> perfectly captures the precise mechanics of this unfortunate mechanism. Rory Kinnear’s Craig Oliver, directing the Remain campaign, first seeks to remotely steer, but then cannot resist actively intervening in, the discussions on immigration. He becomes increasingly frustrated that a number in the group do not respond to immigration ‘logic’ and ‘facts’ in the way that he sees as self-evident. All the sharpest angles and tensions at the heart of the UK’s immigration debates are crammed into three and a half minutes of the most excruciatingly dramatic and illuminating television, which encapsulates exactly why actively engaging on immigration issues in a way which allays fears and concerns, and reduces immigration’s salience, is so fiendishly difficult to achieve in practice.

To what extent do politicians and the media reflect the salience of immigration and to what extent do they drive it? While the latter explanation may seem intuitive, one line of argument suggests that while political and media actors may “play an important mediating and also reinforcing role in the relationship between issue salience and voting” there is little evidence that they can conjure something out of nothing. Instead “salience responds to actual events and their gravity”, and these actual events are numbers, as salience has been shown to be correlated with immigration numbers.<sup>21</sup> If so, it is not hard to see why salience has risen in the UK since the turn of the millennium.

**Figure 1: Estimates average net migration to the UK, per decade. Census figures**



**Source:** ONS Annual Abstract of Statistics (various editions); [Long-Term International Migration Estimates](#), 2 series (LTIM calendar year).

**Note:** There was no census in 1941. ONS Abstract of statistics is not available online.

Source: House of Commons Library chart from ONS Statistics<sup>22</sup>

In this telling, in the years prior to the EU Referendum in the UK, immigration became a core issue of focus and contention for voters not because the media created a storm out of nothing. Instead, the media *reflected* a storm that appeared to be happening – rising net immigration numbers to the UK as well as the chaotic scenes in the summer of 2015 as migrants flowed freely across Europe in high numbers – which in turn triggered the increased salience of immigration for certain sections of society.

Nevertheless, it is also hard to escape the conclusion that the media can in certain circumstances proactively drive issues and focus public attention in a way that can have a significant influence on the salience of immigration in the minds of some sections of the public. Quarterly media reporting of a continually rising estimated annual net migration number, allied to a government numerical target on restricting immigration that never came close to being hit, would appear to be near perfect circumstances for this to happen.

## While COVID-19 puts the net migration number back in the bottle, a new migration number comes to the fore

### The UK's net migration number metamorphoses

This brings us back to the question: whatever happened to the net migration number? Unlike the net immigration target, the end of this headline number being publicised came about not due to a political decision, but to a statistical one. While it had been rumbling on for some time as a technical, statistical debate, this process was brought to a head by the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is often said that you cannot put the genie back in the bottle. But there is an exception to every rule, and the pandemic seemingly achieved the impossible in doing exactly this to the UK's net migration number. In fact, it doubly scrambled the immigration story in the UK by:

- Stopping inbound movement to the UK in its tracks – immigration was no longer a pressing concern. All the stories suddenly seemed to be about migrants leaving the UK rather than entering.
- Less obviously, but more importantly in the longer-term, the pandemic also contributed to a fundamental scrambling of the UK's headline immigration statistics. And while the pandemic at last now appears to be in the rear-view mirror, and different immigration figures show net immigration to the UK flowing very vigorously once more, the core of the UK's immigration statistics remains scrambled. No official overall net migration number is currently being reported for the UK. Instead, what is produced is highly caveated as being experimental, provisional, incomplete, and uncertain.<sup>23</sup>

This is not entirely down to the pandemic. But what the pandemic did was to in effect bring forward an already planned for change in how the UK calculated and reported its immigration statistics. The use of the International Passenger Survey (IPS) for the collection of data and the core method for generating the UK's definitive migration statistics had increasingly come in for criticism as being unfit for that purpose. In August 2019, by mutual agreement between the ONS and the UK Statistics Authority, the technical status of the UK's immigration statistics generated in this way was



downgraded to 'experimental'.<sup>24</sup> It is now generally accepted that the migration numbers generated through the IPS method under-counted both EU arrivals (a view supported by the more than 5 million applications made under the EU Settlement Scheme, in comparison with the number of around 3 million EU nationals believed to be in the UK around the time of the EU Referendum) and non-EU departures, ultimately slightly undercounting overall immigration.

At the same time, the ONS launched a transformation project to move away from relying on sample survey data and instead use administrative data – predominantly from Home Office, Department for Work and Pensions, the Higher Education Statistics Agency and NHS systems – in producing the UK's immigration statistics. But the onset of the pandemic meant that the IPS was permanently discontinued for the purpose of generating immigration statistics earlier than had been planned, and *before* the new system founded on admin-based migration estimates had become fully functional.

The result has therefore been much more than just a technical change in how the immigration numbers are generated. Most importantly for the perceptions and politics of immigration in the UK, while it has not meant that the ONS has stopped calculating and producing various immigration statistics, it has meant that:

- The year ending March 2020 was the last period for which an overall immigration or net migration number was reported for long-term immigration into the UK.
- ONS' migration statistics are now a patchwork of different sources and methods, calculated separately for non-EU, EU, and British nationals. While statistically this may be much more credible than statistics based on the IPS, to the outside world these statistics now certainly look much less coherent and are much harder to explain.
- As the ONS' migration statistics are now being calculated on a different basis from in the pre-pandemic era, there is no easy comparability of these statistics with those produced by the ONS in the pre-pandemic period.

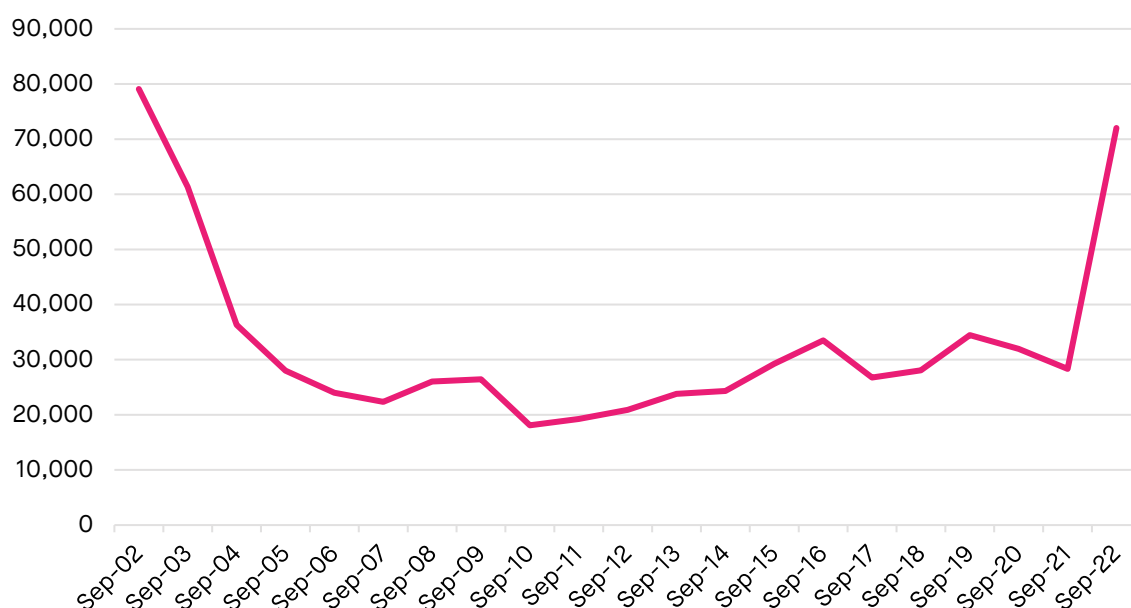
As there has been no net migration number being reported, not surprisingly there have been no headlines written about it. At least until now, as we shall see later.

But just because the net migration number disappeared from view does not mean that immigration numbers dropped out of the headlines. On the contrary. Just as Brexit and COVID-19 combined to put the net migration number back in the bottle, a brand new immigration number started to be regularly reported in the UK. A new number which stepped into the previous number's place, at least in the degree to which this new number increasingly came to monopolise the attention of politicians, the press, and the public. A new number which had echoes of an older story, from the early 2000s, but presented an uncomfortable new slant on it.

### The emergence of the numbers crossing the Channel

Despite the rise of Eastern European immigration to the UK from 2004 onwards, for much of the 2000s the immigration story that was most familiar to the British public was of asylum seekers, and the camps near the northern French coast where many gathered – ‘Sangatte’ became a household name – endeavouring to board transport bound for the UK. The key immigration number of the time, which fed this story, was the number of asylum applications, which had significantly spiked going into the new millennium. Now, once again, the numbers of asylum applications in the UK are increasing.

**Figure 2: Asylum applications lodged in the UK, years ending September 2002 to September 2022**

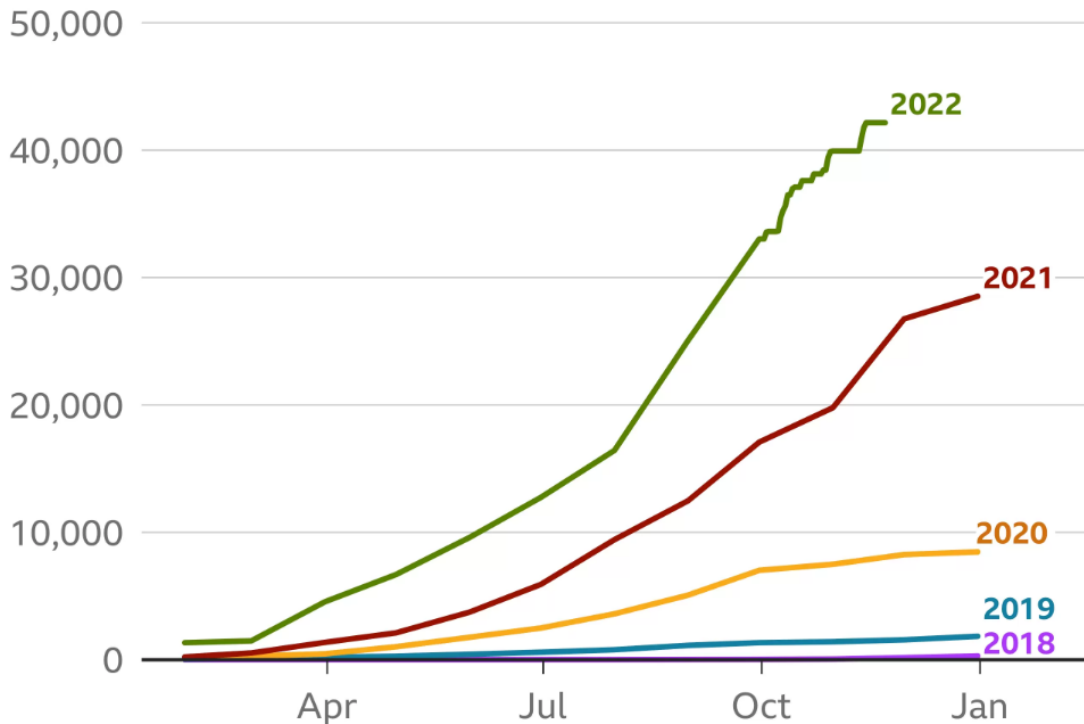


Source: Home Office Immigration Statistics<sup>25</sup>

After a decade of immigration concerns focused primarily on regular economic immigration, the clock looks to have been turned back twenty years. Is it Groundhog Day for the immigration debates? Not quite.

