

BREXIT AND IMMIGRATION: THE ARC OF THE PENDULUM

Jonathan Thomas

THE
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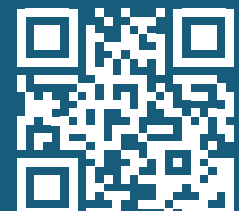
THE FEDERAL TRUST
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enlightening the debate on good governance

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A note on authorship

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Summary

Immigration played a significant role in the political processes leading to Brexit. An important element, and stage, in this chain of events came with the expansive approach to immigration policy – in particular to EU freedom of movement – pursued by the 1997-2010 New Labour government, tied to its globalisation agenda. This seismic policy shift saw large numbers entering the UK, mainly from Eastern Europe. With no meaningful political pushback to this from any mainstream party, the arc of the immigration policy pendulum in the UK swung to an extreme liberal point.

Levels of concern about immigration arise from many different factors, and do not necessarily correlate with the level of immigrant population in a given area. But the pace and scale of the influx from the EU was linked to local pressures and tensions, which helped objections to UK membership of the EU to become fused with concerns over the level of immigration. David Cameron's commitment to a net migration target sought to diffuse concerns over immigration numbers, but instead only served to fan the flames of public concern over them as the target was continually missed, and EU immigration rose to record levels.

In this context, and under pressure from within his own party and from the UK Independence Party, which linked participation in the EU with the lack of control over immigration, Cameron committed to holding a referendum on EU membership. The timing of this, as it turned out, coincided with both inflows from the EU to the UK, and the level of the British public's concern about immigration, hitting their all-time highs.

The time-honoured mainstream British political approach towards immigration – keep it out of the spotlight, minimise differences over it, do not seek to make political capital out of it – began to give way to the opposite. Political contestation over it became magnified and shouted about from the rooftops. The prism of a highly contested Brexit campaign distorted efforts at considered debate over immigration, favouring imagery over information, which the Leave campaign embraced.

Post-referendum, with Theresa May now Prime Minister, on immigration the government took a tough approach on one hand – committing to end EU freedom of movement to the UK – but relatively liberal and flexible approaches on the other hand, none of which received any meaningful political or public pushback – over the design of the UK's post-Brexit immigration system, including the more positive treatment now to be afforded to non-EU immigration, the UK's offer on humanitarian migration, as well as the terms on which EU citizens were allowed to remain in the UK after Brexit.

An increasingly polarised Brexit process played out in tandem with a seemingly much calmer consensus over many aspects of immigration. Overall inflows to the UK stabilised as flows from the EU reduced from their peak. Public concerns receded, reflected in the relatively positive noises about immigration made across the mainstream parties' 2019 Election manifestos.

On his first day as Prime Minister, Boris Johnson scrapped the decade long net migration target. The post-Brexit immigration system, that he oversaw the implementation of, levelled the playing field between EU and non-EU workers coming to the UK. But, with the ending of EU freedom of movement, there was a tension between the system's aspiration to prioritise high-wage, high-skill immigration and the practical everyday demands of the economy. As a result, the government felt the need to make some relatively liberal choices over the parameters of the new system, making it easier for non-EU workers to come to the UK, and to stay, even in relatively low-skilled roles. Thus, rather than resolving the UK's tensions over immigration, the immediate result of Brexit was to allow them to build up further.

Brexit took place just as the Covid-19 pandemic was scrambling the UK's immigration story, indeed turning it on its head, with fears about migrants leaving rather than arriving, and immigration concerns falling to an all-time low. As well as the humanitarian visas offered to Hong Kongers and Ukrainians, coming out of the pandemic worries about the finances of the UK higher education sector, and the resourcing of the UK social care sector, led to liberalising changes to the system to seek to attract international students and social care workers. This was to have a huge impact on immigration numbers as the UK reopened its borders and economy.

Post-pandemic, demand for workers, and immigration, to fill shortages, surged across developed economies. Even countries with continued access to EU freedom of movement were desperate to supplement that with non-EU workers. In the UK this effect was accentuated. From 2021-2024, 2.5 million non-EU nationals came to the UK to work or study or as dependants of those, and of the 2.8 million employee jobs created in that period non-EU employees accounted for two-thirds of them. Even though EU immigration had turned net negative, the surge of non-EU immigration took both overall immigration and net migration – now estimated to have peaked at 944,000 for year end March 2023 – to record levels.

The pandemic also saw small boats across the Channel become the main recorded entry method for irregular arrivals to the UK. This provided a highly visible challenge to immigration control, the large increase in the use of hotels for contingency accommodation for arrivals only adding to the visibility of this issue. From early 2023, the transparency of these arrival figures, now released daily, meant this story came to increasingly represent a key political challenge – particularly given that Brexit had supposedly meant the UK had taken back control of its borders – and a matter of increasing public controversy and concern.

Net migration and immigration levels at more than double the previous records reached before the EU referendum were not what the British public had been led to believe would happen. Unsurprisingly, public levels of concern over immigration began to rise again, from their record lows in the pandemic back up towards their pre-Brexit levels.

Some argued that post-Brexit the public would be less concerned with immigration numbers, as immigration was now under the government's control. However, the Channel crossings were clearly not under control; and relatively smaller uncontrolled numbers coming in could be conflated in the public's mind with larger numbers coming in that were controlled. In any event, just because immigration is controlled does not mean people will regard any level of it acceptable, and necessarily aligned with their concerns. Large inflows can have real as well as perceived impacts, becoming a magnet for broader feelings of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Politicians cannot ignore this; and some politicians will seek to benefit from it.

In the face of this, the Conservative government floated its Rwanda plan to seek to combat the Channel crossings, and made restrictive changes to a range of immigration policies and processes seeking to bring immigration levels down. On immigration, the 2024 Election manifestos marked a sea-change from those of 2019. Sounding as tough as the 2019 versions had sounded liberal, the main parties significantly shifted their positions towards greater restrictions on legal immigration and greater action over the Channel crossings.

Assuming power in July 2024, the incoming Labour government faced a key question over immigration. Would it simply hope to take the plaudits for the reduction of immigration numbers that would shortly feed through from the restrictive changes introduced by the previous government toward the end of its term, or would it further publicly up the ante on immigration and impose its own further restrictions? It chose the latter course.

Immigration numbers to the UK were now clearly falling significantly. But, faced with the Gordian Knot of the Channel crossings and restrictionist immigration rhetoric from its most vociferous opponents, the government's continued immigration pronouncements and reform proposals dialled up, not down, the political importance of the issue.

Many of the immigration policy proposals now coming from across the political spectrum – from reform of the rules around right to stay in the UK, to the structure of the asylum system and the status of refugees, to the UK's relationship with the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) – could be considered revolutionary developments, going far beyond anything envisaged by Brexit.

From the current vantage point, the UK's immigration policy over the last 25 years looks like a huge pendulum swing, with Brexit not a final destination point, but a mid-point passed through enroute and quickly left behind. Indeed, the current debate over the rules on migrants' indefinite leave to remain in the UK seems not only far removed from the world of Brexit, but at odds with it, as it was expressed at the time in the approach and terms of the EU Settlement Scheme covering EU citizens in the UK prior to Brexit.

Immigration played an important part from the 2000s onwards in the sequence of events leading up to the EU referendum, was a key issue promoted by the Leave campaign, and was clearly instrumental in the result of the referendum and the subsequent ending of EU freedom of movement into the UK. Yet, if Remain had won the EU referendum there are reasons for thinking the trajectory of the UK's immigration numbers would not necessarily have turned out that different. And, given how the world has turned since, Brexit may look less a mark of the UK's difference, and more of it just being an early adopter of swinging the pendulum back the other way, of a global shift towards greater immigration restrictionism.

Yet in Brexit one can also see something unique about the UK, with the EU referendum campaign's focus on sovereignty underpinning the ongoing meltdown in the national psyche caused by the Channel crossings, but also the tougher immigration policy proposals now being aired across the board in the UK. When compared with the far-right on the Continent the current centre-left government in the UK has started from a more restrictive position, and then proceeded with a more restrictive mindset.

The Brexit campaign's 'take back control' slogan could now be considered to have evolved into the malleable and aspirational slogan of the UK's everlasting quest for immigration control. In particular it is arguably infusing the UK's push to go further and faster on resolving its problems with the perceived impact of the ECHR on immigration control, philosophically paving the way for UK politicians to more openly, and confidently, question the UK's relationship with the ECHR, and to countenance withdrawal as the ultimate answer.

Another key element of the Brexit campaign with distinct echoes in the current UK immigration debates – such as around what support should be provided to asylum seekers and what rules should govern migrants' access to the welfare state – was the question around what we should be spending our money on, and whom we should be prioritising looking after. In these increasingly cash-strapped times this question looms even larger, increasingly weaponised in support of significant changes being proposed to immigration and asylum policy.

The UK taking back control from the EU also materially affected the balance of power within the UK, providing the launchpad for the government to take back control from employers – who lost the access they had to a huge pool of EU workers without any extra costs, restrictions or requirements. The full effects of this have taken time to impose, and to play out, but under successive governments the screws on business have now really been tightened. If pre-Brexit it was about what the immigration system could do for the UK employer, now it is about what the UK employer can do for the immigration system.

The UK's huge pendulum swing on immigration policy – in which Brexit played its part – has now delivered us politically to a mirror image of the liberal immigration era of the 2000s, with political competition now seemingly driving mainstream politicians towards ever more restrictionist extremes on immigration policy.

While it is tempting to think we must now be nearing the restrictionist extreme of the pendulum's immigration policy arc, the dramatic change in the last few years in how immigration is thought, and talked, about in the UK's corridors of political power, and the fact that there are now so many, and so much, invested in the political battles around immigration in the UK, may mean that the pendulum still has further yet to travel before moving back the other way.

If Remain had won the EU referendum, 52-48, how might that have impacted the reality of immigration in the UK, and the policy around it today? Nothing can be said for certain, but the period between the referendum and the end of the pandemic may well have seen little difference in terms of immigration levels. And coming out of the pandemic there would have been the same need for workers, and desire to welcome the Hong Kongers and Ukrainians.

There would also have been key differences though. Still having access to EU workers under freedom of movement, the UK would not have felt the same need to open up immigration routes to non-EU workers, nor to establish a separate social care visa route. Thus, while immigration to the UK would inevitably have risen post-pandemic, and – as other EU countries experienced – there would still have been some pressure to supplement EU immigration, absent Brexit, immigration to the UK may not have spiked post-pandemic to the same extent. And, as a result, the UK may not then have experienced such an extreme allergic political reaction to that spike, resulting in the more extreme immigration policy proposals now currently on the table. It would be naïve to think though that remaining in the EU would have resulted in calm and chill descending over UK immigration policy.

One thing that does seem certain is that the pendulum will keep swinging back and forth. In terms of demand, the need for migrant workers in certain sectors in the UK is likely to persist, even grow. And, in terms of supply, the UK has deep, longstanding, connections with the countries with the largest young populations on the planet, with continuing large income differentials to the UK. Thus the UK will surely continue to experience the full force of the tides of international migration, and the ebb and flow of immigration numbers and policies.

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Introduction

Brexit sits at the heart of the UK's immigration story of the last 25 years; a rollercoaster ride of shifting immigration numbers and sweeping policy changes that has seen the immigration policy pendulum swing from one extreme to the other. To understand and unravel the relationship of Brexit and immigration, and where Brexit fits into this story, one must consider the extent to which:

- Brexit was a consequence of parts of this immigration story.
- Brexit was a cause of, or contributing factor to, other parts of this story.
- The UK's key immigration issues today are part of the Brexit story, or part of a different narrative.

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From globalisation to Gillian Duffy: immigration under New Labour

From the end of World War Two to the end of the 1970s the UK had been an *emigration* nation; with more people leaving than arriving. In the Thatcher era, economic and labour market liberalisations opened up the conditions and incentives to increased immigration, but tight controls still kept it subdued and the migration ledger relatively flat overall.

Those keenest to contest immigration across this period tended to be individual politicians – Enoch Powell a prominent example – or fringe parties such as the National Front and then the British National Party, who saw immigration as part of bigger issues around race, culture and religion. Throughout this period the two main political parties though had an informal understanding around a much more managed approach to immigration; that immigration should be both restricted – hence freedom of movement from the Commonwealth was increasingly curtailed, then ended – but also that it should not be a matter for open political discussion or contestation.

Immigration's part in the road to Brexit starts with the New Labour government's (1997-2010) expansive approach to immigration policy, in particular to EU freedom of movement. New Labour did not publicly discuss immigration much either, but its worldview marked a major policy shift from what had gone before. It saw a new world now operating on a globalised capitalist model. In this world immigration was not only impossible to control, but openness to it was imperative if its full benefits were to be realised, and the UK was to be competitive in this new global order.¹

Rather than British business badgering the government to be able to hire immigrant workers, it was the other way round. In 2003 the Home Office wrote to businesses advertising the services of its Work Permits department: *“Are you struggling to find the quality staff you need to run your business effectively? Do you want to employ an individual from outside Europe but aren't sure how? ... High, medium, or low-skilled vacancies can be filled from overseas ...”*²

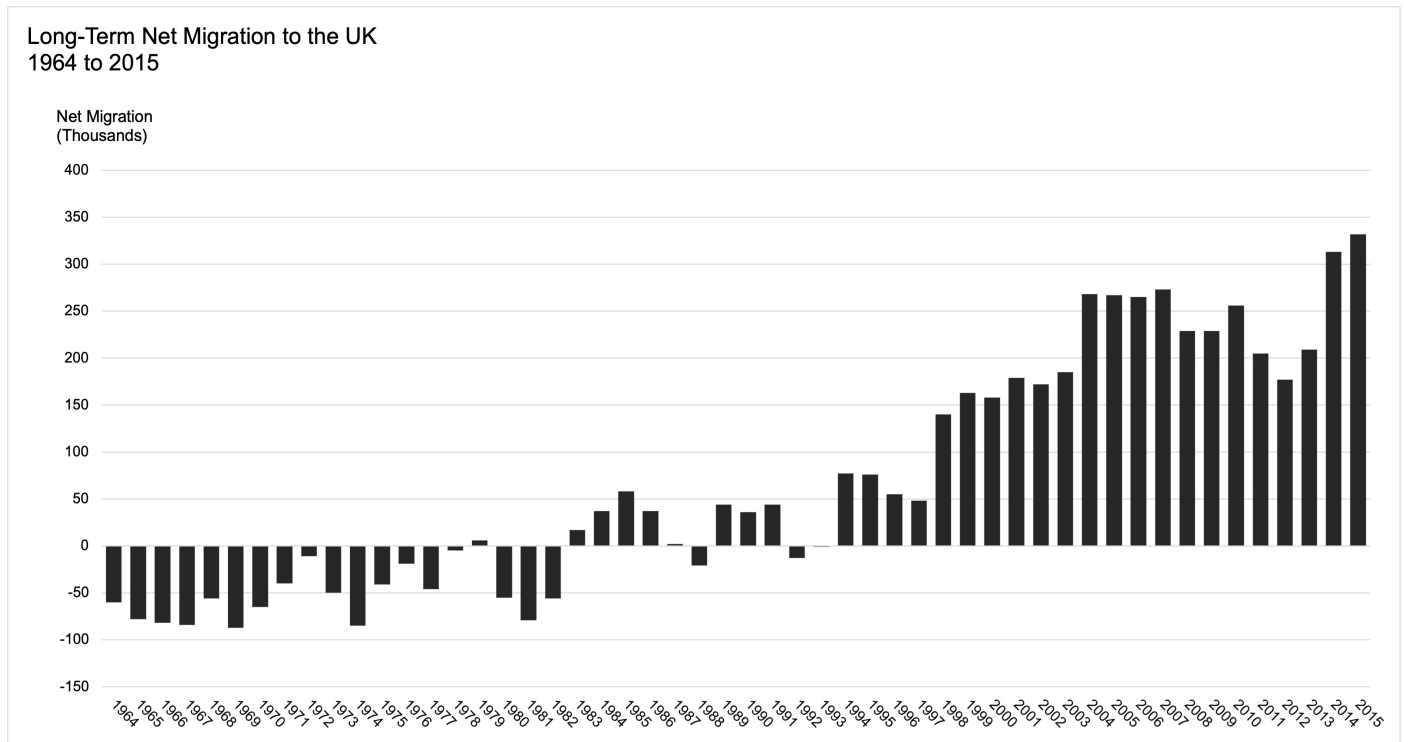
This new-found openness to immigration was eventually to include a points-based system for non-EU workers, and a regime to attract international students by allowing them to stay on in the UK for a period after their studies. But at its core was the UK's membership of the EU freedom of movement regime.

The numbers coming to the UK under freedom of movement were not particularly noteworthy until the government's decision to open up to the labour forces of the Eastern European EU-8 countries on those countries joining the EU in 2004. Alongside only Ireland and Sweden, the UK granted immediate access to these countries' workforces, not taking up the option of the transitional period negotiated by the EU. The numbers moving to Sweden were in practice restricted by a tightly regulated labour market, but immigration into the much more flexible, and lightly regulated, UK labour market significantly increased.³

1 Tony Blair, Labour Conference Speech 2005.

2 Peter Lilley, 'Too much of a good thing? Towards a balanced approach to immigration' (Centre for Policy Studies, March 2005).

3 Martin Ruhs and Philip Martin, 'Numbers vs. Rights: Trade-Offs and Guest Worker Programs' (2008) *International Migration Review* 42(1), 249-265.



Source: Office for National Statistics, 'Long-Term International Migration into and out of the UK by citizenship, 1964 to 2015' (1 December 2016).

The government's liberal approach on economic immigration was paired with a crackdown on asylum seekers – whose numbers in the UK had risen significantly – and encountered no real political opposition. *'Too much of a good thing?'*, a 2005 paper by Peter Lilley, a senior Conservative politician, was a rare challenge to the new prevailing orthodoxy on immigration. But even he was almost apologetic in asking whether the government had gone too far in its openness, and felt the need to explicitly make clear that in questioning this he was not a racist, and that immigration was clearly a good thing.⁴

The 2005 Election suggested a break in the informal cross-party consensus when, under Michael Howard's leadership, the Conservatives made controlled immigration a core election pledge. But following their defeat, and David Cameron's ascendancy to the Conservative leadership, that seemed to be rolled back. When in 2007 the new Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown used the phrase 'British jobs for British workers', it was David Cameron who accused him of using far-right language.⁵ It was also in 2007 that the 'Strangers into Citizens' campaign emerged, arguing for undocumented migrants in the UK to be granted a path to citizenship. Its most high-profile political supporter was the new Mayor of London, Boris Johnson.⁶ The arc of the immigration policy pendulum was at its most extreme liberal point.

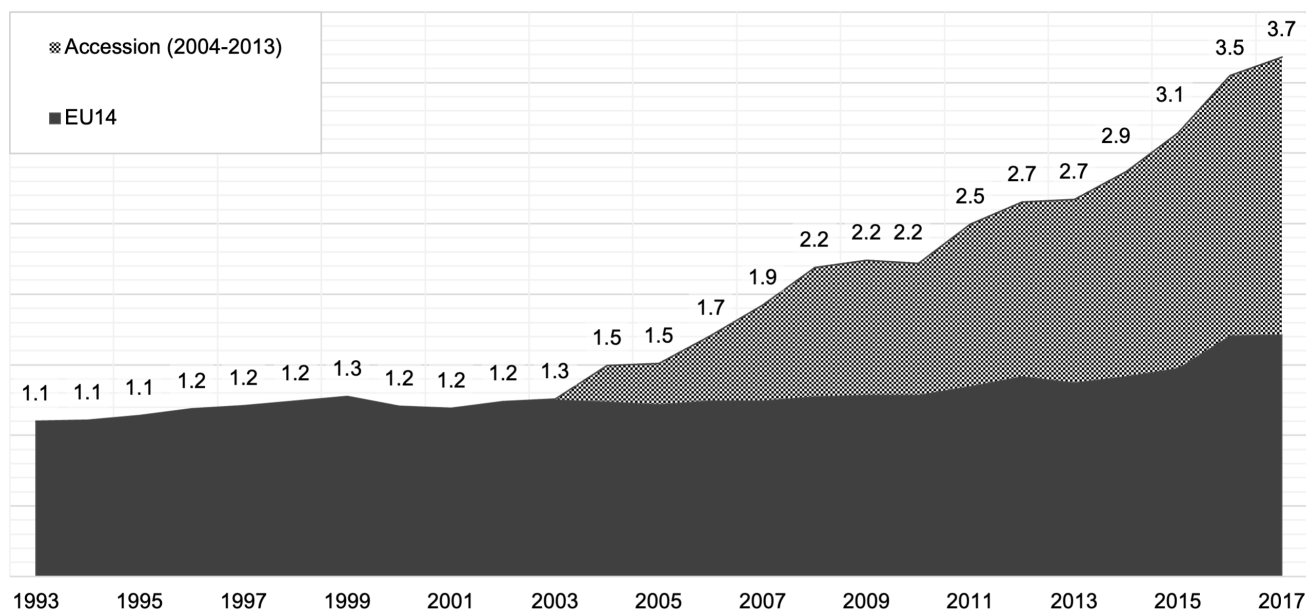
The number in the UK from EU-8 Eastern European 2004 new joiner countries was soon to surpass the number from the pre-2004 EU countries.

4 Peter Lilley, 'Too much of a good thing?' (n 2).

5 Tania Branigan, 'Leaders clash over commitment of substance in Commons battle' *The Guardian* (7 November 2007).

6 Hélène Mulholland, 'Boris Johnson's backing boosts illegal immigrants amnesty campaign' *The Guardian* (15 April 2009).

Number of EU-born in the UK (Millions) 1993 - 2017



Source: 'Number of EU-born in the UK: 1993-2017' (The Migration Observatory).

Many new arrivals ended up in towns across the UK, particularly in the East of England, which had previously not experienced much immigration. This had a rapid and noticeable effect on those places.⁷ The pace and scale of the influx and the churn of people coming and going in different local areas caused rising pressures and tensions.⁸ None of which movement was effectively tracked by the processes that governed the local planning and delivery of services, nor the central allocation of government resources to them.

Public concerns over immigration have many and varied causes, rarely directly connected with people's experiences of, and exposure to, immigrants per se. These concerns are available to be amplified and shaped by interested media and politicians into powerful narratives pursuing different agendas. And crucially, from the perspective of the road to Brexit, the extent of EU immigration in this period allowed concerns over the UK's EU membership to become fused with concerns over the level of immigration.⁹ By the 2010 Election this had become not only a growing political issue¹⁰, but also a public one.

When, in the final week of campaigning, Prime Minister Gordon Brown encountered retired council worker and Labour supporter, Gillian Duffy, on the streets of Rochdale, she attempted to ask him about the numbers of Eastern Europeans coming in. The Prime Minister interrupted, then sidestepped her question. Afterwards, unaware he was still on mic he referred to her as a 'bigoted woman', intimating this was because she had raised the issue of immigration with him.

For those of the British public concerned that their concerns over immigration were not only being ignored, but were regarded with contempt by the 'governing class', it is hard to think of a vignette that could have better confirmed that impression. The full political significance of this disconnect, though, had yet to become apparent. Looking back ten years later – from the other side of Brexit – as one leading commentator put it: "Ms Duffy turned out to have been a harbinger from the future".¹¹

7 Chris Cook, 'How immigration changed Boston, Lincolnshire' *BBC* (10 May 2016).

8 Jonathan Thomas, 'All immigration is local' (Social Market Foundation, 22 January 2019).

9 Erica Consterdine, *Labour's Immigration Policy: The Making of the Migration State* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

10 'Immigration under Labour' edited by Tim Finch and David Goodhart (IPPR and Prospect, 2010).

11 John Rentoul, 'Gillian Duffy and how the Labour Party lost part of its working-class vote' *The Independent* (28 April 2020).