Every year since the Channel flows started in earnest, the numbers have further significantly increased the following year. From under 300 arriving in this way in 2018, to 1,843 the next, then 8,466 the year after that, as COVID-19 took hold. Then 28,526 in 2021 when, unlike in previous years, large numbers of crossings continued deep into the autumn months. At the height of the pandemic it seemed that small boat arrivals may be spiking because the ability to access the UK through other routes had been closed off. Yet the number of small boat arrivals in 2022 have continued to materially increase, not decrease, even as COVID-19 restrictions have ended. The numbers are on course to reach 40,000 this year.<sup>26</sup>



**Figure 3: People crossing the English Channel in boats**

Note: Data to September 2022 is monthly totals, more recent figures are updated daily and weekly. Some data from the latest week may be unavailable

Source: Home Office/Ministry of Defence, latest data 22 Nov

**B B C**

Source: BBC

And despite the Government's rhetoric of breaking the model of the people smuggling business, crossings seem to have become more, not less, organised, if one takes as a proxy for that the average number of people per boat. This has increased from only 7 people per boat in 2018 to 28 people per boat in 2021, to 35 people per boat the first six months of 2022.<sup>27</sup>

Once again, published statistics on a particular aspect of the UK's migration experience have provided the foundation for a major political-media story. A major reason for the huge attention that these small boat crossings continue to attract is now the frequently updated data reported by the Home Office and the Ministry of Defence on numbers arriving by this route.

The Home Office statistics also provide a more granular breakdown by nationality, age, sex, also linking to asylum claims made and processed. It is this statistical breakdown which has drawn particular attention to the recent significant change, from the early summer of 2022, in the split of nationalities making the crossing, and the impact that these arrivals are having on the asylum case backlog.<sup>28</sup> In doing so these statistics have given the UK a new favourite immigration number; the percentage of new arrivals across the Channel made up by Albanians.

Yet, notwithstanding all this, there are a number of reasons to argue that the public mood around asylum is significantly more favourable than when asylum numbers were last the main focus of the UK's immigration attention in the 2000s. And, indeed, that, in the context of immigration politics in the UK more broadly, the pressure points, tensions and challenges faced in the immediate pre-EU Referendum period are now significantly reduced. Indeed, there appear to be a number of real causes for optimism for those arguing for more open immigration policies in the UK. This positive case can be stated as follows.

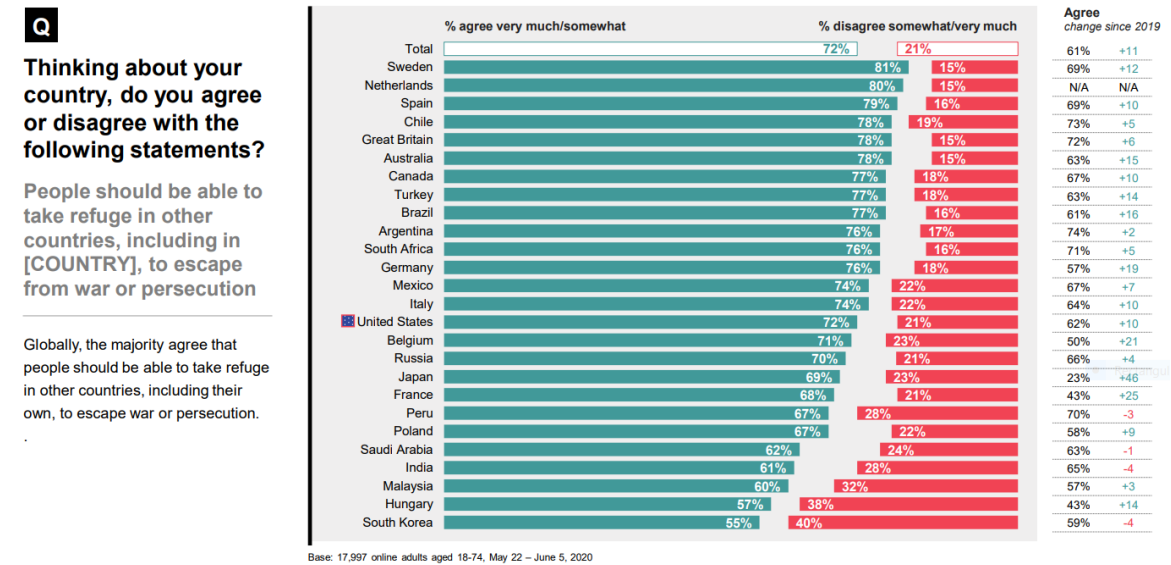
## CHAPTER TWO – ‘DON’T WORRY ABOUT A THING’

### Refugees and asylum

On asylum, for those immersed in the political, legal and media controversies around the Channel crossings – and whose memories do not extend as far as the asylum controversies of the Noughties – it may seem controversial to claim that the UK in 2022 is relatively well-disposed to refugees. Some might also be surprised by the argument that there has been significant mellowing on this issue across the British press.

Yet for all the reasonable and well-intentioned concerns expressed by some advocates about Britain’s national hostility to those in need, there is much to be positive about. Britain stands near the top of the charts of those countries whose public support the right for those escaping from war or persecution to take refuge here.

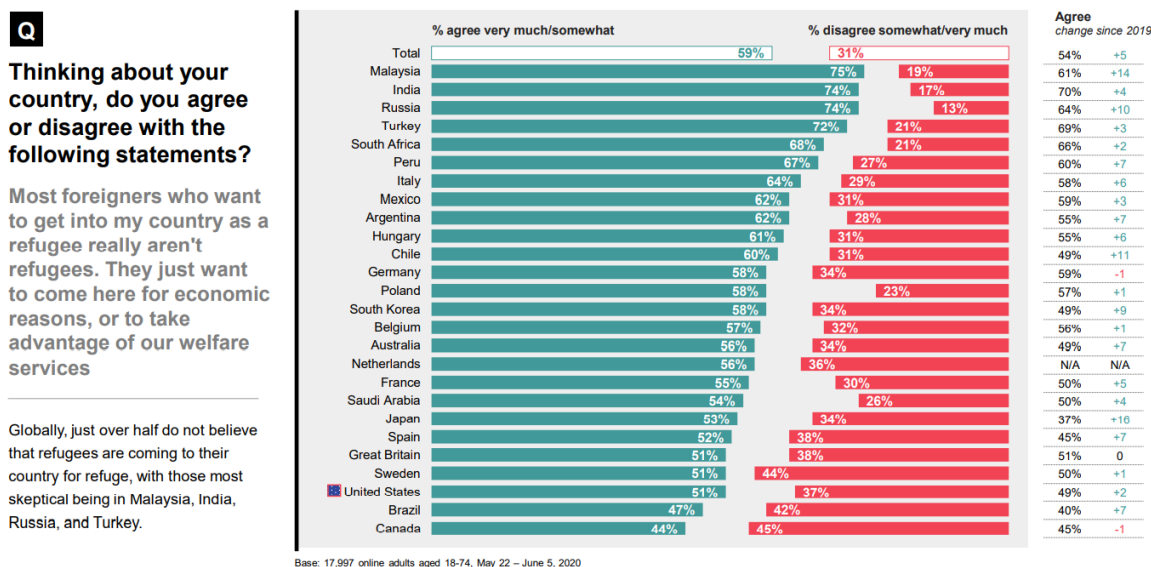
**Figure 4: Perceptions across nations on whether people should be able to take refuge in other countries**



Source: Ipsos<sup>29</sup>

And the British public are more inclined to believe asylum claimants than the public in most other countries; suspicion about their motives is lower here than in most other countries.

Figure 5: Perceptions across nations of genuine need among those seeking asylum in their country



Source: Ipsos<sup>30</sup>

This is a far cry from the vitriolic days of the 2000s, when the British tabloid press revelled in increasingly outrageous headlines on asylum seekers – from ‘Asylum-seekers infected with the Aids virus are putting public health at risk’ to the even more notorious ‘Swan Bake: Asylum seekers steal the Queen’s birds for barbecues’<sup>31</sup> – which has an other-worldly quality to it now. That was a different era.

Of course, certain sections of the media *are* today very focused on the Channel crossings. And those more sceptical sections of the British press are still quick to leap on any stories that may suggest that the asylum system is being exploited by those crossing the Channel who are not refugees. But the reporting of this seems considerably more restrained and balanced now, the most critical articles still willing to highlight that even those people entering who may not be refugees are generally still escaping terrible levels of poverty and corruption.<sup>32</sup> It should also be noted that the reach and impact of British newspapers is much reduced. Print sales are down more than two-thirds since 2000<sup>33</sup> and online editions have failed to make up for the lost clout that entails. Newspapers railing against asylum seekers have much less power to shape opinion and narratives than they did two decades ago.

In the atmosphere of the 2000s, the coverage of an asylum seeker killing himself with an explosive device outside a hospital in Liverpool would have been covered with much less balance. The *Daily Mail* of that era would not in its ‘Femail’ section have published a positive ‘human interest’ article telling real-life stories of British women who have taken refugees into their spare rooms.<sup>34</sup> The *Daily Telegraph* of that era would have been very unlikely to publish a column arguing that banning asylum-seekers from working is “morally and economically unjustifiable”.<sup>35</sup> Yet these things have happened more recently.

What might account for the recent more positive narrative in the UK around refugees?