Cameron’s costly commitments and the EU referendum

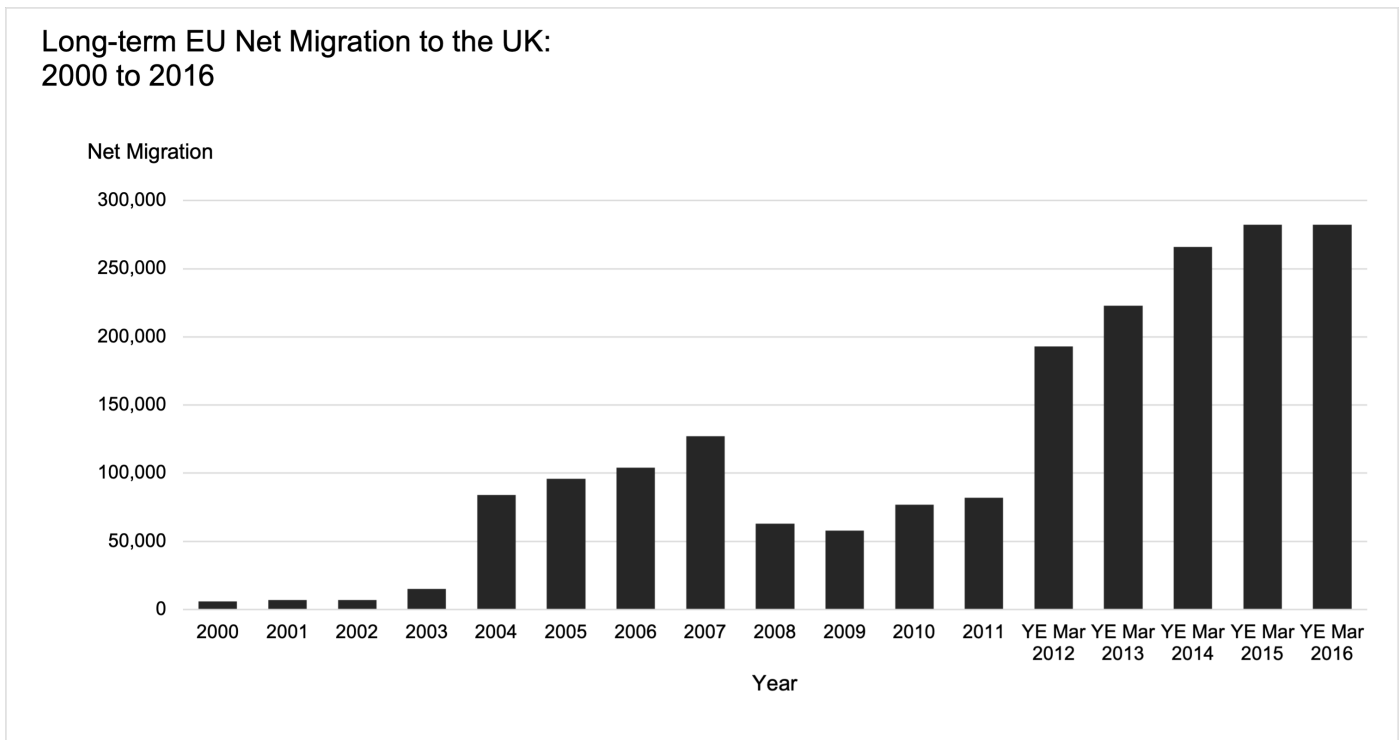
Gordon Brown was not alone among senior politicians in making an unguarded statement about immigration on live television in the run up to the 2010 Election which would prove to be highly consequential. In a live interview David Cameron stated that he “would like to see net immigration in the tens of thousands [annually] rather than the hundreds of thousands”¹². And so, after the election, ‘tens of thousands’ de facto became the new coalition government’s net immigration target.

(In)conveniently, shortly afterwards the UK Office for National Statistics began quarterly reporting of the UK’s immigration numbers, including the net immigration number. Thus was established a rolling, recurring reminder that the government’s net immigration target was being missed, which only served to amplify the public’s concerns over immigration. In an effort to douse the fire, this commitment instead therefore ended up fanning the flames. The combination of the government target alongside the regularly reported official numbers electrified the media focus on immigration, and, unlike most other countries, sanctified the *net* migration number as the key headline number driving political and public concerns and reaction to immigration.

The time-honoured approach over immigration which had prevailed at the top of British politics – keep it out of the spotlight, minimise differences over it, do not seek to make political capital out of it – began to give way to the opposite. Instead, immigration increasingly became a key site of political contestation, not kept under wraps but shouted about from the rooftops, with any differences – often within, as well as between, parties – magnified for maximum effect.

Immigration was now an issue that mainstream parties had to have views on, and a plan to do something about. Whereas the 1997 Conservative Election manifesto included just two sentences on immigration and asylum, by the 2015 Election manifesto it warranted a whole chapter.¹³ And this need to be seen ‘to do something’ about immigration gave rise to a new, and destructive, feature of British politics; endemic over-promising and under-delivering on immigration numbers and control, which only served to further ratchet up public anxiety over immigration. This was at the heart of both the cause and effect of Brexit.

Under Home Secretary Theresa May there was the tough talk and ‘Go Home’ vans of the ‘hostile environment’, a cap on non-EU visas, a crackdown on ‘bogus’ colleges and marriages, and greater restrictions on international students staying on after their studies. But none of this impacted those coming to the UK from the EU. And they kept on coming. The flows slowed in the wake of the global financial crisis, but then rose again when Romanian and Bulgarian (EU-2) workers acquired freedom of movement rights within the EU, and as the Eurozone crisis led to more movement from Southern Europe. As a percentage of overall net migration to the UK, EU immigration now made up an unprecedented share – on some calculations three-quarters – of it.¹⁴



Source: ‘EU Migration to and from the UK’ (The Migration Observatory, 20 November 2023).

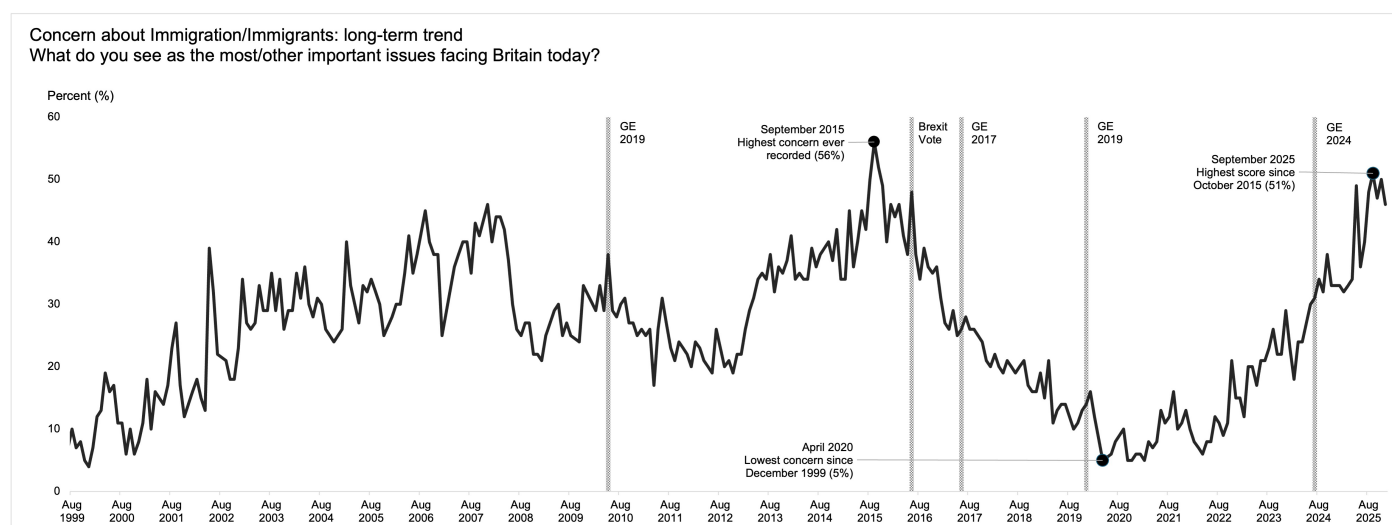
12 ‘Tories would limit immigration to ‘tens of thousands’ a year, says Cameron’ *The Guardian* (11 January 2010)
 13 Erica Consterdine (n 9).
 14 Madeleine Sumption, Ben Brindle and Peter William Walsh, ‘Net migration to the UK’ (The Migration Observatory, 10 June 2025).

The government was forced to admit the political problem it had with numbers was also a control problem; that it had promised something out of its control. So, in the Conservatives' 2015 Election manifesto, Cameron made another big commitment related to immigration – building on a speech he had made at Bloomberg in January 2013, partly in the face of political pressure from the UK Independence Party – to reform the EU “which is too big, too bossy and too bureaucratic” and to hold an in-out referendum on EU membership.¹⁵

Having won the election, Cameron then made a further commitment; ahead of the referendum vote, to seek to extract concessions from the EU on greater controls around freedom of movement, and access to the welfare state. But only limited concessions were on offer from the EU, and Cameron returned with little.

In only adding to the impression that EU membership was incompatible with meaningful controls on EU immigration, the outcome was not helpful to the Remain campaign. At the same time, the chaotic scenes from the summer of 2015, with large numbers of refugees moving through Turkey into, and across, Europe, played into wider public concerns around immigration control beyond just the UK's relationship with the EU.

In terms of the impact of immigration concerns, the EU referendum vote could hardly have been held at a more consequential time. As it turned out, both inflows from the EU to the UK, and the level of the British public's concern about immigration, hit their all-time highs just before the referendum. Indeed, in 2016 Ipsos crowned the UK the number 1 out of 25 developed world countries in terms of the public level of concerns about immigration.¹⁶



Adapted from Ipsos Issues Index (August 2025).

The Remain campaign favoured the economic arguments for staying in the EU. But its ability to appeal to those with concerns about immigration was undermined not only by the outcome of the renegotiation, but by the government's net migration target; in 2015 both EU and non-EU migration to the UK, *separately*, had been above the target level.¹⁷ The government was therefore vulnerable not only to the charge that it did not have control, but also that it could not even exercise the control it did have.

As for Labour, its internal divisions over the extent to which it should pursue immigration controls, as exemplified by the furore within the Party over its 'Controls on immigration' mug at the 2015 Election called into question whether it really believed in such controls at all.¹⁸ The Green Party countered with its own mug – 'Standing up for Migrants'. But for much of the British public there was no such stark binary; it was perfectly possible to support the principle of migration, indeed to count migrants as colleagues and friends, while nevertheless being concerned about levels of immigration, and opposed to uncontrolled immigration.¹⁹

'Take Back Control' was the tagline of the official Vote Leave campaign. Initially it seemed reluctant to focus its campaign on immigration, for fear of alienating too many voters.²⁰ In the final weeks of campaigning though, concerns over immigration – and a desire to end free movement – came to the fore. The prism of a highly contested Brexit campaign distorted efforts at considered debate over immigration, favouring imagery over information, which the Leave campaign embraced.

15 The Conservative Party Manifesto 2015.

16 Ipsos MORI, 'The Immigration Conundrum' (2016).

17 'EU referendum: Gove and Johnson challenge PM on immigration' *BBC* (29 May 2016).

18 Frances Perraudin, 'Diane Abbott: Labour's 'controls on immigration mugs are shameful' *The Guardian* (29 March 2015).

19 Andrew Dawson, 'Hating immigration and loving immigrants: Nationalism, electoral politics and the post-industrial white working-class in Britain' (2018) *Anthropological Notebooks* 24(1), 5-21.

20 Nicholas Watt, 'EU referendum: Vote Leave focuses on immigration' *BBC* (25 May 2016).

Vote Leave raised the spectre that Turkey could shortly be admitted to the EU which would lead to a surge of inflows to the UK.²¹ Nigel Farage and the Leave.EU campaign caused even greater controversy with the 'Breaking Point' poster.²² Depicting a large group of mainly male migrants being escorted to a Slovenian refugee camp in autumn 2015, this effectively conflated concerns over numbers arriving *in* Europe with concerns over numbers arriving *from* Europe.

Neither side of the campaign mentioned the flexible arrangement the UK had secured many years earlier with the EU over asylum control measures; an opt-out from common EU asylum process measures that the UK did not like, but with an opt-in to any such measures it did like. The UK had exercised this opt-in to gain access to the 'Dublin Regulation'; this determined the EU member state responsible for hearing an asylum application where the asylum claimant had transited through another member state, and potentially allowed the UK to return asylum claimants to other EU member states they had passed through on their way to the UK.

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The yin and yang of the EU referendum's aftermath

The EU referendum's aftermath saw a restrictive approach on one key aspect of immigration – EU freedom of movement – sitting alongside a relatively open approach to immigration in many other respects. And an increasingly frenzied political atmosphere around Brexit itself sitting alongside a relatively calm political atmosphere around immigration and immigration policy.

Had those voters who had been animated at least in part by concerns over immigration voted for Brexit because they thought it would lead to action against immigrants? Or that it would at least allow the UK to control immigration? Or that it would lead to less immigration? The job of determining what Brexit should practically mean in terms of immigration policy fell to Theresa May, who – having managed to largely straddle both the Remain and Leave camps during the referendum campaign – now became Prime Minister.

On immigration her government had to answer three main questions:

- What approach to take to EU freedom of movement
- What the shape and details of the UK's new work immigration system should look like
- What to do about EU citizens in the UK

At the headline level the government's approach looked tough. The net migration target was maintained. And despite some suggesting that what the public really wanted from Brexit was the 'Norway model' – remaining within the European Economic Area²³ – the government took the referendum result as a vote to end EU freedom of movement to the UK.

The government set out its high-level position on ending free movement in the summer of 2018.²⁴ It began filling in the proposed details of the post-Brexit work immigration system in another White Paper six months later.²⁵ It proposed a level playing field as between EU and non-EU immigration; an end not only to EU freedom of movement but to any preference for EU over non-EU immigration. Quite how tough an approach this new immigration system would represent in practice though depended on the details of a number of key thresholds of, and exceptions within, the system which were yet to be finalised.

In this process the government was supported by the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) – established under the New Labour government to gather expert evidence, and advise on policy around economic migration. The MAC published extensive analysis of what the – at least at the overall level, relatively slight – impacts of EEA migration had in fact been in the UK, across a number of different metrics.²⁶ As the journey from the referendum to Brexit became increasingly drawn-out, the details of the new immigration system were not to be finalised until after the next election, under Boris Johnson's government.

EU freedom of movement to the UK was the key immigration policy battleground in this period. Should it be ended, or maintained through a closer post-Brexit accommodation with the EU? Should there be a second referendum so the public could vote again? In fact, EU freedom of movement was largely the *only* immigration policy battleground in this period. Other, often liberal, developments in immigration policy received no meaningful political or public pushback at all.

21 Daniel Boffey and Toby Helm, 'Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey security threat claims' *The Guardian* (22 May 2016).

22 Heather Stewart and Rowena Mason, 'Nigel Farage's anti-migrant poster reported to police' *The Guardian* (16 June 2016).

23 UK in a Changing Europe, 'We asked the British public what kind of Brexit they want – and the Norway model is the clear winner' (11 October 2018).

24 HM Government, 'The Future Relationship between the United Kingdom and the European Union' (July 2018).

25 HM Government, 'The UK's future skills-based immigration system' (December 2018).

26 Migration Advisory Committee, 'EEA migration in the UK: Final report' (September 2018).

A ‘Leave Means Leave’ report on post-Brexit immigration policy argued 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”.²⁷

Indeed, an increasingly polarised Brexit process played out in tandem with a seemingly much calmer consensus over many aspects of immigration, as overall inflows to the UK stabilised, flows from the EU reduced from their pre-referendum peak, and the British public’s level of concern about immigration receded.

The government’s focus on delivering on the assumed ‘will of the people’ by restrictively reframing the UKs immigration relationship with the EU seemed to create space for a more positive outlook towards immigration from outside the EU. Politicians as diverse as Boris Johnson and Diane Abbott reflected this. For the former, Brexit meant the UK should focus more on its old Commonwealth ties.²⁸ For the latter, Commonwealth migrants and other non-EU migrants had been unfairly treated as second-class by the previous immigration system, and there should be a “levelling up” of the system to combat this.²⁹

This was a period when the National Conversation on Immigration toured the UK listening to ordinary people’s views on immigration, finding the majority to be relatively balanced and nuanced.³⁰ When the exposure of the injustices suffered by some of the Windrush generation at the hands of the Home Office caused widespread outrage. And when the desire for more non-EU doctors and nurses in the UK led to the government removing the numerical cap on them entering.³¹

In terms of humanitarian migration, in response to the Syrian civil war in 2014 the government had established a refugee resettlement scheme. So insulated did the UK feel from the direct effects of the refugee crisis chaotically playing out across mainland Europe in the summer of 2015 that the government felt able to commit to a five-year 20,000 target for refugees to be resettled into the UK, prioritising the most vulnerable refugees. And after the EU referendum the nationalities eligible to be resettled to the UK were broadened.³² A community sponsorship programme was also launched to encourage and support community groups to sponsor and provide practical support to refugee families arriving in the UK.³³ None of these developments received any political or public pushback.

In terms of the third key immigration question to which Brexit gave rise – what to do about EU citizens in the UK? – EU experts queued up after the referendum to explain how the EU freedom of movement regime had always allowed the UK more control than it had exercised. As other EU countries did, the UK could have registered EU arrivals and departures, and removed those who were not working or self-sufficient.³⁴

Having not done so though, the UK government did not know how many EU citizens were in the UK, and whether or not they were compliant with the free movement right requirements. The government therefore adopted a broad brush, generous, approach to the status of EU citizens in the UK, in effect offering them all a path to permanent status in the UK. EU freedom of movement had established and incentivised a transient status; easy to come and go but far less easy to secure permanent residence rights in the UK. In its stead, under the terms of the EU Settlement Scheme (‘EUSS’) announced in 2018, every EU citizen not only in the UK at that point, but who came to the UK before the end of 2020, was offered a path to stay in the UK forever. Around 3 million EU citizens had been estimated to be in the UK at the time of the referendum. 5.8 million have been granted status in the UK under the EUSS.³⁵

As for the fear that the referendum would unleash a wave of anti-immigrant feeling and discrimination towards EU citizens in the UK, a short-term rise in their perception of this following the referendum soon dissipated.³⁶ If there had been such antipathy from the broader British public it would surely have exploded on seeing the generous terms offered to EU citizens under the EUSS. Yet the only voices raised in criticising certain aspects of the scheme were those representing EU citizens.

Far from Brexit resulting in European immigrants being expelled from the UK therefore, the UK offered a permanent residency pathway to twice as many EU citizens as it thought it had – many of whom were not entitled to that pathway before the referendum – without the slightest murmur of political or public disapproval.³⁷ This had a seismic impact on the number of migrants granted indefinite leave to remain in the UK.

27 Steven Woolfe MEP, ‘Immigration Post-Brexit: A Fair, Flexible and Forward-thinking Immigration Policy (Leave Means Leave, 2017).

28 Boris Johnson, ‘Commonwealth has key role to play in the bright future for Britain’ *Daily Express* (11 March 2018).

29 Diane Abbott, Speech on Labour’s plans for a simpler, fairer immigration system, 13 September 2018.

30 Jill Rutter and Rosie Carter, ‘National Conversation on Immigration: Final Report’ (British Future and Hope Not Hate, September 2018).

31 HM Government, ‘Doctors and nurses to be taken out of the Tier 2 visa cap’ (15 June 2018).

32 HM Government, ‘Vulnerable Persons and Vulnerable Children’s Resettlement Schemes Factsheet, March 2021’ (18 March 2021).

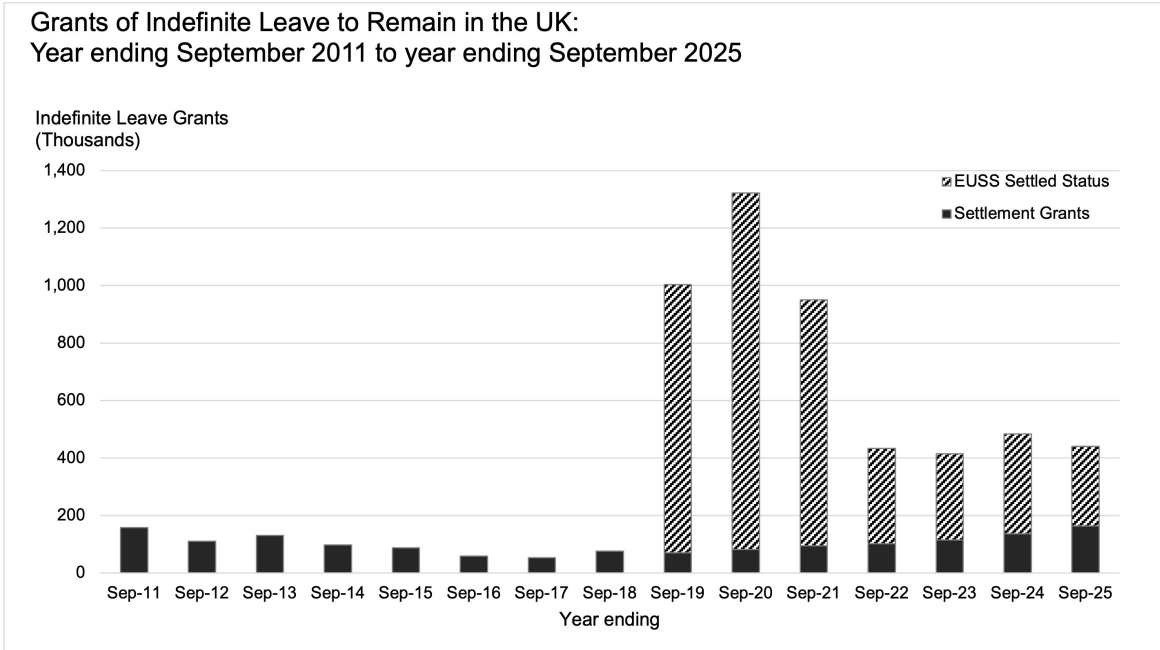
33 HM Government, ‘Community sponsorship scheme launched for refugees in the UK’ (19 July 2016).

34 Home Affairs Committee on Post-Brexit migration policy (HC 857).

35 The 3 million, ‘EU Settlement Scheme statistics’ (November 2025).

36 Mariña Fernández-Reino, ‘Migrants and discrimination in the UK’ (The Migration Observatory, 20 January 2020).

37 Jonathan Thomas, ‘The EU Settlement Scheme: the greatest story never told?’ (Social Market Foundation, 29 June 2021).

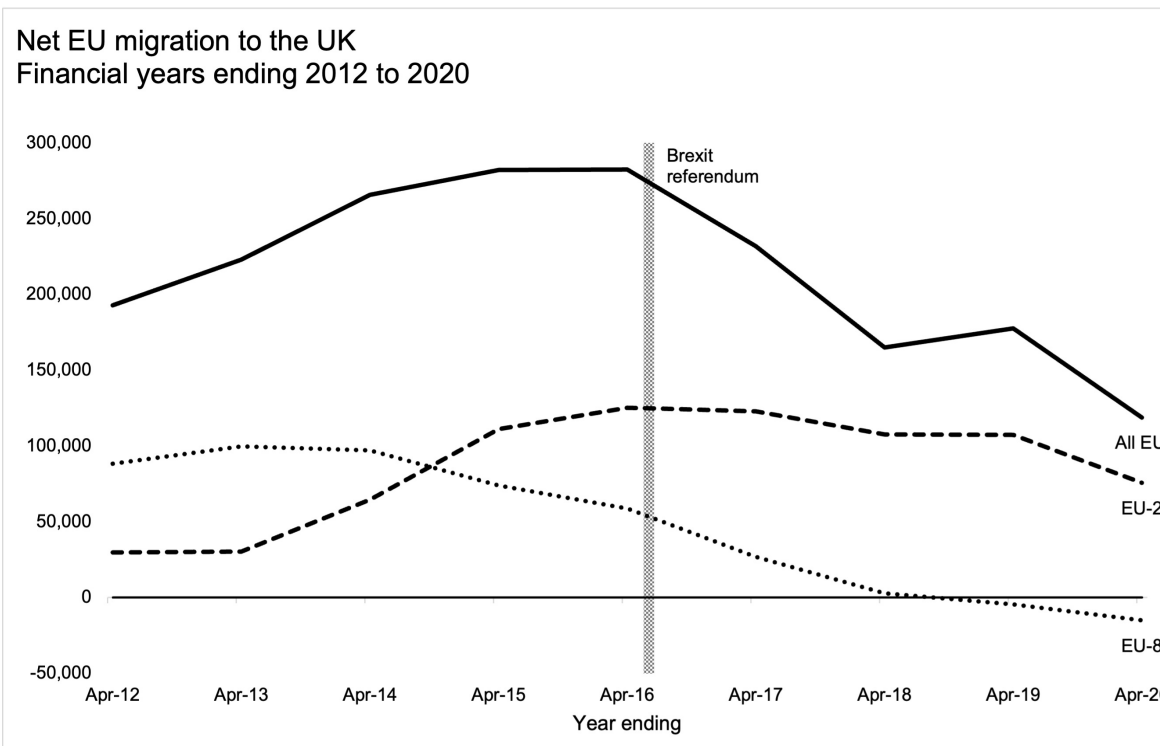


Source: Home Office, Immigration system statistics data tables, 'Settlement detailed datasets, year ending September 2025 - Se_D02' (27 November 2025).