Four angles:

- Connected to that ‘Femail’ story, there have been increasing opportunities for connection between refugees and ordinary British people. The growth of refugee resettlement schemes in the UK in the past decade<sup>36</sup> has enabled the involvement of sections of the public, both at an individual, but also at the community, level – the community sponsorship of resettled refugees from Syria being the most prominent example – to connect with, and assist, these refugees in adapting to British life, and “has the potential to radically shift the British public's attitudes to the UK taking in refugees, particularly reducing opposition to refugees among more socially conservative groups”<sup>37</sup>.
- Refugees tend to get a better reception when they are seen as fleeing from atrocious acts clearly perpetrated by people who are viewed by the British public as enemies of the UK. And the past decade has seen refugee arrivals to the UK escaping from a raft of bad actors – al-Assad in Syria, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Putin in the Ukraine – in situations covered in great and sympathetic detail in the British media.
- A corollary of this last point, and the higher recognition rate of asylum claims in recent times in the UK, has been less focus on failed asylum seekers, and the problems of their remaining in the country and increasing the UK’s overall irregular migrant population. Indeed, one potentially very significant immigration number that has recently been only very sporadically reported is that of the UK’s estimated overall irregular migrant population.<sup>38</sup>
- For all of its negative rhetoric around Channel crossings, the Government has largely targeted its war of words at the people-smugglers and traffickers, rather than at the migrants themselves. Even the more recent round of stories about the rise in Albanians crossing the Channel have focused more on these middlemen, arrangers and ‘TikTok traffickers’ aggressively advertising their services, and less on the people seeking entry, whom it is acknowledged are coming from a country with far less opportunities.<sup>39</sup>

Ministers may talk a good game on ripping up the rules on refugees, but they have largely not followed that talk with action – perhaps because they know that the balance of public opinion is against. The current Government’s hardline approach to irregular entry by asylum seekers under the new Nationality and Borders Act does seek to give legal backing for the UK to treat refugees who have irregularly entered the UK less favourably than those who have entered lawfully. This two-tier form of refugee status may seek to put Britain as close to the limits of international law as possible, and arguably to find out exactly where that line might lie. But the fact that the UK is still clearly seeking to navigate within the confines of its obligations to refugees made under international law, not simply ripping those up, is likely not unrelated to the support shown in wider British society for the UK taking its asylum obligations seriously.

Frequent criticisms are levelled at the Home Office over the seemingly inexorable rise of the asylum case decision backlog. The Home Office's own latest figures show that "at the end of September 2022, there were 117,400 cases (relating to 143,377 people) awaiting an initial decision, almost 3 times more than the number of applications awaiting an initial decision at the end of 2019."<sup>40</sup> At the same time "the number of asylum seekers being held in hotels has trebled to more than 26,000, costing taxpayers £3 million a day."<sup>41</sup> The limbo status that in practice arises from the new asylum inadmissibility rules introduced under that Nationality and Borders Act will surely only add to this situation.

This would seem to be in no one's best interests. Yet there is also a potentially positive angle to this story. Under international law, refugee determinations are made on an individual basis, inevitably on imperfect evidence, and with most key witnesses unavailable. This takes time. The very existence of such a backlog might therefore be thought clear evidence that the UK takes its obligations with regard to asylum very seriously. This seems to be supported by the current statistics showing that the UK's overall recognition rate of asylum claims in recent times has been very high, absolutely, and relatively, compared with recent history. "Just over three quarters (77%) of the initial decisions in the year ending September 2022 were grants of refugee status, humanitarian protection or alternative forms of leave, which is a substantially higher grant rate than in pre-pandemic years when around a third of initial decisions were grants. The grant rate in the year ending September 2022 is the highest grant rate in over 30 years."<sup>42</sup> As the SMF has previously highlighted, in terms of applications from some countries in particular, including Albania and Pakistan, the UK's recognition rate of asylum claims appears significantly *higher* than the average recognition rate across EU countries.<sup>43</sup> Does this all suggest a country that is insufficiently serious about its commitment to refugees?

## Labour immigration

Beyond the fraught arena of asylum claims, as we have already seen it can be argued that the UK is neither implacably against, nor irreconcilably divided over, immigration more generally.

Consider immigration for work. While the current state of the UK's immigration statistics complicates measurement, the overall number of overseas workers currently employed in the UK economy does seem to have risen despite the pandemic.<sup>44</sup> Those who see the British public's concerns about immigration as rooted in concerns around control, rather than immigration numbers, see both the present and the future looking bright.

In the words of Jonathan Portes, an observer who has rarely hesitated to criticise governments for perceived failures over immigration:

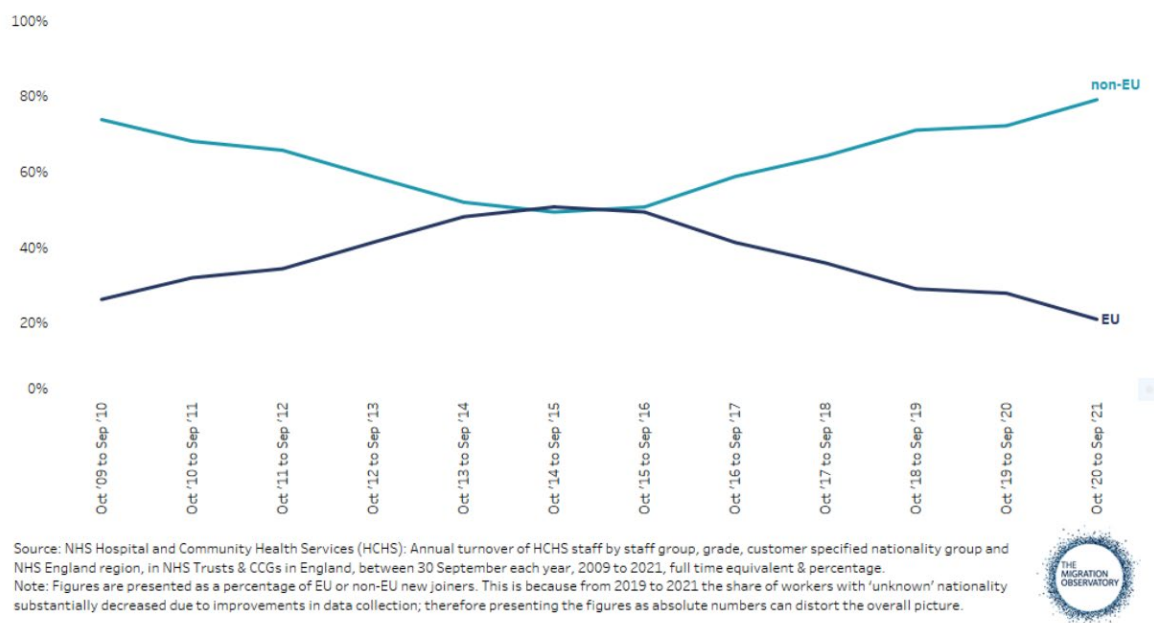
**“... the new post-Brexit system, while not perfect, is delivering broadly what was promised, what people want, and what the economy needs. This would be a pretty good balance sheet for a well-functioning, successful government. For the current one, it’s astonishing. Not broke, don’t fix.”<sup>45</sup>**

From this perspective it is argued that the salience of immigration in the list of the British public’s main concerns now appears to have fallen so low<sup>46</sup> because the British public:

- Understand and accept that immigration numbers to the UK were not necessarily going to fall as a result of Brexit;
- Are therefore not concerned that those numbers have now risen strongly post pandemic, because, regardless of the numbers that are allowed to enter, the post-Brexit immigration system for work has now given the UK sufficient control in this area;
- Understand that migrants admitted from overseas are admitted because they are those that the British economy or society needs.

The recent work visa statistics show that “almost two-fifths of sponsored ‘Worker’ visa applications have been in the health and social care sector”<sup>47</sup>, and even Government ministers have been prominently highlighting how important securing the services of overseas staff is to the functioning and performance of the NHS.<sup>48</sup> Doctors and nurses are unsurprisingly the occupations where polling shows the greatest number of the British public supportive of increasing immigration.<sup>49</sup> But it may also be that, despite appearances, immigration numbers are not increasing overall in this sector at all, but instead non-EU workers are substituting for EU workers.<sup>50</sup>

**Figure 6: EU and non-EU staff joining the NHS, as a share of non-UK joiners (FTE, excluding those of unknown nationality)**



Source: *The Migration Observatory*<sup>51</sup>

### The political context

Given that recently the volume dial seems to have been turned up again on the UK’s immigration debate, this may seem a strange time to argue that the political context for greater consensus over UK immigration policy has recently materially improved.

But in respect of labour immigration, the turning up of the political volume dial has largely been around debates within the Government of the advisability, or not, of tweaks at the edges of a post-Brexit labour immigration system around which there is now in fact a large degree of consensus.<sup>52</sup> And what were recently quite significant philosophical and policy differences between the two main political parties have now largely disappeared.

Rewind just three years, and the differences between the immigration policy offerings of two major parties were stark. Going into the 2019 General Election, the Conservatives were pledging to end EU freedom of movement, while Labour was not only offering a Second EU Referendum, but stating that:

**“... we recognise the social and economic benefits that free movement has brought both in terms of EU citizens here and UK citizens abroad – and we will seek to protect those rights.”<sup>53</sup>**

Labour’s 2019 manifesto stated that it stood “for a levelling up of rights” in this respect.<sup>54</sup> It was never clear what that meant in practice. We will never find out. Labour has made clear that reinstating EU freedom of movement is no longer its policy.<sup>55</sup>



Politically, across the spectrum there now seems a large degree of consensus that, at least in its broad parameters, the post-Brexit 'points-based' work immigration system is reflective of the public consensus that combines control with a level playing field between EU and non-EU workers while seeking to prioritise migrants with the skills most needed in the UK labour market.<sup>56</sup>

In fact it is not unlikely that Labour's desire to hold employers to greater account for their use of overseas workers and how this is compatible with maximising the opportunities for home grown talent, with an emphasis on workforce planning, investing in skills, boosting low-end pay, and greater labour market rule enforcement versus exploitative business practices, would mean that a Labour government's broader policy approach in this area could result in fewer, not more, overseas workers coming to the UK. The Leader of the Opposition has even gone as far to say that under the points-based system "I would like to see the numbers go down in some areas. I think we're recruiting too many people from overseas into, for example, the health service."<sup>57</sup> He reinforced that message in a speech to the CBI on 22nd November where he confirmed once again that Labour was no longer seeking to restore freedom of movement.

Even on asylum, where Labour has been critical of the Government's (thus far undelivered) plan to deter crossings by removing certain asylum claimants to Rwanda, it is also clear that Labour is keen to sound no less determined and forceful in responding to the numbers of small boats departing the French coast. Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, in her 2022 party conference address was at pains to emphasise that<sup>58</sup>:

**"... we will work with France to prevent dangerous small boats crossing the Channel and putting lives at risk with a new cross-border police unit to crack down on the criminal gangs who make millions from trading in people and profiting from their lives."**

The seemingly stark contrast with the position in the US may be instructive. In the US, the two main parties publicly divergent stances on immigration, in particular over controls at the southern border, seem to be further stoking political divides over the issue. Whereas previously those parties had in fact been largely united in the need for strong controls at the southern border, under the approach of the Biden administration this has changed. This has left even some of those most supportive of more open immigration policies in the US expressing increasing frustration and alarm at the potential adverse impact the current administration's approach may have on public opinion towards more open immigration policies there.<sup>59</sup>

In the UK, on the other hand, while there are differences in how best to deliver them, the two main parties are united in the need for strong controls at the UK's own southern border. It seems possible that the narrowing divides between their presentation of their positions on immigration policy more broadly could help reduce the politicisation and the public profile of the issue in the UK, and give cause for optimism that the UK can avoid the worst polarising effects of the immigration debate seen in the US. It is also plausible that despite recent surface-level appearances to the contrary, the UK political context may instead prove supportive of the recent drop in the salience of immigration and the gradual positive shift in public attitudes towards it.