A strange new world: Post-Brexit immigration priorities meet world events

The 2019 Election was held against the background of the political frenzy of getting Brexit done but relative political calm around immigration and immigration policy. Public concerns around immigration were polling at near 20-year lows.

Immigration from the EU had already reduced significantly even though EU freedom of movement to the UK continued. Between the referendum and Brexit, net EU flows into the UK overall remained positive, but within this there were large differences between flows from the EU-8 and the EU-2 countries.



Source: Analysis of ONS RAPID data in 'EU Migration to and from the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 20 November 2023).

Immigration from the EU-8 countries had almost a decade's head start over that from the EU-2 countries. Having started later, inflows to the UK from the EU-2 countries continued at high levels – by 2021 Romanian-born in the UK numbered over half a million, representing an almost seven-fold increase from a decade earlier³⁸ – whereas net migration from the EU-8 countries had been reducing even before the referendum, and now turned net negative.

In 2018 the MAC had highlighted that the business model of many employers in the lower-skill sectors of the economy “in which the ready availability of EEA migrant labour plays an important role ... now faces a number of problems even in the absence of changes to immigration policy.”³⁹ Relative economic growth and currency movements appeared to have shifted the balance of opportunity between the main EU-8 country, Poland, and the UK, making working in the UK materially less economically attractive for Poles than it had been.

The relatively relaxed atmosphere around immigration was reflected in the main parties' election manifestos in 2019. None took a tough position on it. Indeed, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats were still holding out the hope that EU freedom of movement to the UK might be maintained, and, even if not, in Labour's case arguing for “a levelling up of rights, not a race to the bottom” to replace the “two-tier system”.⁴⁰

The Conservative manifesto was as tough as it got, with its promise to end freedom of movement and introduce an ‘Australian-style points-based immigration system’. But it also praised the contribution of immigration, highlighted the need to grant asylum and support to refugees fleeing persecution, and to make the immigration system fairer and more compassionate after the “horrific” treatment of the Windrush generation.⁴¹ As for Nigel Farage's Brexit Party, its focus of at this Election was principally on getting Brexit done.

The Conservative manifesto referenced both increasing immigration control – “take back control of our borders” – and reducing immigration numbers – “there will be fewer lower-skilled migrants and overall numbers will come down”. But from the moment of Johnson's appointment as Prime Minister the need to control immigration was emphasised, and the need to reduce numbers de-emphasised. Indeed, his very first day in office saw Johnson abandon his party's nearly decade-old net migration target, making it clear that “no-one believes more strongly than me in the benefits of migration to our country” and instead focusing on the control that a new ‘Australian-style points-based system’ would bring.⁴²

For nearly a decade the Conservatives had committed to a ‘tens of thousands’ net migration target without having the necessary control over immigration from the EU required to deliver it. Now – on the cusp of Brexit, and of finally taking back control over EU immigration so that the target could at last be achieved – it might seem perverse that the target was dropped. But from a political perspective it was imperative. For now, with the UK outside of the EU and having taken back control over immigration, there would have been no excuse if/when the target was not met.

Thus the very moment when the government had acquired the levers of power to actually achieve the net immigration target was the moment when, from a political perspective, the target had to be ditched. Indeed, the UK's deep historical connections with some of the world's largest, and still growing, populations – India, Pakistan, Nigeria – had the potential to create far larger flows to the UK than the smaller, and stagnating, populations of the EU ever realistically could – India's population being nearly 40 times the size of Poland's. And, in a number of policy areas, key decisions around the details of the post-Brexit immigration system provided an opportunity for these larger flows.

The final details of the UK's new post-Brexit immigration system for work were revealed on what turned out to be the eve of the global Covid-19 pandemic. While the core approach remained from the 2018 White Paper – based on the UK's existing system for employer sponsorship of non-EU workers – some details had shifted, under the ‘Australian-style points-based system’ branding beloved of the new Prime Minister. It was advertised as combining 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. Its stated aim was “to reduce overall levels of migration” and “to create a high-wage, high-skill, high productivity economy”.⁴³

Since the end of WW2 though, the UK economy had always had access to ‘free movement’ of workers from one preferred group of countries or another; first its colonial connections then its European neighbours.⁴⁴ Now that was ending, to compensate for the lack of any free movement the government made some relatively liberal choices over the parameters of the new system, including:

- no cap any more on the numbers of non-EU workers;
- reduced required worker skill level, down from degree level (RQF6) to A-level equivalent (RQF3);

38 Mihnea Cuibus, ‘EU Migration to and from the UK’ (The Migration Observatory, 20 November 2023).

39 Migration Advisory Committee, ‘EEA-workers in the UK labour market: Interim Update’ (March 2018).

40 It's Time For Real Change: The Labour Party Manifesto 2019.

41 Get Brexit Done, Unleash Britain's Potential: The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto 2019.

42 Matt Honeycombe-Foster, ‘Boris Johnson axes Theresa May's vow to lower immigration to the ‘tens of thousands’, *Politics Home* (25 July 2019).

43 HM Government, ‘The UK's points-based immigration system: policy statement’ (19 February 2020).

44 John Salt and Victoria Bauer, ‘Managing Foreign Labour Immigration to the UK: Government Policy and Outcomes since 1945’ (2020) Occasional Paper, UCL Migration Research Unit.

- reduced general threshold level for the minimum salary an overseas worker must be paid – pushing back on the original advice of the MAC that advised a higher minimum – and even lower for many jobs on an expansively drawn Shortage Occupation List;
- employers no longer required to meet the Resident Labour Market Test ('RLMT') by first advertising a job for 28 days in the UK before offering it to an overseas worker.

These changes meant those coming to the UK under the sponsorship system were now eligible to do over half of all full-time jobs in the UK economy – double the level sponsored workers had been eligible for before Brexit. And now with no cap on numbers, and no RLMT requirement.⁴⁵ The scrapping of the separate, higher minimum income requirement for permanent settlement also now meant that not only was it easier for non-EU workers to come to the UK, it was also easier for them to stay, permanently.

Rather than resolving the UK's tensions over immigration, Brexit may therefore be viewed as allowing them to build up further. As in the New Labour era, large increases in immigration were to occur not as a result of some overall grand plan to increase immigration or – as the current Labour government alleges – of a deliberate "open borders experiment". Instead, they resulted from a wide range of different adjustments to the system – some more controlled than others – deriving from a range of policy agendas – including economic, foreign, and higher education policy. Also relevant was the Office of Budget Responsibility's forecasts of the impact of immigration levels on the UK's economic and fiscal position, with the OBR's methodology regarding higher levels of immigration as more positive for GDP growth.

That Johnson's brand of 'Global Britain' boosterism recalled Blair's 'Cool Britannia' era was not the only echo of the New Labour era's more open approach to immigration. The core of the post-Brexit immigration system was New Labour's own 'points-based' system for non-EU work and post-study visas originally introduced in 2008.⁴⁶ Indeed, the Johnson government re-launched – re-branded as the graduate visa – New Labour's post-study visa to allow international students to remain in the UK for a period after the end of their course – which had been withdrawn in 2012 as part of Theresa May's crackdown as Home Secretary under the coalition government.

To set these more expansive changes in context though, considerably less future EU immigration was forecast as a result of Brexit; due to the ending of freedom of movement to the UK, but also the take-up of the EUSS suggesting a large pool of EU citizens already in the UK with the right to work. And – outside of designated shortage occupations – the new system shut the door to the lowest skilled and paid – hitting sectors, most particularly hospitality, reliant on a constant flow of low-paid, short-term workers – and to self-employed workers from overseas. Even employers who could sponsor overseas workers now faced significant additional costs, administrative complexity, and legal responsibility in comparison with hiring under the EU freedom of movement regime.

The end of the Brexit transition period, and the go-live of the new immigration system, occurred in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, which had spectacularly scrambled the UK's immigration story in a number of ways. Immigration numbers to the UK dropped, then stopped, then disappeared entirely. In the sense that not only was inbound movement to the UK stopped by pandemic restrictions, but, for a period, the official immigration statistics were not produced at all⁴⁷, as the pandemic prevented the collection of data through the existing survey-based method, and the shift to new admin-based methods of calculation took time.

Against this background an entirely new framing took shape as the combination of Brexit and the effects of the pandemic turned many concerns about immigration on their head. The lower-skilled, lower-paid – whom the UK seemed intent on excluding under its new immigration system – were suddenly feted as the plucky key workers selflessly keeping the country going while everyone else kept themselves safe on Zoom. The health system was put under huge strain, and the social care system seemed in serious difficulties.

The worry became not the numbers of overseas workers arriving, but the numbers leaving.⁴⁸ Was this a Brexodus, or just migrants returning home due to the pandemic?⁴⁹ Were they leaving temporarily or permanently – given that many EU countries were explicitly offering their returners incentives to stay back home for good⁵⁰? The worry suddenly was not about whether the UK would be open to too many immigrant workers, but about whether it would have access to too few.

The autumn of 2021 saw shortages of HGV drivers and poultry workers trigger serious concerns about food and petrol deliveries, and the availability of turkeys in the run up to Christmas.⁵¹ There was pressure to allow temporary immigration routes to alleviate these shortages. And, more broadly, to further expand the occupations on the official Shortage Occupation List which allowed employers to offer lower wages within the rules. The MAC opposed this, arguing that for occupations allegedly suffering shortages it was perverse to see lower pay as the answer. But, for some sectors,

45 Jonathan Portes, 'Immigration and the UK economy after Brexit' (2022) 38(1) Oxford Review of Economic Policy, 82.

46 Melanie Gower, 'The UK points-based system for immigration' (House of Commons Library, 9 July 2018).

47 Jonathan Thomas, 'Routes to resolution: Finding the centre ground in Britain's immigration debates' (Social Market Foundation, 19 December 2022).

48 Jonathan Portes, 'A million people have left Britain. What does this mean for the country?' *The Guardian* (8 March 2021).

49 Megan Specia, 'After Pandemic and Brexit, U.K. Begins to See Gaps Left by European Workers' *The New York Times* (17 June 2021).

50 Caitlin Katsiaficas and Justyna Segeš Frelak, 'Tapping into Global Talent – Many returned home during the pandemic – can they be convinced to stay?' (International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 1 February 2022).

51 Ben Chapman, 'The 12 shortages of Christmas' *The Independent* (8 October 2021).

employers' use of immigrant workers would not have been viable post-Brexit without this allowed salary discount.⁵² This was at odds though with the aim of reducing immigration numbers. It also highlighted the stark tension between the longer-term vision of a high-wage, high-skill economy, on the one hand, and the shorter-term practical everyday demands of the economy for low-wage, low-skill workers, on the other.

The pandemic was not a force for sweetness and light over immigration in all respects though. As it made irregular entry to the UK harder, small boats across the Channel became the main recorded entry method for irregular arrivals.⁵³ Unlike other forms of irregular entry, these arrivals made no effort to avoid detection, thus providing a highly visible challenge to immigration control. The pandemic also saw a large increase in the use of hotels for contingency accommodation for asylum claimants⁵⁴, further adding to the visibility of this issue.

The increase of small boat arrivals was to fuel the government's attempts to fundamentally redraw asylum legislation, and its nascent deterrent of the Rwanda plan. Having left the EU without agreeing any replacement arrangement, the UK had lost the ability – under the Dublin system – to return asylum claimants to other EU member states they had transited through on enroute to the UK, although the deep flaws in the operation of this system in practice had meant the UK had achieved relatively few returns through it, even when it had been a member.⁵⁵

At this time though the small boats numbers had yet to assume the degree of political and public prominence they were destined for. And the British public's level of concern over immigration remained at 20-year lows. Just as the official immigration statistics had disappeared, so immigration itself seemed to have disappeared as an issue of political and public concern. It was against this benign seeming background that four further expansive changes were made to the UK's immigration regime, reacting to changes in the world.