This may be how things turn out. But there are a number of risks to this scenario, and reasons for thinking that things may turn out quite differently. And that, if they do so, this may well have immigration numbers at its heart again.

## CHAPTER THREE – ‘YOU AIN’T SEEN NOTHIN’ YET’

There are several plausible scenarios in which immigration’s salience rises again in the UK, with immigration numbers once more back in the spotlight and viewed as potentially problematic by a significant section of British society. There is a risk of irregular journeys across the Channel becoming endemic. There is a real possibility of much larger, and more visible, numbers of immigrants within the UK. And there are questions about the future of the official immigration statistics, which will not remain in their current state of opaque flux forever.

### Refugees and asylum

While the British public’s attitudes towards refugees may seem favourable compared with those of earlier decades, and other countries, for most people this does not trump concerns around control. Figure 5 showed that, even though generally more sympathetic to refugees, and less sceptical towards those claiming to be so, the British public are still on balance concerned about the degree to which the asylum system is exploited by those who are not refugees. It is therefore not surprising that this particular angle of the Channel crossings story is now receiving such attention.

The numbers of those crossing the Channel to claim safety at the UK border are of course dwarfed by the numbers at the US-Mexico border. Yet there is a common theme. For people with concerns around immigration control, these events heighten those concerns. And, from this perspective there is an important angle from which the UK picture arguably looks bleaker, not better, than what is happening across the Atlantic. The Biden administration’s response to border crossings has been notably light on rhetoric or claims about ‘control’ – even though the US federal government is indeed trying to control the southern border, the administration seems intent on fostering the perception that it is not really trying too hard to do so. The UK Government’s approach has been totally the opposite, significantly ratcheting up the rhetoric and commitments it makes, in order to be seen to exercise effective control. Yet to most voters, that control remains absent.

In terms of seeking to address public concerns over immigration control, it is one thing, as Biden has done, to be seen not to deploy the full raft of potential immigration controls. It is quite another to suggest a range of ever more extreme options to take control, from wave machines, to offshoring asylum processing on South Atlantic islands, to removing claimants to Rwanda, but for none of them to appear practically workable or effective in addressing the situation faced.

In the world of the UK’s immigration numbers, as in Boston, Lincolnshire, visible numbers, even if relatively small, can count far more than invisible numbers. The UK population is estimated to contain hundreds of thousands of invisible irregular migrants, most presumed to have entered the country lawfully and overstayed. They merit scarcely a mention in public discourse, and there is no significant evidence of public concern about illegal immigration. Instead, it is the visibility of numbers which speaks directly to concerns about (lack of) control.

In terms of the numbers of asylum claims the UK is currently receiving, overall these numbers are still shy of what they were in the peak years at the start of the millennium. They have more recently made up only just over 5% of long term international migrant flows to the UK. On a 'per population' basis, the UK has more recently received below the EU average of such claims. None of these facts matters as much to public opinion as the public visibility, and real-time reportability, of what can be seen happening in the Channel.

In the 2000s, those entering the UK irregularly mainly did so by hiding away in/on lorries and trains, departing France/entering the UK through regular entry points and methods; they were, almost by definition, hidden. Now migrants very visibly travel to and enter the UK, coming across the sea in boats they can pilot themselves. Hence the political and media attention this started to receive from an early stage; as participants in the debate including Nigel Farage have noted, images of small boats reaching the English shoreline make for impactful video footage.

It is of course somewhat ironic that migrants crossing the Channel in small boats have created the perception that the UK's borders are not under control, since, at least initially, these crossings were a consequence of controls at the UK's regular border having become increasingly effective. It is just possible that the answer to taking 'control' will be provided by some combination of: the legal powers in the Nationality and Borders Act; the removal of some Channel crossers to Rwanda; and further increased funding of the French law enforcement authorities. But this outcome seems far from assured.

In particular, even if it does proceed, the apparently small capacity of the planned Rwandan scheme – it seems unclear that Rwanda will in practice take more than hundreds<sup>60</sup> – versus the scale of the flows that it is seeking to dissuade make its successful impact seem unlikely. Even that section of the public more supportive of this policy seem to agree.<sup>61</sup> The failure of these aggressive tactics may therefore have quite the opposite effect on the perception of immigration control, confirming, rather than addressing, the perception that nothing can be done to exert meaningful control over the situation.

Of course, to observers of recent Conservative Party immigration gambits, the current Government's raising of expectations very high over the Channel, then failing to meet them, is an all too familiar story. It has clear parallels to the 'tens of thousands' net immigration target; a high-profile flagship policy that becomes a staple of media reporting for all the wrong reasons, and where every turn of events only serves to reinforce a perception that immigration is less, not more, under control. Every time the Government trumpets that it is about to 'Do Something' new, it is seen very publicly to have failed to meet the promised outcome of the previous 'Something' that it had decided to 'Do'. Thus the process engenders a lack of confidence amongst the concerned section of the public that the situation can in reality be controlled at all. This leads to the worst of both worlds; ever-more extreme plans (or promises of plans) to impose control, but ever-less faith that they will achieve their objective.

On the other side of the debate though, from those supporting the cause of refugees, there seems little recognition that the Channel crossings give rise to any immigration control concerns at all that need to be engaged with, and instead simply require more efficient processing and admission of those arriving. This seems at best naïve, at worst reckless. For while it is certainly true that the current Government has done much to recklessly ratchet up the stakes around addressing the Channel flows, a non-trivial section of the public do appear to consider the issue a core issue of concern, and the irregular crossings of the Channel now seem to have replaced EU freedom of movement as the totem for the concerns of those most worried about immigration control.

Work by More in Common shows that those voters more likely to express such concerns are most heavily represented in the ‘Red Wall’ constituencies that most switched their votes from Labour to Conservative in the 2019 General Election.<sup>62</sup> This is a voter group that both major parties are particularly focused on; one on which the current Government’s majority was built, and one that the Labour Party needs to win back to win the next general election. Should Labour indeed return to power with the votes of that group, keeping power will require the party to be hyper-sensitive to even the remotest suggestion, or perception, of a Biden-like event at the southern border<sup>63</sup>. Any material increase in numbers of Channel crossers in the expectation of a more welcoming regime under a Labour government would pose a significant challenge to any new Labour government.

In one important sense though, refugee advocates are entirely correct: the international refugee protection regime is not an immigration control regime. As a consequence, their international law obligations towards refugees have given rise to five key control concerns for Global North states such as the UK:

- **Uncontrolled, Unlimited and Unknowable.** This applies to outflow and inflow. Refugees can be generated from any country in the world, in any numbers, at any time, by a wide range of unforeseen events. And in theory every one of those refugees can turn up at the same border and all claim asylum in the same single country.
- **Sole Responsibility.** The lack of agreed mechanisms within the United Nations Refugee Convention for sharing responsibility between states means that, absent any other agreements that have been separately concluded, sole responsibility lies with the state receiving the asylum claim.
- **Relativity.** If a particular country is seen to be materially more generous than other states in accepting refugees, in certain circumstances this may draw further flows to that state – witness the experience of Germany in the Syrian crisis.
- **Mixed Flows.** The package of rights allowed by states to recognised refugees is understandably attractive to many of those migrating, who unless they have legal means of entry may therefore be incentivised to claim refugee status – even if they are not, in fact, refugees. All the more so because, regardless of whether adjudged a refugee or not, the migrant may in practice get to remain in the country where they have claimed asylum.

- **Practical Difficulty of Returns.** A number of those who fail in their refugee claim may in practice be unreturnable. Returning people against their will is costly, complex, and subject to legal challenges, particularly under the European Convention on Human Rights. But an even more fundamental barrier is that often it may not even be clear to which country someone should be returned and, even if it is, a number of countries effectively refuse to take back their citizens through enforced returns.

These control concerns are, of course, not unique to the UK. But two additional related issues arising from the UK's geographical position – protected by a continent and a sea from most refugee inflows, and surrounded by safe and prosperous countries – impact perceptions and can colour the debate:

- Those who reach the UK to lodge asylum claims generally have access to the financial resources and organisational capacity needed to reach this relatively remote location;
- They have travelled through other countries where, on the face of it, they could also have sought refuge.

While there is no reason under international law or otherwise why a refugee should not use their organisational capacity, and spend what resources they have, to seek asylum in the country of their choice, this has nonetheless tainted the public's perception of this issue – or allowed some political and media actors to taint that perception.

The reality of all these concerns has led one of the foremost authorities on the international law applicable to refugees, Professor James Hathaway, to conclude that – in its current form at least – the hugely costly international refugee regime now serves the interests of only a small minority of the world's refugees, and in practice limits the degree of support that the system can ever expect from the public, due to the inherent lack of control and potentially unlimited and uncertain reception and resourcing obligations that the current system creates.<sup>64</sup>

Meanwhile, this system hugely incentivises states to exercise the one practical form of control that the design of the Refugee Convention in effect leaves open to them, which is that there is nothing in the Convention requiring refugees to be assisted or allowed to enter a country in order to claim asylum. Thus, the way in which the UK (and indeed all other Global North democracies) seeks to exercise control over the number of refugees which it is obliged to admit is to reduce the number of refugees actually reaching its border.

The result is a dystopian paradox; with states such as the UK which offer the fullest rights to recognised refugees having the greatest incentive to seek to deflect and divert asylum seekers away from ever reaching their territory and making a claim to those rights. It is hard to think of an international system that could be better designed to risk the lives of refugees and spur the flourishing of people smuggling operations.

Thus the UK spends much time and money extra-territorialising its immigration controls to seek to stop potential refugees arriving. For all the complex, ineffective and high-profile extra-territorial immigration controls in the Channel that are currently receiving so much attention, most such controls are surprisingly simple, effective, and low profile. A prime example is imposing visa requirements on a country if asylum claims from that country start to rise.<sup>65</sup> The UK's decision in May 2022 to require entry visas for Salvadorans is just the latest example of such a response.<sup>66</sup>

This is also why the sensible-sounding idea of 'safe and legal routes' – to allow refugees to file claims for asylum in the UK without having to make an irregular, dangerous journey to the UK – has struggled to survive contact with public perceptions and political reality. If the UK were to establish such a route, it would on the face of it put into reverse the UK's only established mechanism for controlling refugee numbers, instead opening up a portal to British territory directly from overseas.

Outrageous though it may currently seem to those working in the refugee sector, it is quite possible that the past decade might in hindsight come to be seen as some sort of golden era of openness and calm for refugee reception in the UK. This was an age of at least some coordinated and ordered refugee resettlement efforts into the UK, the development and implementation of community sponsorship support of resettled refugees. This was a time when refugee flows were experienced mostly as a result of events and situations which clearly aroused sympathy from the British public, and had higher recognition rates. Those refugees generally came from countries which did not have such large populations or well-established connections with the UK, thus allowing refugees to be received by the UK in manageable numbers.

In the context of what could be viewed as these relatively benign circumstances, it may seem particularly alarming then that the asylum backlog has risen to such levels, and that the Rwanda plan is really considered to be the best approach to managing this. What might be the outcome if the UK experienced asylum flows in much larger numbers, in much more challenging circumstances?

The UK has deep and longstanding connections with some of the most populous countries on earth: India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh. Even with the relatively low proportion of refugees those countries have thus far generated, given their size, connections with, and ability to access the UK, all four have generated a steady flow of refugees recognised by the UK in the last 20 years.<sup>67</sup> What might happen if an event or situation were to occur which caused a material rise in asylum claims from a country of their size and with such existing connections with the UK?

At the same time, away from the furore of the Channel and the asylum system, the UK's post-Brexit labour immigration system provides a greater opportunity than did the pre-Brexit regime for those from outside the EU not only to come to work in the UK for a period, but also to permanently settle here.



## Labour immigration

Earlier in this paper I referred to the likelihood that the Government's net immigration target would continue to be missed, even after it had taken back full control over the UK's immigration policy post-Brexit, as one of the key reasons behind that target's quiet abandonment. In creating the level playing field of the UK's post-Brexit labour immigration system, the Government paired a more restrictive policy approach to immigration from the EU with a considerably more expansive policy approach to immigration from outside the EU. Key aspects of this include:

- The cap on the numbers of 'skilled worker' visas issued has been removed.
- As has the Resident Labour Market Test, the requirement to advertise the job for 28 days in the UK first before offering it to an overseas worker.
- Even more important is the significant reduction of the required skill level, and
- The required salary (including the expansion of the eligibility criteria for 'new entrants', and of the shortage occupations list, which allow an employee to be hired at a discounted salary level) to qualify for a skilled worker visa.
- (Changes 3. and 4. have meant that those coming to the UK from outside the EU are now eligible to do roughly half of all full-time jobs in the UK, double the level under the pre-Brexit immigration system.<sup>68</sup>)
- The 'graduate route' has meant a (re)liberalisation – this route was introduced by the Labour Government, but scrapped in 2012; now it has been re-introduced – of overseas students' ability to stay on in the UK to work unsponsored after they have completed their studies, and then to subsequently switch from a student to a skilled worker visa to continue to stay and work in the UK.
- Importantly, as well as liberalisation of the rules on entry, there has also been liberalisation of the rules allowing non-EU migrants to stay in the UK longer term. Over the past decade, the majority of work visas issued to non-EU migrants have typically expired within five years; a large proportion of non-EU workers only stayed in the UK temporarily. A contributing factor to this has been the separate permanent settlement minimum income requirement of £38,800 – much higher than the required salary level for a working visa. But under the new UK points-based system, this separate, higher, requirement has been removed and meeting the required visa salary level is sufficient. So not only is it now easier for non-EU migrants to come to the UK for work, but, having done so, it is now also considerably easier for them to stay.



**Table 1: Share of eligible worker that pass the settlement threshold**

	Does not meet old or new threshold	Meets old threshold (£38,000)	Meets new threshold (£25,600)
<b>Overall</b>			
UK & Ireland	5%	62%	95%
EEA	2%	71%	98%
Non-EEA	6%	69%	94%
<b>RQF3-5</b>			
UK & Ireland	7%	35%	93%
EEA	3%	38%	97%
Non-EEA	15%	32%	85%
<b>RQF6+</b>			
UK & Ireland	3%	85%	97%
EEA	1%	85%	99%
Non-EEA	2%	85%	98%

Source: Migration Advisory Committee, Annual Report 2020/69

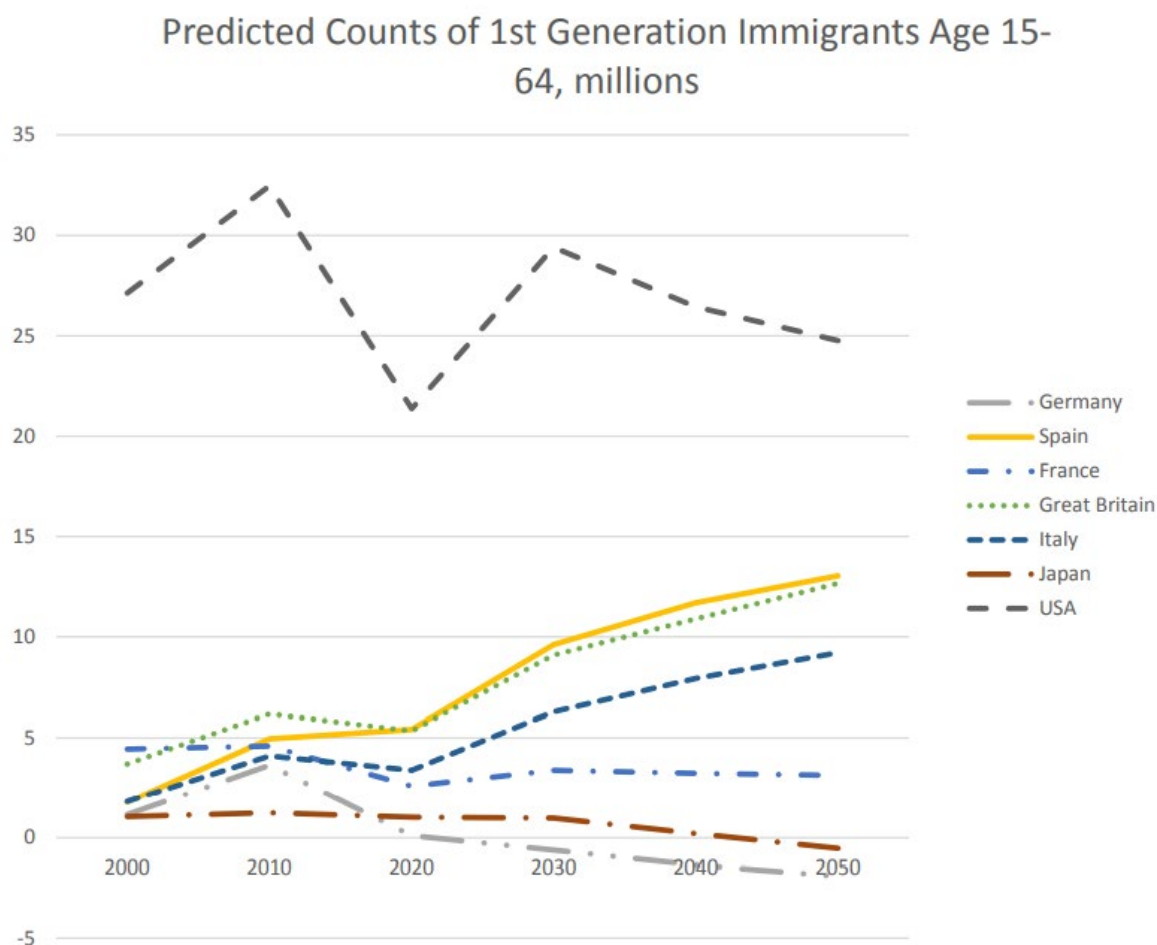
Given these opportunities for those coming from outside the EU, over the longer term the UK's deep historical connections with some of the most populated countries across the globe – India, Pakistan, Nigeria, and Bangladesh – have the potential to create far more sizeable flows of people to the UK than the smaller and stagnating populations of the EU ever realistically could.

The legacy of the British Empire and the Commonwealth – itself effectively founded on the migration of what was at that time one of the world's fastest growing national populations, Britain's – has left some of the most densely populated countries on earth not only with historical linkages, but also with a significant current and living connections, to the UK, through their relations with, significant diaspora in, and ongoing migration flows to, the UK. The people flows of the Empire have been reversed.<sup>70</sup> And for these countries the English language provides a key link not just with their past, but to their present, and indeed to future opportunities.

For these reasons these countries are already among the largest contributors to the UK's immigration numbers across all different parts of the spectrum: from work, student, and family migration, to numbers of overseas born mothers giving birth, to numbers applying for settlement and citizenship.

And it is the UK's connections with, and exposure to, these countries on which Hanson and McIntosh's prediction of a near tripling of the number of first-generation immigrants in the UK over the next three decades is largely based, a level of predicted growth that stands in contrast to many other countries where relatively flat or even declining migrant flows are predicted:

Figure 7: Predicted migration by destination



Source: Hanson and McIntosh NBER Working Paper 22622<sup>71</sup>

Per George Box, all models are wrong, but some may be useful. We cannot know the future of these countries, nor how the UK’s deep connections with them will play out in practice. But what is clear is that demographic trends that are already locked in mean that, in the period to 2050, India and Nigeria are the two countries that will provide most of the world’s young people actively looking for jobs and a better life.

Nor of course can we know the future of work. It is possible that the consequences of technological advances, remote working and automation may mean that, whatever the potential for migration to the UK, the actual migrant workforce the UK will need is lower than currently. But the opposite is also possible. Indeed might be thought more likely if some migrant-heavy sectors of the economy prove relatively resistant to automation, and/or if the interaction of technology and the gig economy continues to allow migrants to exploit new opportunities in sectors previously hard for them to access.<sup>72</sup> And while politicians from both main parties talk about increasing the skills and productivity of the resident workforce in order to reduce the UK economy’s need for migrant labour, such promises are much easier made than delivered. Even if those promises could be realised, Japan is providing a reminder that even a high-productivity polity averse to immigration might have to reconsider its position as its population ages.<sup>73</sup>

This is what is to come. But what appears to have already happened, the COVID-19 pandemic having at last seemingly been brought under control, is that migration flows to the UK from outside the EU have swiftly reached significant levels.<sup>74</sup> The official commentary is that this reflects ‘unique’ circumstances<sup>75</sup>, the expert opinion that “‘record’ immigration is driven by special factors ... [and] future flows are unlikely to reach the levels seen today”<sup>76</sup>. And, of course, opening up an economy after a pandemic is certainly (one hopes) a rare circumstance, and the flows have also been swelled by other ad hoc events, particularly the crisis in Ukraine. One might query whether war is such a special factor. But, regardless, might these ‘special factors’ be hiding the bigger story? For the flows seem robust across the board. While, for reasons discussed earlier, an overall comparison is hard between pre- and post-pandemic migration statistics, administrative statistics for work, student and family visas are of course able to be compared; these categories show UK immigration numbers up 72%<sup>77</sup>, 71% and 61% respectively since 2019.<sup>78</sup>

The UK’s reported international student numbers are particularly spectacular, given the mortal shock that was initially feared to have been delivered to the UK’s international student franchise by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the last three years the rise in the student numbers coming to the UK from India, Nigeria and Pakistan has been staggering, even if it has had relatively little attention in public debate.