First, following the Chinese crackdown in Hong Kong, in early 2021 the UK opened a safe route – for which over 5 million were eligible – for Hong Kongers to relocate and settle in the UK should they wish to do so.⁵⁶

Second, in summer 2021 the government re-launched the post-study visa to make it even more attractive for international students to come to study in the UK. This was against the advice of the MAC, but driven by the demands of the higher education sector and concerns that the effect of the pandemic might threaten the UK's position in the global competition for international students. Indeed, the UK International Education Strategy's targets of, by 2030, annual 'education exports' of £35 billion and hosting 600,000 international students in higher education, seemed at risk.⁵⁷ As did the actual financial viability of some higher education institutions, which had become increasingly dependent on the fees paid by international students, especially given domestic student tuition fee levels remained frozen by the government below the cost of delivery.

Third, in early 2022, the government expanded the Health and Care Worker visa to make low paid ordinary social care roles eligible for a visa even though their pay and skill level fell below the minimum allowed by the immigration system.⁵⁸ This was another demand-driven immigration policy expansion – in this case though supported by the MAC – fuelled by concerns about the resourcing of the UK's social care sector coming out of the pandemic, allied to the fact that no fundamental reform of this crucial but underfunded sector was in sight.

Fourth, implemented alongside the social care visa expansion, was the urgent development of schemes to take in and accommodate Ukrainians fleeing the Russian invasion. The Homes for Ukraine scheme⁵⁹ – providing for Ukrainians to be hosted in private homes in the UK – went live the same day that the government announced the removal of the last remaining Covid-19 travel restrictions to the UK.⁶⁰

What the consequences would be of all these different elements of the post-Brexit immigration system, in the new normal of the post-pandemic world, as the world, including the UK, reopened its borders and economy, was about to be tested.

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52 Madeleine Sumption, 'Shortages, high demand occupations, and the post-Brexit UK immigration system' (2022) *Oxford Review of Economic Policy*, 38(1) 97.

53 Home Office, 'How many people come to the UK irregularly' (20 October 2025).

54 Nuni Jorgensen, 'Asylum accommodation in the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 15 August 2025).

55 Peter William Walsh and Mihnea Cuiibus, 'Returns of unauthorised migrants from the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 11 August 2025).

56 Peter William Walsh, 'Q&A: The new Hong Kong British National (Overseas) visa' (The Migration Observatory, 23 November 2020).

57 Department for International Trade and Department for Education, 'International Education Strategy: 2021 update' (6 February 2021).

58 HM Government, 'Biggest visa boost for social care as Health and Care Visa scheme expanded' (24 December 2021).

59 HM Government, 'Homes for Ukraine' scheme launches (14 March 2022).

60 HM Government, 'All Covid-19 travel restrictions removed in the UK' (14 March 2022).

Post-pandemic: soaring immigration lights the touchpaper

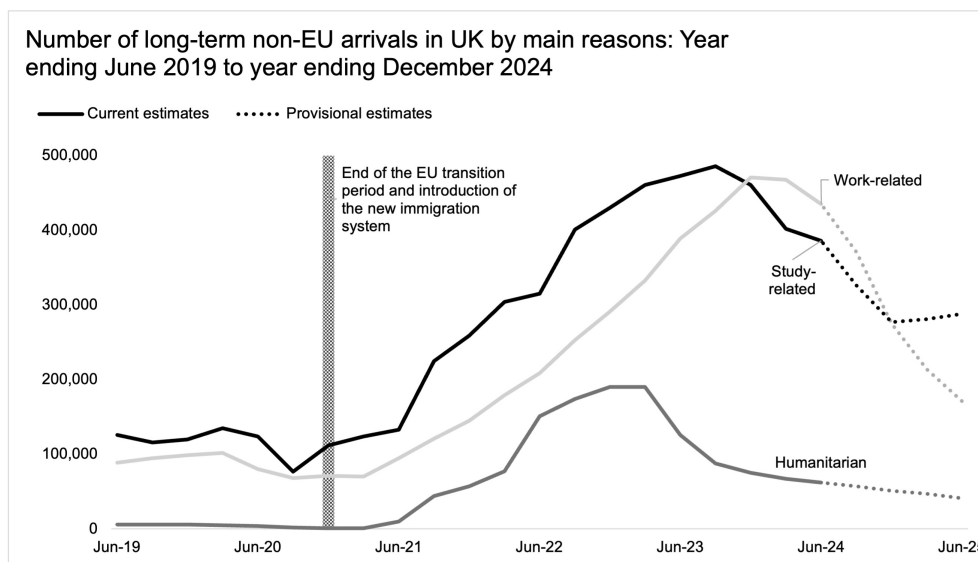
Notwithstanding the ‘Brexodus’ concern, in many sectors EU employment in the UK still seemed relatively robust. At the time the UK’s new social care visa was introduced in 2022, the latest data was showing no ‘Brexit-effect’ on the number of EU nationals employed as care workers in the UK, with the numbers actually increasing.⁶¹ In construction – at least looking at payrolled employment of EU workers (although many had previously typically been self-employed) – numbers seemed stable. And in the transportation sector the exodus of drivers from the workforce appeared primarily attributable to UK nationals leaving it, while payrolled employments of EU and non-EU nationals had risen.⁶²

Nevertheless, as the pandemic restrictions were relaxed, labour shortages quickly emerged. By October 2021 the almost 1.2m vacancies in the UK was the highest figure on record.⁶³ Some blamed Brexit and the new immigration system. It soon became clear though that a significant demand/supply mismatch – manifesting in labour shortages and demand for new immigrant workers to help fill them – was a global phenomenon being experienced across leading economies, “from Brooklyn to Brisbane”.⁶⁴

European countries were themselves experiencing labour shortages in many of the same sectors as the UK, and also looking for workers from outside the EU even though they still benefited from EU freedom of movement. For instance, notwithstanding its continued EU membership, 2022-2024 saw neighbouring Ireland experience record worker inflows from outside the EU.⁶⁵

The UK’s position though was particularly acute. The government anticipated that the post-Brexit immigration system’s rebalancing between EU and non-EU immigration would cause some sectors – particularly those such as hospitality that had benefited from a steady flow of low-skilled EU workers – significant challenges.⁶⁶ What had obviously not been anticipated though was the pandemic, and its consequences. These included the high level of economic inactivity of UK resident workers as economic life resumed, which in sectors such as HGV driving amplified the shortages caused by new driver training having shut down during the pandemic.⁶⁷

Coming out of the pandemic, numbers coming to the UK with visas under the new immigration system from the EU were very low, but more than made up for by those coming from outside the EU. From 2021-2024, 2.5 million non-EU nationals came to the UK on either work or student visas, or as dependants alongside those who did. Of the 2.8 million employee jobs created in the UK 2021-2024, non-EU employees accounted for two-thirds of them.⁶⁸



Source: Migration Statistics Team, ‘Long-term international immigration, emigration and net migration flows, provisional (Office for National Statistics, 27 November 2025).

61 Claire Kumar et al, ‘Migration and the future of care: supporting older people and care workers’ (ODI and Center for Global Development, March 2022).

62 Office for National Statistics, ‘Changes in payrolled employments held by non-UK nationals during the COVID-19 pandemic and EU Exit periods’ (1 March 2022).

63 Migration Advisory Committee, ‘MAC Annual Report 2021’ (December 2021).

64 *The Economist*, ‘The shortage economy’ (9 October 2021).

65 Hugh Creaton, Karen Hogan and Diarmaid Smyth, ‘Recent Trends in Migration Flows Impacting the Irish Labour Market’ (Government of Ireland Working Paper, April 2025).

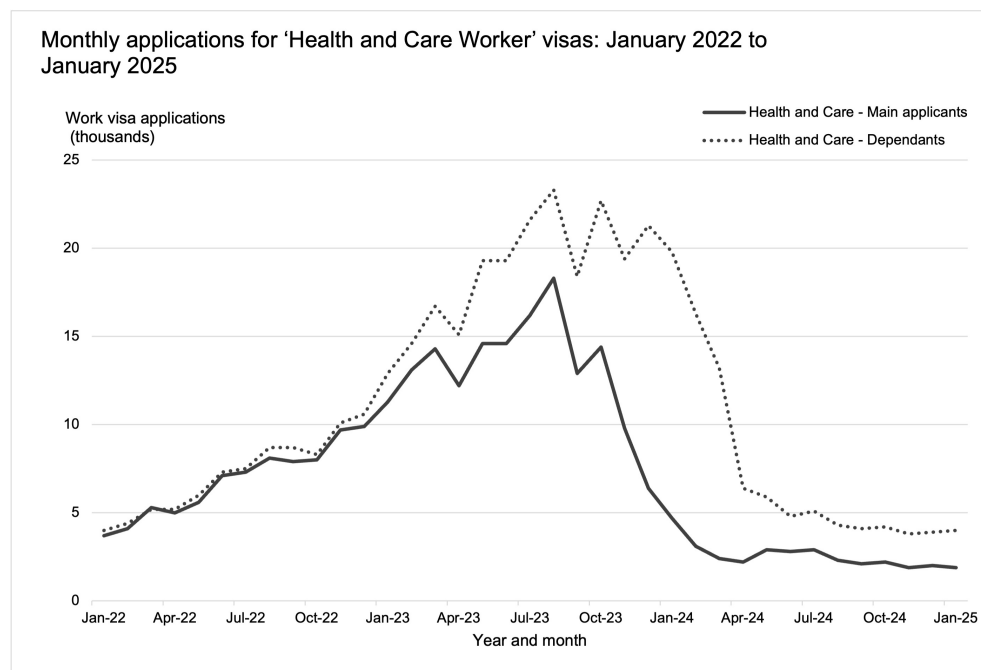
66 HM Government, ‘The UK’s future skills-based immigration system’ (December 2018).

67 Jonathan Thomas, Aveek Bhattacharya and Gideon Salutin, ‘The Whole of the Moon: UK labour immigration policy in the round’ (Social Market Foundation, 26 June 2023).

68 Ben Brindle, ‘How might the UK’s new approach to migration affect the economy?’ (Economics Observatory, 28 October 2025).

The real kicker to the overall numbers came from international students and from health and social care workers. Post-pandemic, international student numbers to the UK easily surpassed the previous, 2009, record level, peaking at 484,000 student visas in 2022. From year-end ('YE') 2019 to YE summer 2022, Indian sponsored study visas increased 215%, to over 80,000, and Nigerian 686%, to over 65,000.⁶⁹ There was a huge spike in dependants accompanying those students – 143,000 in 2023 – representing an eight-fold increase since 2019. And, with a record 172,000 post-study graduate visas issued in 2024, combined with the relatively liberal salary thresholds for a skilled worker visa, international students were staying on in the UK after their studies at higher rates than before.⁷⁰

The new visa route for social care workers was particularly attractive to those with no other realistic option for lawfully entering the UK, offering a path into the UK at a low level of both skill and salary. A surge of inflows resulted, not only of those coming to work – in 2023 over 70% of all health and care entry visas issued to main applicants were issued to care workers – but also of their dependants. It also offered the most accessible route for international students to stay on further in the UK after their study or graduate visa ended.⁷¹



Source: Home Office, 'Monthly entry clearance visa applications: January 2025' (13 February 2025).

But the social care visa was not well designed and, initially, not well policed by the Home Office. It was open to exploitation by rogue employers. An early warning sign was reports that international students were being encouraged to switch into social care jobs on arrival in the UK, without even taking up their student place.⁷² Today, many care worker sponsors have had their sponsor licences revoked. As a result around 30,000 who entered on this visa route remain in the UK without sponsoring employers and care jobs.⁷³

Opening new immigration routes initially has an outsized impact, because flows through a new route are initially all in one direction. This obviously also applied to the Ukraine and Hong Kong schemes, through which almost 400,000 have been admitted to the UK, with the largest numbers arriving shortly after launch.⁷⁴

These flows were at least through routes the UK had deliberately opened up. Not so the small boat arrivals across the Channel. Although a relatively small piece of the overall immigration figures at this time, these numbers continued to rise. And crucially – in terms of their political significance – unlike other forms of irregular entry into the UK these arrivals could be seen and recorded; not only the numbers, but also how many were in each boat, and where they were from.