**Table 2: Top 5 nationalities granted Sponsored study visas, 2019 compared to year ending June 2022**

Nationality	Year ending 2019	Year ending July 2022	Difference	Percentage difference
India	37,396	117,965	+80,569	+215%
China	119,825	115,056	-4,769	-4%
Nigeria	8,384	65,929	+57,545	+686%
Pakistan	4,927	23,490	+18,563	+377%
United States	14,837	16,137	+1,300	+9%
Other	99,352	148,291	+48,939	+49%
Total	284,721	486,868	+202,147	+71%

Source: Home Office<sup>79</sup>

Notes: Top 5 nationalities in the most recent year. ‘Other’ includes all nationalities that don’t feature in the top 5 in the latest year

In the most recent statistics is the changing picture on dependant visas for those coming to the UK with students is also stark. The number of study-related visas being issued to dependants has more than tripled in the last three years to 20% of such visas, driven predominantly by those coming from Nigeria and India. The number of Nigerian dependant study related visas increased from 1,586 in 2019 to 51,648 in the year to September 2022 to stand at 50% of the total study related visas issued to Nigerians. The numbers for Indians over the same period went from 3,135 to 33,239. Between them, over 100,000 study dependant visas were issued for the year ending September

2022 to the top five nationalities for such visas (Nigeria, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka).<sup>80</sup>

This may suggest something new is happening in the student visa space. So too might reports of a new trend that, given that the UK skilled worker visa no longer requires a degree-level qualification, some overseas students may be being encouraged to gain access to the UK through a student visa before then immediately switching into a sponsored work visa without even taking up their university place.<sup>81</sup>

In terms of the potential permanent impact of immigration, unlike the UK's offer under the Ukrainian schemes which is temporary in nature<sup>82</sup>, the UK's offer to both EU and Hong Kong residents has provided an opportunity to permanently settle in the UK:

- **EU Citizens:**

The offer of permanent settlement that the UK made to EU citizens already in the UK pre-Brexit was made on a much more expanded and simplified basis than pre-Brexit. It also turned out that it was made to a lot more EU citizens than was initially envisaged, because it turned out that EU citizens coming to the UK had over the years indeed been materially undercounted, with the result that there were a lot more of them in the UK than the official statistics had suggested. The advocacy group for EU citizens in the UK was named 'the3million'. But nearly 6 million have now applied through the Scheme.<sup>83</sup> How many of them will choose to settle in the UK in practice is still unclear. The 2021 Census suggests far from all of them.<sup>84</sup> But, for now, a lot of EU citizens have that right.

- **Hong Kong British National Overseas (BNO) status holders:**

In the case of the UK's offer to British National (Overseas) status holders from Hong Kong and their dependants, which has recently been opened up further<sup>85</sup>, the eventual numbers are even harder to predict. Potential migrants' decisions under this route are influenced not just by UK policy, but by specific developments in Hong Kong but also broader geopolitical developments relating to China. This makes the spread of potential outcomes for numbers through this route very wide, represented in the Home Office's scenario planning for between 10,000 and 1 million coming to the UK over the first 5 years.<sup>86</sup> Almost two years in, there have so far been over 140,000 applications through this route.<sup>87</sup>

Might any of these immigration numbers matter to the British public? Ranged against those who argue no, these numbers do/will not matter because the UK has 'control' over them, are those on the other side of the debate, including Nick Timothy, David Goodhart, Philip Johnston, and Patrick O'Flynn, who argue, yes, these numbers absolutely do/will matter. For them, the "current immigration surge – about 1 million visas for work, study and family settlement have been issued in the past year – [are] poised to send immigration anxiety back to pre-Brexit levels". From this perspective, Brexit is seen as "less a vote about 'taking back control' than reducing numbers", and the Government did in fact make clear policy promises that overall levels of migration to the UK would be reduced as a result of the new post-Brexit immigration system, so numbers do matter.<sup>88</sup> Many of the concerns from this perspective are set out in the recent Centre for Policy Studies report co-authored by Nick Timothy.<sup>89</sup>

Control is clearly important to positive public perceptions of immigration policy. But it is easy to get sucked into the binary thinking of “control or numbers”; that taking back control is the cure all for those of the public concerned about immigration. EU freedom of movement is understandably held up as the poster child of a system lacking immigration control. But public concerns about freedom of movement and lack of control did not become at all material until the actual numbers of migrants became material, post the UK’s ‘early’ opening up of its labour market to citizens of the EU-8 countries from 2004.

There is another important point about EU freedom of movement. It was not uncontrolled. Rather, it effectively handed control over labour immigration to employers. EU freedom of movement did not provide an unlimited right to move, but a right to move *for work*. It was up to UK employers how much use they wanted to make use of EU citizens wishing to avail of that right in circumstances where, under immigration rules at least, there was no minimum for the level of wages and skills that could be contracted for. As the Migration Advisory Committee pointed out though, freedom of movement may have resulted in a system that appeared to be run in the sole interest of employers, when employers’ interests were not the sole interests that should be taken into account in designing a labour immigration system.<sup>90</sup>

It is perfectly possible therefore for an aspect of the immigration system to be totally controlled, but for significant sections of the public not to see those controls as aligned with their interests and preferences. Some possible forms of the post-Brexit labour immigration system, with even lower levels of salary and skills thresholds, would have risked falling into this category, appearing to take back control while in reality continuing to allow employers most of the unrestricted leeway they had enjoyed under the freedom of movement system.

Another example is the admission of international students. Since the crackdown on bogus colleges of a decade ago, the system for admitting international students to the UK has been very controlled. It is largely accepted by the public. But it would be wrong to conclude that there is no limit to what might be acceptable as long as control is exercised. Of course, there is a narrow economic logic which says that there should be no limit to overseas students, as the higher fees paid by them can be used to subsidise the education of domestic students, so the more the better. But if recent history has taught us anything, it is that even if immigration policy is founded on sound economic logic arguments at the aggregate level, presenting it as such may be counterproductive to allaying concerns. Instead, better to acknowledge that it is at least conceivable that there may be a limit to the number of international students that can be admitted to the UK and received with equanimity by the British public before this starts to be represented as prioritising international over domestic students for financial gain. Concerns with the sheer size of the numbers may have been behind recent reports suggesting that some in the Government may be having second thoughts about some of the most liberal aspects of this regime.<sup>91</sup>

Those who argue that numbers do matter may not put it quite this way, but in effect their position is that the UK has now in effect reverted to the classic Freeman strategy:

- Using the veil of the end of freedom of movement to run a labour immigration system that is in fact considerably more liberal than most of the public seem to realise;
- Facilitated by the (very convenient) lack of any current reported official net migration number to hold the Government to account for reducing immigration numbers.

Three important points on this though:

- The statistical bottle will not remain stoppered forever. The official immigration statistics will at some stage surely inevitably emerge in more clear form from their current conveniently opaque state of flux. Clearer, more reliable – now EU numbers are being properly tracked as well, which was not the case in the era of freedom of movement – and reportable immigration statistics will be developed and published, even if they are not directly comparable in all respects to those of the pre-COVID period.
- We have begun to see that opacity can be used both ways. Those who see the public's concerns over immigration revolving around numbers had begun to make claims of 'surges' and 'rivers' of people, extrapolating from those ONS statistics that were being made available.<sup>92</sup> And now, despite all the ONS' caveats and disclaimers about the experimental, provisional, incomplete and uncertain nature of the official estimates, in the light of the size of some of the underlying numbers being reported the most recent ONS immigration statistics release has been greeted by the media like a long lost friend, attracting headlines across the spectrum; it is almost like the quarterly net migration statistics never went away.
- In order for the classic Freeman strategy to be successful, politicians need to quietly embrace and play along with it, keeping all talk of immigration low-key and under wraps. This is the opposite of what is currently happening.

### The political context

Rather than helping to reduce the politicisation and the public profile of immigration in the UK, the most recent evidence suggests some politicians are still intent on doing the complete opposite. Not only are they intent on re-treading the same rocky path on the slippery slope of over-promising and under-delivering on what can be done to reduce immigration numbers, some seem intent on doubling down on the risks in this area.

Suella Braverman, the current Home Secretary, has gone as far to suggest her aim is the total stopping of all arrivals across the Channel.<sup>93</sup> And, not content with that, she also appears to be rummaging through the dustbin for David Cameron's 'tens of thousands' net immigration target, claiming that it is her ultimate aspiration to get the numbers down to this level.<sup>94</sup> In terms of high-profile flagship policy statements that are constantly in the media for all the wrong reasons, and which remind those with concerns around immigration control that immigration is not in control, it is hard to think of a more combustible combination. Particularly in the light of the fact that the same Government's fiscal plans are effectively dependent on an *increase* in net migration, as set out by the Office for Budget Responsibility at the Autumn Statement of 2022.<sup>95</sup>

At the same time, the significant degree of consensus that now exists between the two main parties on the key high ground of immigration policy might ultimately prove a problem rather than a solution for the latent immigration tensions which remain in British society. One of the reasons that immigration upended the British political consensus in the last decade was that an increasing number of voters became concerned that their views on immigration were not represented by *either* of the major parties. This allowed other voices to enter the debate, which were effectively able to capitalise on that gap in the market.

The make-up of the British electoral system means that, rather like the Brexit vote, while the British public as a whole may be relatively balanced in its approach to immigration, at the local level this can still mean that a number of key constituencies, particularly those in areas that most swung from Labour to Conservative at the last General Election, are less inclined to see immigration favourably or relaxed about seeing it increase further.<sup>96</sup> If neither of the main parties looks capable of addressing these concerns, and if, despite all the promises to the contrary, the numbers do show immigration levels further increasing, even if those most concerned about this are in the minority, one can envisage a situation where the UK could find itself once more with immigration's salience spiking back up and once again potentially politically transformative.



## CHAPTER FOUR – FOR THOSE ADVOCATING FOR MORE OPEN ASYLUM AND IMMIGRATION POLICY APPROACHES IN THE UK, WHAT TO DO ABOUT THIS?

In a sentence: those inclined to take the ‘Don’t worry about a thing’ view must productively engage with the argument that ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet’.

The last 20 years of immigration politics in the UK should surely have taught those who ‘don’t worry about a thing’ over immigration that ignoring those who do worry about immigration does not appear to reduce the salience of immigration. Nor does telling the worriers that there is no need to worry about it. Even worse, of course, is deriding those worries, or condemning them as born of prejudice.

For those who ‘don’t worry about a thing’ over immigration, and who want to achieve positive change, rather than looking virtuous while completely failing to achieve it:

- The aim should be to reduce the salience of immigration for those who do worry about it.
- The strategy for achieving this should be not only to acknowledge the pressure points and challenges around immigration control and numbers, but also to show understanding of and interest in engaging with these concerns.
- There can be positive power in putting the two perspectives together; ‘don’t worry about a thing’ but taking account of ‘you ain’t seen nothin’ yet’ will result not only in more robust, but also more broadly supported, policy outcomes.

Four key points for implementing this:

- Acknowledge and seek to engage with the core concerns that are raised on the other side of the debate around immigration control and numbers. Prioritise attempts to mitigate those concerns.
- This does not mean having to address the concerns of every extreme view on the other side of the debate. But it does mean though not assuming that the views of every person on the other side of the debate are necessarily extreme or have extreme motives.
- Look to identify, articulate, and increase the common ground that exists on an issue, then start from there, rather than starting from the perspective of immediately aiming to identify, articulate and resolve the differences.
- This does not mean having to sacrifice the achievement of the core aims of more open approaches to asylum and immigration, but it may mean having to compromise on how they are achieved.

What might embracing ‘You ain’t seen nothin’ yet’ mean in practice?



## Immigration Numbers

Even for those who believe that, overall, immigration control concerns trump immigration number concerns, it means acknowledging that numbers may matter more to some people and that there are particular times and situations where concerns around immigration numbers may come to the fore and will likely always matter. Specifically for the UK, the range of potential scenarios that lie ahead mean there will almost certainly be times when numbers have their day again as a focal point for those with concerns over immigration. That will be either because of the size or visibility of those numbers, or because of the politics of how immigration developments and policy are presented.

It also means accepting that the prominence of immigration numbers is not itself damaging. What is damaging is when immigration numbers themselves become an arbitrary guide or, even worse, a target for unrealistic immigration policy. For example, promising “no boat crossings across the Channel” without any realistic plan for achieving this, or, even thinking about bringing back the net immigration target when labour shortages persist in many sectors.

British politics’ soundbite-based ‘immigration unrealism’ heightens, rather than ameliorates, concerns around immigration numbers. But it has proven to be – and continues to be – an error to simply dismiss the relevance and logic of numerical targets. The best way of drawing the poison out of immigration numbers is to:

- Acknowledge their importance to some.
- Seek to understand where those concerns come from.
- Most importantly, identify the common ground between both sides of the debate that exists around such concerns – Are we able to properly help refugees integrate, earn a productive living, and contribute to our society? Are we investing enough in our domestic skills base alongside our use of overseas workers?

In terms of refugee/asylum policy and labour immigration policy, those advocating for more open policies should consider a re-calibration of approach based around four ‘C’s’:

1. Concerns: acknowledging and engaging with the concerns to be mitigated.
2. Common ground: identifying the common ground from which this can be done.
3. Compromise: considering the available compromises on the “how” ...
4. Core aim: ... to still achieve the core of the main outcomes aimed for.

## Refugees and asylum

The significant common ground on which to build here is the degree of consensus across British society that providing a compassionate welcome to refugees is the right and fair thing to do. The concerns that need to be engaged with here are around the uncontrolled and unlimited nature of the asylum regime. The answer to improving matters must involve attempting to reconcile the two, endeavouring to reconcile safety for refugees with at least taking immigration control concerns into account.

In an ideal world, the compromise required to do so would be built into a reformed international refugee system, along the lines of the model suggested by Professor James Hathaway. In this model the legal relationship between states would provide a framework for the sharing of obligations between them, which would break the link between where the asylum claim is made, who determines the claim and, if the claim is accepted, in which country the refugee is then settled. Refugees would not then have to put their lives on the line to get access to proper protection; they would access the same protection regime with the same opportunities, whether they crossed the nearest border or travelled thousands of miles.<sup>97</sup>

Only such a system – in which the country where an asylum seeker's claim for protection is just their point of entry into an international refugee determination process, but does not determine where they will end up if they are determined to be a refugee – could realistically undermine the incentives that drive the extended people-smuggling model that has built up around the international asylum system in its current form, in which would-be claimants are often encouraged to travel long distances by any means necessary to reach a preferred destination country.<sup>98</sup>

For the UK, the outcome of such a reformed system would be to end the obligation to maintain two very onerous and costly systems: one designed to seek to repel asylum claims, the other to process asylum claims that it has failed to repel. Instead, there would be an obligation to resettle from elsewhere in the world, in a controlled fashion, a share of those already determined to be refugees.<sup>99</sup>

But, of course, while the Hathaway proposal may represent an attractive approach to the problem if coming at it from a neutral starting position, we are not in that position. Getting to the outcome Professor Hathaway proposes from where we are now would involve a significant reconfiguration of an existing real world multilateral system. That would seem unlikely in the near-term. Too many uncompromising and unaligned states and political personalities would need to compromise and align. But is there a possibility for the UK to apply some of the core principles of such a system to try to counter the dangerous and uncontrolled asylum flows it is currently experiencing and replacing them with a safer and more controlled welcome for refugees? It is clearly not easy. But it is possible.

On the part of refugee advocates and those more open to the UK accepting refugees it would require what looks like a huge compromise, accepting two very challenging conditions. Namely:

- Refugee numbers accepted can be limited by the state.
- Those arriving and making asylum claims in the UK will not be prioritised ahead of refugees elsewhere in the world.

Refugee advocates making that compromise could however reap a huge reward:

- Fewer refugees would die making dangerous journeys.
- More refugees than currently allowed could be admitted to the UK.

In essence, this compromise would accept a diminution in the relative privilege of individual refugees arriving in the UK in order could improve the position of a greater number of refugees overall.

Limiting refugee numbers is understandably anathema to refugee advocates. But resettled refugee numbers to the UK are already limited in number. What if those numbers were higher? And/or, as myself and Russell Hargrave have previously argued for, supplemented by routes which allowed refugees who are overseas access into the UK in ways that could be similarly controlled and limited?<sup>100</sup>

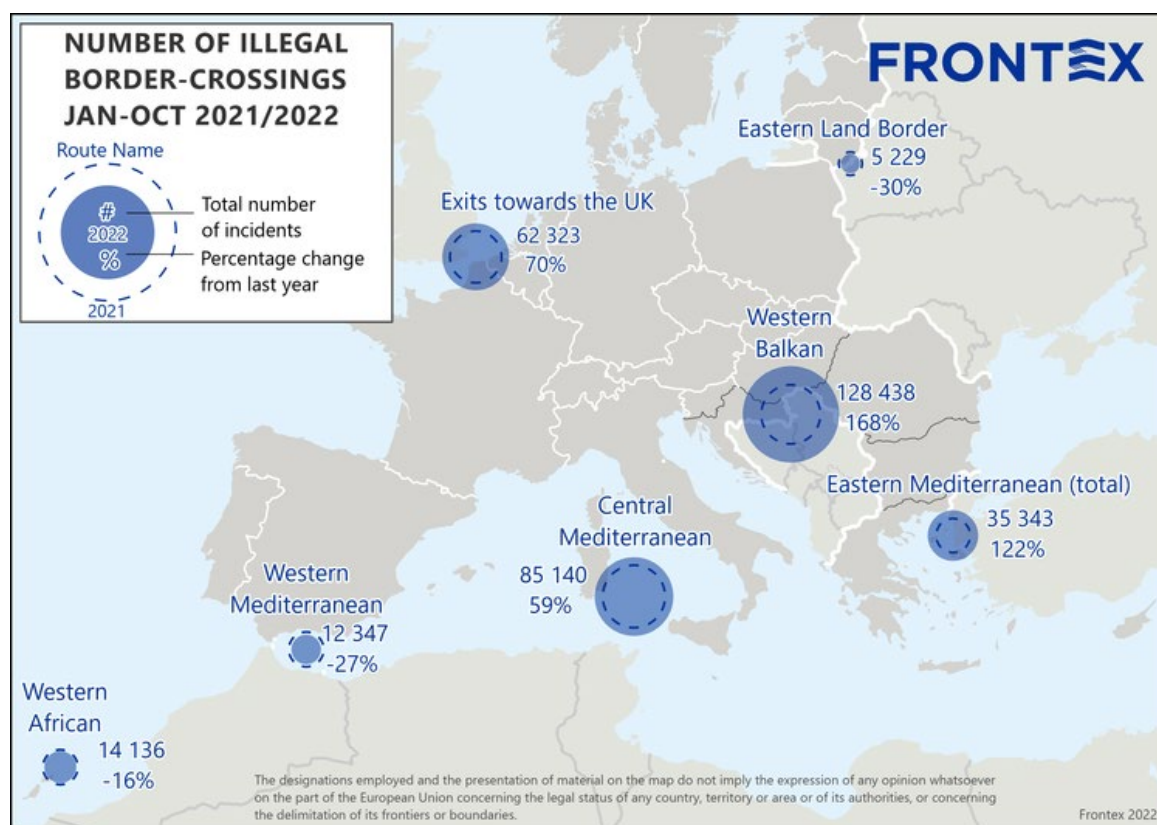
Ending irregular boat crossings across the Channel safely, humanely, and legally requires fundamentally undermining the economics of the people smuggling arrangements that are operating here. Removing the incentive for making the crossing would require the immediate return of most of those making it. This means accepting France as a safe country from the perspective of the Refugee Convention. Only those with valid human rights claim to remain in the UK under the separate European Convention on Human Rights would *not* be returned to France.

Taking control of the route in this way could result in an end to dangerous journeys across the Channel. But it could also allow more, not fewer, refugees to be admitted to the UK, not just as a *quid pro quo* for refugee advocates, but for France and the wider EU to be willing to countenance any such operationally effective returns agreement with the UK.

The question of course is why would France/the EU countenance such an agreement at all?

From the EU's perspective, the events in the Channel are clearly very much on its radar, as this current diagrammatical depiction of illegal border crossings at the EU border for the first ten months of this year shows.

Figure 8: Number of illegal border-crossings Jan-Oct 2021/2022



Source: Frontex (EU Border Agency)<sup>101</sup>

Jean Mafart of the French Ministry of the Interior outlined the concerns about events in the Channel from the EU’s perspective rather well in his remarks on EU migration/asylum policy at the recent ICMPD Vienna Migration Conference.<sup>102</sup> In summary, he stated:

- The EU/France needs a migration agreement with the UK
- Not having one causes problems for the EU/France in terms of those irregularly entering the EU/France to enter the UK
- The cause of effective immigration controls in the EU/France would be advanced by the UK opening up more legal routes for entry
- In exchange for that, the EU/France would need to agree to the readmission of certain irregular migrants who had attempted to enter the UK.

Such an agreement would obviously be very difficult to negotiate, and have to address a number of complex and potentially confrontational aspects. But a start is to at least recognise the common ground, as articulated by Mr Mafart. Does France have an interest in showing that cooperative migration control can work to dissuade irregular movements of migrants? In stopping the build-up of irregular migrants on its territory in order to make the journey to the UK? In disrupting people smuggling and criminal operations on its territory? In ending the diversion of resources to seek to stop these journeys, no matter who is paying for these resources? In demonstrating control over its own border? Yes, to all of these.