The small boat arrivals were a concern because they evoked disorder, and an inability to practically impose and enforce controls. For those concerned, or seeking to promote concern, that the UK had not in fact taken back control of its borders, the small boat numbers thus became the new totem. And one that updated in real-time. Back when EU freedom of movement had represented the main concern over lack of control, the statistics were never issued more frequently than quarterly. But, from February 2023, in the case of small boat crossings the past seven days data has been updated, and made publicly available, *daily* by the Home Office.⁷⁵

⁶⁹ HM Government, 'Immigration statistics year ending June 2022' (23 September 2022).

⁷⁰ Mihnea Cuiibus, Peter William Walsh and Filip Němeček, 'Briefing: Student Migration to the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 30 October 2025).

⁷¹ Migration Advisory Committee, 'Rapid Review of the Graduate Route' (May 2024).

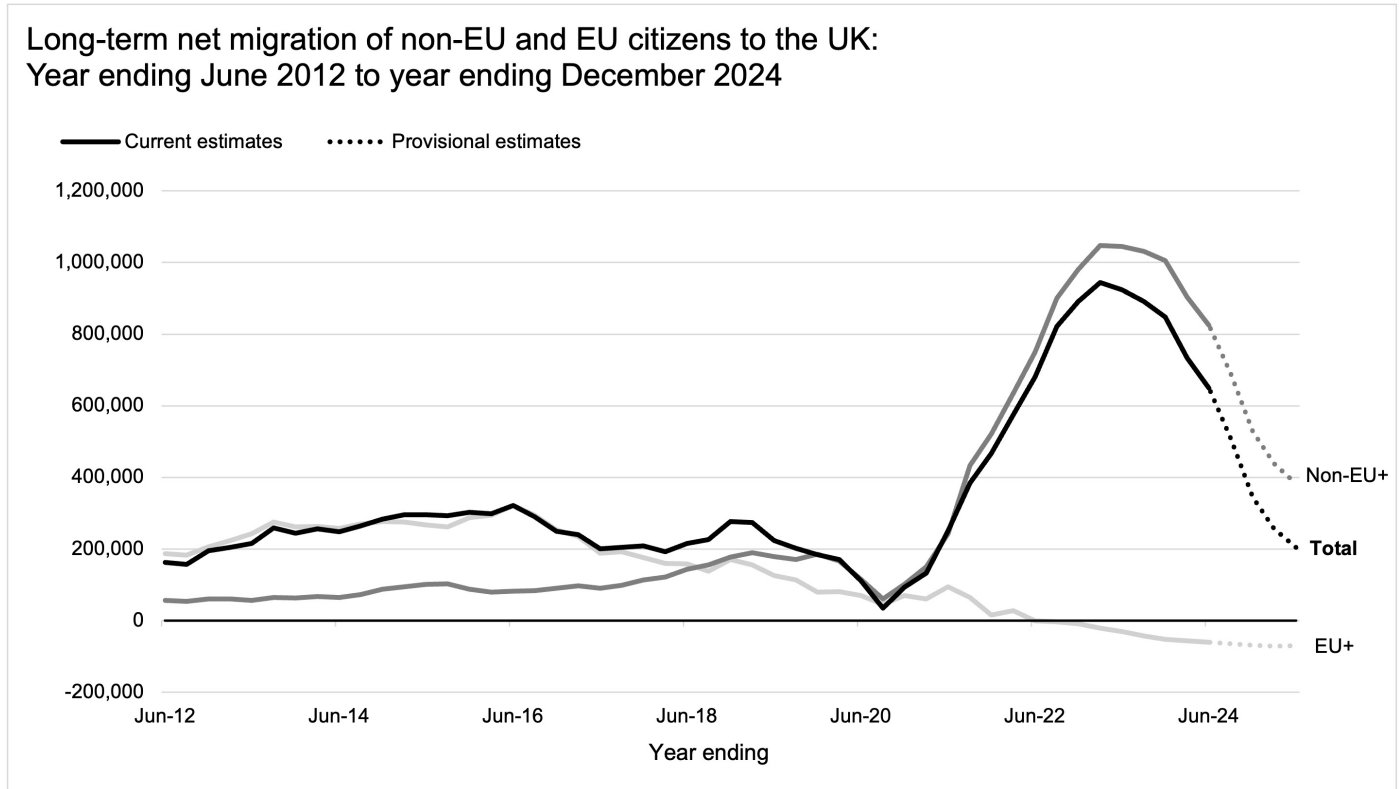
⁷² Nick Cuthbert, 'UK: more students switching to skilled worker visa on arrival' *PIE News* (30 November 2022).

⁷³ HM Government, 'Support offer to international ASC workers whose employer's sponsor licence has been revoked' (12 May 2025).

⁷⁴ HM Government, 'How many people come to the UK via safe and legal (humanitarian) routes?' (20 October 2025).

⁷⁵ HM Government, 'Small boat activity in the English Channel' (1 February 2023).

In terms of what all these separate routes meant for numbers overall, while EU net migration to the UK was now net negative, the level of non-EU immigration was so high – with 3.6 million arriving 2021-2024 – that overall immigration and net migration surged to record levels.



Source: *Borders and Immigration data from the Home Office, Registration and Population Interactions Database from the Department for Work and Pensions (Office for National Statistics, 22 May 2025).*

And, as they did so, previously issued official numbers continually seemed to be revised and restated upwards as further information was subsequently factored into them. Most spectacularly, the YE June 2024 net migration figure, of 728,000, was released alongside a huge upward revision of the YE June 2023 figure, from 672,000 to 906,000 (which has since been revised even further upwards). The estimates for long term immigration for YE June 2023 and June 2024 were 1.3 and 1.2 million respectively.⁷⁶

These were more than double the levels that net migration and immigration had reached at the previous high before the EU referendum. This was not what the British public had been led to believe would happen. Unsurprisingly public levels of concern over immigration began to rise again, from their record lows in the pandemic back up towards their pre-Brexit levels.

Some argued that post-Brexit the public would be less concerned with immigration numbers, as immigration was now under the government’s control. Except the Channel crossings were clearly not under control. And relatively smaller numbers coming in that were not controlled could be conflated in the public’s mind with larger numbers coming in that were controlled. In any event, just because immigration is controlled does not mean people will regard any level of it acceptable, and necessarily aligned with their concerns. Large inflows can have real as well as perceived impacts, becoming a magnet for broader feelings of dissatisfaction and disillusionment. Politicians cannot ignore this; and some politicians will seek to benefit from it.

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76 Office for National Statistics, 'Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2024' (28 November 2024).

Tough enough? The political response to the record immigration numbers

Having got Brexit done, taken back control, and presided over an explosion in immigration numbers, the Conservative government now faced a presentational and policy choice. Own what had just happened, positively defending and explaining the choices it had made; why it had let in all those students, social care workers, Hong Kongers and Ukrainians. Or disown and disavow it, changing policies to get the numbers back down. It chose the latter course. In what proved to be its final year the Conservative government made restrictive changes to a range of immigration policies and processes – affecting care work, skilled work, students, family unification and dependants – targeting those parts of the immigration system most easily and quickly impactable by policy and process change.

On immigration policy, the 2024 Election manifestos were a world away from those of 2019. Reform UK promised to freeze non-essential immigration⁷⁷, while the Conservatives pushed their policy about-turn even further, promising a binding, annually reducing, immigration visa cap⁷⁸. Even Labour's position had shifted a huge amount, not only from the open immigration rhetoric of its 2019 manifesto, but also from that of Sir Keir Starmer's party leadership pitch.⁷⁹

In terms of combatting the Channel crossings, while Labour rejected the Conservatives' Rwanda plan to 'Stop The Boats', it did not challenge the framing of 'the boats' as an existential security and control problem that merited a headline pledge to voters; in Labour's case, to 'Smash The Gangs'. On legal migration, Labour fostered a 'British jobs for British workers' vibe which focused not only on constraining the supply of immigration, but also the demand for it – looking to hold employers to account for why they were using overseas workers, and for investing in local skills, fairer employment practices and improved working conditions.⁸⁰

Where the Blair government had focused on GDP growth, and considered high levels of overseas hiring an indicator of strength – evidence of a high performing economy in a globalising world – Labour's focus now was on GDP *per capita* growth, considering high levels of overseas hiring a sign of weakness – evidence of the UK labour market's failure to develop its own skills base and becoming dangerously reliant on the skills of others.⁸¹

On coming to power the new Labour government faced its own choice. With immigration numbers already falling significantly following the Conservative government's final year restrictive policy shift, should the new government 'stick' – dialling down the rhetoric over immigration, imposing no further immigration restrictions, and simply taking the plaudits for the reduction of immigration numbers that would shortly feed through into the official immigration statistics? – or 'twist' – further publicly upping the ante on immigration and imposing its own further restrictions? Whether stemming from the deeply held belief of those directing government immigration policy, or from a desire to politically capitalise on the tarnished immigration record of the Conservatives, or from a fear of the emerging threat of Reform UK, it chose the latter course.⁸²

On 28 November 2024 – hours after the ONS announced the revised record level of the YE June 2023 immigration numbers, and less than five years on from himself having been one of the few remaining political proponents of maintaining freedom of movement with the EU – the Prime Minister stood outside 10 Downing Street and berated the previous government for deliberately and unforgivably "turning Britain into a one-nation experiment in open borders". He committed to a White Paper setting out the government's own plans to reduce immigration.⁸³

Six months later, when the White Paper was issued, it was accompanied by another speech from the Prime Minister, doubling down on the tough rhetoric; the social contract had been broken, there had been a failure to back British workers and invest in young people's training.⁸⁴ The White Paper itself exhibited some familiar aspects; not least the concerns of its title – 'Restoring Control over the Immigration System' – and of its opening chapter: 'Net Migration Must Come Down'.

Framed as a revolution, the White Paper represented an evolutionary step in further tightening a number of immigration restrictions, building on, and out from, the Conservatives' prior restrictive efforts. Some of the changes were significant though – including raising the required skilled worker skill level, far tougher requirements to qualify for special dispensation as a shortage occupation, and completely banning overseas recruitment of care workers. It reiterated the target of improved GDP *per capita*, which "means more than boosting economic output; it means making sure that boost is felt by everyone".⁸⁵

77 Our Contract with You: Reform UK, 2024.

78 The Conservative and Unionist Party Manifesto, 2024.

79 Michael Savage, 'Starmer warns Labour: unite or face a generation out of power' *The Guardian* (22 February 2020).

80 Change: Labour Party Manifesto 2024.

81 Letter from the Home Secretary to the Migration Advisory Committee (6 August 2024).

82 Jonathan Thomas, 'Politics or principle? Making sense of the Government's White Paper on immigration, and how should business respond' (Social Market Foundation, 15 May 2025).

83 HM Government, 'PM speech on migration; 28 November 2024'.

84 HM Government, 'PM remarks at Immigration White Paper press conference: 12 May 2025'.

85 HM Government, 'Restoring Control over the Immigration System' (12 May 2025).

At the same time as placing further restrictions on work migration, the Labour government took tough action on other areas of immigration: securing a framework deal with France to seek to address the flows across The Channel; cracking down on illegal working and exploitative employers; removing far higher numbers of people illegally in the UK than the previous government had done; and restricting family reunion for refugees.

Yet when Yvette Cooper, the Home Secretary who had overseen all of this, was replaced as Home Secretary by Shabana Mahmood, the headline stories were that Cooper had not been tough enough.⁸⁶ That such a sweeping series of measures and actions bearing down on all aspects of immigration – building on but going beyond what the previous Conservative government had done in its own clampdown – were considered insufficiently tough, and were about to themselves be built on by yet tougher proposals, suggests a fundamental mindset shift seemingly going far beyond what was at issue in Brexit.

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A radical shift leaves Brexit out of the picture?

The immigration numbers continue to be subject to revisions for the ‘spike’ period. The latest revisions have the annual UK immigration number running at over 1 million from YE March 2022 until YE 2024, with net migration to the UK now estimated to have peaked at 944,000 for YE March 2023.⁸⁷ The current Home Secretary states that “between 2021 and 2024 we have seen net migration of an additional 2.6 million people”.⁸⁸

Net migration to the UK has now fallen considerably from its peak though, as the post-pandemic effect has reversed, and the suite of restrictive policy changes has impacted across the board. For YE June 2025 immigration was 898,000, down from the updated estimate of 1,299,000 of a year earlier. And net migration fell from 694,000 a year earlier to only 204,000.⁸⁹ While immigration is still higher than pre-EU referendum, net migration is now below where it was then. And more EU citizens continue to leave the UK than to arrive – while status under the EUSS allows someone a path to stay in the UK that does not mean they have to take it.