France, though, has no *obligation* to help to the UK out of its own bind on asylum, particularly during times when France has received asylum applications at roughly three times the UK rate, and accepts a greater number of refugees than the UK does. To have any chance of securing a comprehensive return agreement with France would therefore require agreeing to an exchange that reduced rather than increased this disparity; the UK would need to take in refugees, from France and/or elsewhere in the EU. This would then equalise the discomfort, and would be necessary to turn an agreement that would otherwise be completely unsellable on one side of the Channel into one that is tough – but possible – to sell on both sides of the Channel.

If the UK could increase control over its borders and reduce irregular migration, but the *quid pro quo* was increasing the number of refugees it offers protection to, would this be acceptable to the British public? The evidence suggests that, in this context at least, reasserting control could indeed increase the acceptability of higher numbers.<sup>103</sup> Even those who have taken some of the toughest stances on the question of the Channel crossers have acknowledged that “controlling illegal immigration would increase public support for the refugees who arrive through legal routes”.<sup>104</sup>

To repeat, this approach requires a very significant compromise. But the outcome could be truly transformative; to achieve the core aim of protecting lives, and of taking in (more) refugees. The UK would be demonstrating that it is committed to refugee protection and to working responsibly and cooperatively with neighbouring countries to deliver it. Indeed, there is an argument that the core aim here can *only* be achieved through the control that this compromise allows. Looked at this way, rather than being at odds, control and humanity can be considered mutually supportive.

## Labour immigration

As Gordon Brown’s chance meeting with Ms Duffy demonstrated, it is easy to dismiss, even deride, public concerns around labour immigration as fundamentally misplaced. After all, the consensus of learned economists is that immigration has little if any impact on average (un)employment rates and wage levels in the UK.<sup>105</sup> So why the concern? And migrants clearly perform so many important roles in British society and economy that the need for them seems glaringly self-evident. As a consequence, the emergence of labour shortages in some sectors where there are not enough migrants to fill them as before can easily engender a disdainful ‘told you so!’ attitude among advocates of more liberal positions.

And this is only now. What is to come can be portrayed as even more self-harming. Demography is a seductive topic for those who most hold dear the benefits of immigration. The UK is in a demographic bind, its fertility rate below replacement rate now for half a century. But it is in less of a demographic bind than most other developed countries, which are aging more quickly. This is due to immigration; since the 1990s immigration has been the main contributor to the UK’s population growth, and the lower average age of those immigrants has meant that over that period Britain has aged less than it otherwise would have done, and less than most other Global North countries.<sup>106</sup>

But while the UK may be able to smooth the trajectory, it cannot alter the inexorability of demographic reality which a shortage of babies brings (immigrant fertility rates themselves tend relatively quickly towards native rates following arrival); the UK's population is getting older and will continue to do so. As it does so, increasing numbers of health and care service professionals will almost certainly be needed to provide the care which British citizens expect. And, more broadly, in importing younger workers from overseas the UK can at least continue to push the demographic can down the road a little, improving the dependency ratio and generating the tax revenues and social contributions necessary to support an aging population.

From the perspective of immigration as viewed as both a key response to, as well as a mitigant of, an aging and dwindling society, those communities, from Bulgaria<sup>107</sup> to Quebec<sup>108</sup> to Japan<sup>109</sup> that resist immigration, concerned that the arrival of immigrants may signal their own identity's exit from history, seem to be engaging in the ultimate in demographic self-deception and self-harm, in effect voting for their own extinction.

That the conclusion – more immigration needed – seems so self-evident, serves only to further reinforce the glib 'told you so!' tendency among some of the advocates of these arguments. This can easily slip into creating the toxic perception that overseas workers are not just important for the British economy and society, but are somehow better regarded than, indeed preferred to, domestic workers. Such advocates can sometimes seem blind to any other perspective. But if you are coming from a different perspective on immigration, you may well take quite a different lesson away from the very same events.

Did the pandemic highlight the essential contribution of some key workers from overseas?

Or

Did it shine a spotlight on the potential risk of over-dependence on fluid and flexible overseas born workforce who can decide to return home whenever they like?

Does the emergence of labour shortages show the folly of the ending of freedom of movement of workers to the UK, and how much the UK needs overseas workers to support its economy and society?

Or

Does it only serve to confirm that the economic system based on freedom of movement and frictionless hiring of migrant labour was mis-calibrated, and over-reliant on immigrant workers willing to work under poor conditions for poor pay?

It is tempting to think that no-one would ever vote for shortages and inconvenience. But what if some people thought that shortages and inconvenience had the potential to empower them? More so than a freedom of movement system which incentivised employers to prefer immigration as a quicker, simpler, and cheaper alternative to investing in local skills and training? More so than a freedom of movement system which seemed to some to be solely dedicated to the short-term profitability and flexibility of the employer at the expense of both the long-term productivity of the economy and interests of the 'ordinary worker'?



In the story told from this different perspective, positively reinforced by the recent ‘high-wage, high-productivity’ messaging of both major parties<sup>110</sup>, this unbalanced system has now been found out, by a potent cocktail of Brexit and the pandemic. This story casts this as a positive development; it forces employers to reassess how they most appropriately carry out their business and invest in their workforce, mitigating towards workers getting a fairer share of the economic pie.

All this should give pause for reflection. But it should not mask the fact that there is a substantial amount of common ground in the labour immigration debate. There is a widespread desire to source skills and labour in genuine areas of shortage. There is a widespread acknowledgement that in order to fulfil the needs of the UK’s economy and society both now, but even more so as the UK’s population continues to age, immigration will almost certainly play an important part, but is not, and cannot be, the only answer.

The case for labour immigration thus needs to be clearly presented as *supplementing*, not supplanting, what the UK domestically already has, or realistically could have, available. The value of a more open approach to labour immigration must be set out in a way that clearly acknowledges political and public concerns around the appropriate balance with other interests; is the UK investing enough in the skills base of its school leavers? Or sufficiently in its re-training its elder workers? Or in overlooked categories of the under-employed?

To secure its core aims, those making the case for more open labour immigration could utilise more inclusive strategies in more imaginatively seeking compromise:

- There is a clear need therefore to situate labour immigration policy in the wider context of engaging with all potential options to address labour market gaps – alongside training and upskilling of the domestic workforce, tackling under-employed segments of society, extending working life. This can rebut the perception that overseas labour is employers’ lever of first resort, and instead presenting it as an important *supplement to* rather than a cheap *substitute for* domestic resources.
- This could be bolstered by highlighting the significant costs paid by employers to sponsor overseas workers, and in particular the Immigration Skills Charge (‘ISC’), whose revenues should be more visibly highlighted, and transparently used, rather than subsumed into general tax revenue. Since it was introduced in 2017, the revenue raised by the ISC has significantly increased, from £91.3 million in 2017-18 to £349.1 million for 2021-22.<sup>111</sup>
- A core aspect of this approach – and an important quid pro quo for shorter-term immigration asks being politically and publicly acceptable – would be to pro-actively engage with longer term workforce planning between key stakeholders to develop workable, strategic resourcing solutions for key sectors of the economy and society.

- Building on the NHS Employers Code of Practice for International Recruitment<sup>112</sup>, those advocating for a more open labour immigration approach for the UK also need to focus on helping to strategically shape migration sustainably on mutually beneficial terms with those countries from which the UK is receiving migrants, making sure that the story from the perspective of those countries is ultimately ‘brain gain’, not ‘brain drain’. This means, through ‘global skills partnerships’<sup>113</sup> identifying, but also actively and constructively helping to develop, *before* they arrive, the skills of the potential pool of migrant workers who can contribute to the UK economy and society, but in a way that is also fair and positive for them but also for their country of origin in terms of building capacity and expertise within that country.
- At the same time, it is important to make sure that the skills of those migrants already in the UK – from EU citizens who are in the UK with the right to stay under EU Settlement Scheme, to those who have come as international students, those who have come on family visas, or under the Hong Kong BNO visa, or under the Ukrainian resettlement schemes, or who have refugee status – are, alongside those of the locally born population, fully and fairly developed and utilised. Focusing on the considerable broader human resources already available within the UK from overseas could help to fill some of the workforce gaps in an efficient, lower profile way without the need to publicly push against the boundaries of the labour immigration system.
- This all needs to be combined with more robust and pro-active labour market law enforcement to ensure minimum wage compliance, and to break the perception that more open immigration fuels exploitative labour practices that are damaging to both migrant and locally born workers.

Indeed, one of the most direct routes to achieve the core aims in this area can be targeted interventions which can further grow the common ground, identifying areas such as labour market law enforcement where structural improvements can be seen to accrue to the benefit of local as well as migrant workers. Another twist on this approach can be seen in Germany, where the Digital Career Institute, originally established in 2016 specifically to teach coding to refugees, was later expanded to become a provider of this training for unemployed people regardless of whether they were refugees. As well as making the “enterprise’s business model more sustainable [this] also promoted social ties between refugees, migrants and other local residents”.<sup>114</sup>

Immigration cannot fundamentally change the UK’s demographic future. But it can help its economy and society adapt to that future, and to support the UK’s way of life heading into it. But, as other developed countries will be facing the same prospects, and the same challenges, there will be an increasingly competitive struggle between countries to attract the labour immigration they need. To compete well in this endeavour the UK will need the most supportive political and public opinion it can realistically achieve. This will require a more imaginative compromise than those favouring a more open approach to labour immigration are currently offering.



## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> We sympathise with the view that referring to people who migrate as ‘numbers’ can appear dehumanising. But this paper is seeking to engage with debates around the perceptions and policies at the public and political level which do, and will inevitably continue to, use this language and framing.

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<sup>3</sup> Henry Ford.

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<sup>5</sup> Gary P. Freeman, ‘Britain, the Deviant Case’ in Cornelius, Tsuda, Martin and Hollifield eds *Controlling immigration: a global perspective* (Stanford University Press 1994), 297.

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<sup>7</sup> Office for National Statistics, ‘Migration Statistics Quarterly Report – information for users’ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/internationalmigration/methodologies/migrationstatisticsquarterlyreportinformationforusers>.

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Tories would limit immigration to ‘tens of thousands’ a year, says Cameron’ *The Guardian* (11 January 2010) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2010/jan/11/david-cameron-limit-immigration>.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Bigotgate’ 10 years on: the full exchange between Gordon Brown and Gillian Duffy’ *The Independent* (28 April 2020) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/bigotgate-gordon-brown-anniversary-gillian-duffy-transcript-full-read-1957274.html>.

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<sup>16</sup> Heather Rolfe, Sunder Katwala and Steve Ballinger, ‘Shifting Views; Tracking attitudes to immigration in 2022’ (British Future, October 2022) <https://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Shifting-Views-Report-Oct-2022-FINAL.pdf>.

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<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*

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