The Channel crossings have replaced, if not surpassed, the net migration target as an object lesson in government over-promising, then under-delivering, against expectations on immigration control. Just as the net migration target was not hit, the small boats were not stopped, and the gangs have thus far not been ‘smashed’. Mixed with the question of where to accommodate asylum claimants after arrival, this has now formed an even more toxic political cocktail.

There is a feeling of having gone back to the future. Today’s immigration news flow looks straight out of the early 2000s – border security, the behaviour of ‘illegal migrants’, the cost of asylum support and asylum accommodation. Back then, before EU freedom of movement into the UK really took off, these things hogged the headlines. Who can forget The Sun’s 2003 front page: ‘Swan Bake: Asylum seekers steal the Queen’s birds for barbecues’?⁹⁰ Not Nigel Farage clearly, who has been reprising the tale for the current day audience.⁹¹

Just as in the US where the focus of tensions over immigration has recently turned inwards, in the UK it has also done so. Away from the numbers arriving, and onto those recently arrived, and where and how they are being accommodated. And onto which migrants, in which circumstances, should be given a permanent right to stay, and which should not, and which should have to leave.

Since the government’s White Paper framed acquiring the right to permanently settle in the UK – indefinite leave to remain (‘ILR’) – as “a privilege that is earned, not a right”⁹², and proposed extending the standard qualifying period in the UK to acquire ILR from 5 to 10 years, things have moved on a pace. With politicians of different hues competing to sound ever more draconian.

The government has not only confirmed its intention to apply this change to those already in the UK who have not yet acquired ILR, but also proposed a series of requirements meaning the period to acquire ILR could be anywhere between 3 and 30 years. It is even considering whether recourse to public benefits should only be granted on acquisition of citizenship, rather than on ILR.⁹³ Refugees are now being told they may have to wait up to 20 years to get ILR. Even resettled refugees will have to wait 10 years.⁹⁴ Reform UK’s plan meanwhile is to remove ILR status entirely – leaving only temporary status or citizenship – and rescinding ILR status from those who already have it.⁹⁵

86 ‘PM clears out Home Office in sweeping reshuffle after Rayner exit’, *BBC* (5 September 2025).

87 Office for National Statistics, ‘Improving long-term international migration statistics, updating our methods and estimates: November 2025’ (18 November 2025).

88 Home Secretary Foreword in HM Government, ‘A Fairer Pathway to Settlement’ (20 November 2025).

89 Office for National Statistics, ‘Long-term international migration, provisional: year ending June 2025’ (27 November 2025).

90 ‘Swan Bake: Asylum seekers steal the Queen’s birds for barbecues’ *The Sun* (2003).

91 John Crace, ‘Nigel Farage swans around peddling hate on Nick Ferrari’s phone-in’ *The Guardian* (24 September 2025).

92 HM Government, ‘PM remarks at Immigration White Paper press conference’ (n 84).

93 HM Government, ‘A Fairer Pathway to Settlement’ (n 88).

94 HM Government, ‘Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government’s asylum and returns policy’ (17 November 2025).

95 Reform UK, ‘Prioritising UK Citizens’ (22 September 2025).

This is a fundamental policy shift. As are the plans to rewire the asylum system, asylum support, and the status of refugees in the UK. As are the potential changes impacting the interpretation of, and the UK's relationship with, the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) which are being considered due to claims that the ECHR is in practice undermining the UK's ability to carry out effective immigration control, and whether this can be fixed by national legislation, or requires changing the ECHR itself, or even the UK withdrawing from it altogether. These could all be considered revolutionary not evolutionary developments.

From the current vantage point therefore, the UK's immigration policy over the last 25 years looks like a huge pendulum swing, with Brexit not a final destination point, but a mid-point passed through enroute and quickly left behind. Indeed, the world of Brexit can already seem passé, an entirely different era of contestation over immigration. Back then the 'hostile environment', of simply having employers and landlords check immigration status, was relatively light touch but deeply contested. Today things have moved past that; the talk is of digital ID, facial recognition and deportation.

Indeed, some of the current suite of immigration policy proposals in the UK seem not only far removed from the world of Brexit, but at odds with it. Most particularly the polar opposite approach in respect of ILR now being advocated in respect of those who have come to the UK post-Brexit in the 'Boriswave' from the approach that was taken to those who came to the UK pre-Brexit under EU freedom of movement.

Those who came under the post-Brexit immigration system now face having their qualifying period for permanent settlement extended after they have arrived, and subjected to new, enhanced character and contribution requirements. Whereas those who came to the UK pre-Brexit under EU freedom of movement were given a path under the EUSS to stay in the UK forever, with a very low bar character test and no questions asked about their working status or contribution. No voices were raised against giving them this right, and still are not. Even Reform UK – which is now questioning that cohort's rights to public benefits – has so far confirmed it will not revisit the right to remain of those granted status under the EUSS.⁹⁶

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How then to evaluate the role and impact of Brexit?

What if Remain had *won* the EU referendum 52-48? How might that have impacted the reality of immigration in the UK, and the policy around it today?

Nothing can be said for certain – except perhaps that Nigel Farage would surely have campaigned for a second referendum, with himself allowed to lead the official Leave campaign the second time around. The most plausible political scenario though would have seen David Cameron serving out his second term as prime minister, with Theresa May or George Osborne becoming his successor after the next election, and Boris Johnson out of the picture.

In terms of immigration levels, in the period between the referendum and the end of the pandemic there may well have been little difference – as the evidence suggests the levels experienced were not primarily driven by Brexit. And coming out of the pandemic there would still have been the need for workers as the economy reopened, and desire to welcome the Hong Kongers and Ukrainians.

But there would also have been key differences. Still having access to EU workers under freedom of movement, the UK would not have felt the same need to open up immigration routes to non-EU workers, nor to establish a separate social care visa route. And, had May then been Prime Minister – having herself been the instigator of the clampdown on the post-study visa route – she would surely have been much less likely than Johnson to re-open that route.

Thus, while immigration to the UK would inevitably have risen post-pandemic, and – as other EU countries experienced – there would still have been some pressure to supplement EU immigration, absent Brexit, immigration to the UK may not have spiked post-pandemic to the same extent. And, as a result, the UK may not then have experienced such an extreme allergic political reaction to that spike, resulting in the more extreme immigration policy proposals now currently on the table.

Having said that though, it would be naïve to think remaining in the EU would have resulted in calm and chill descending over UK immigration policy. Two examples. Debates over the potential longer-term costs of lower-skilled immigration, for instance, would likely have become more, not less, fraught if free movement of low-skilled EU workers into the UK was still allowed. As would debates over international students in the UK if EU students still had the right to study at UK universities at the subsidised domestic fee rate, the reinstatement of which has been one of the EU's negotiating demands for agreeing a youth mobility scheme with the UK.

⁹⁶ Sam Francis and Georgia Roberts, 'Reform plans to scrap indefinite leave to remain for migrants' *BBC* (22 September 2025).

What would continued EU membership have meant for the current main source of the UK's immigration angst – the Channel crossings? On the one hand, the UK's bilateral one-in-one-out deal with France would not have been possible. On the other, the UK would still have been able to effect some returns to other EU countries under the EU Dublin system. And there is also evidence that the UK now being outside that system may be incentivising some to cross the Channel who otherwise would not do so, in order to escape this system's reach.⁹⁷

Overall though, it is not clear that remaining inside the EU would have materially improved the situation or the options for dealing with the Channel crossings very much. And indeed, with the UK still within the EU one can see how the crossings would likely have been exploited by politicians to create the (mis)perception that the UK was hampered in controlling them precisely because it remained in the EU, and to stoke anger against the EU in not stopping them.

In terms of what has actually happened though, as opposed to the 'what if's', how to evaluate the role and impact of Brexit?

Given how the world has turned since, the Brexit vote may look less a mark of the UK's difference, more like the UK was at the vanguard of a broader and bigger story; a global swing of the pendulum towards greater immigration restrictionism as part of a move away from a world of multilateral cooperation, rooted in a globalised liberal economy, and towards competitive re-assertion of national self-interest, protection and renewal, as most vividly painted by the US's current course. The pandemic arguably played a part in this, for some highlighting the risks of reliance on fluid overseas labour and globalised business models; "fickle foreigners and fragile supply chains".⁹⁸

Even seen through this prism, though, the UK's particular journey over immigration – including its vote to leave the EU – still arguably differentiates it. In terms of immigration policy, the EU referendum campaign's focus on sovereignty, encapsulated in the 'take back control' slogan, has had influence far beyond just those people who were animated by it to vote for Brexit. It arguably underpins the ongoing meltdown in the national psyche caused by the Channel crossings, but also the tougher policy proposals now being aired across all aspects of the immigration system.

The UK's approach to immigration can still be regarded as determinedly different to that elsewhere in Europe. Not without its own tensions over aspects of immigration, neighbouring Ireland has nevertheless responded to its own immigration surge by expanding, not reducing, the list of occupations eligible for employment permits.⁹⁹ Even in European countries governed by the political right, notwithstanding restrictionist rhetoric, employment of non-EU workers is expanding. In Viktor Orban's Hungary, numbers of non-EU migrant workers have nearly doubled in the last five years. In Italy, Giorgia Meloni has set a target of issuing 165,000 low-skilled visas in 2026, up from 30,000 five years ago.¹⁰⁰

In Germany, for all the tough rhetoric over asylum, even the hard right Alternative für Deutschland seem relatively relaxed about EU freedom of movement, and with easing some of the entry rules for non-EU workers. Indeed, with Germany as the comparative frame, one can argue that the current centre-left government in the UK is starting from a more restrictive position, and then proceeding with a more restrictive mindset, than German politicians regarded as far to the political right.¹⁰¹

Notwithstanding the tough action taken by the current US government over the past year to seek to demonstrate its control over those without permission to be in the US, polling suggests that, in comparison with the US public, the British public "take a tougher line on how the government should deal with immigrants living in the country without permission".¹⁰²

The current UK government's immigration White Paper used the phrase 'take back control' in one specific context; that of the government's ongoing efforts to clarify the application of the ECHR "to make it clear that Parliament needs to be able to control our country's borders and take back control over who comes to, and stays in the UK".¹⁰³ While some other European countries have indicated their desire to also discuss reform of the ECHR, in going further the UK's particular approach seems to owe much to the Brexit mindset. Not only in its articulation of sovereignty using Brexit-like rhetoric, but also the depth of analysis in support of arguments that make the case that reform is not enough, and that the UK should leave the ECHR.¹⁰⁴ It can be argued that philosophically Brexit has paved the way for UK politicians to more openly, and confidently, question the UK's relationship with the ECHR, and to countenance withdrawal as the ultimate answer.

The controversy over Labour's 2015 'Controls on immigration' mug now seems prelapsarian.

97 Peter William Walsh and Mihnea Cuiabus, 'People crossing the English Channel in small boats' (The Migration Observatory, 16 June 2025).

98 *The Economist*, 'The shortage economy' (n 64).

99 Irene Mosca, 'Beyond the Global Irish: what are the migration challenges facing Ireland?' (Economics Observatory, 27 October 2025).

100 *The Economist*, 'How to make immigration palatable in a populist age' (22 October 2025).

101 Jonathan Thomas, 'A tale of two five-point plans: Germany's anti-immigration path is not quite what it seems' (Social Market Foundation, 3 March 2025).

102 Alex Scholes et al, 'UK and US attitudes: Two sides of the same coin?' (National Centre for Social Research, November 2025).

103 HM Government, 'Restoring Control over the Immigration System' (n 84).

104 The Rt Hon The Lord Lilley, 'Britain and the ECHR: Past myths, present problems and future options' (9 July 2025, Centre for Policy Studies). Lord Wolfson, 'The Wolfson Report: Advice to the leader of the Conservative Party re ECHR' (2025).

Indeed, 'Take Back Control' could now be considered to have evolved from the slogan of Brexit into the slogan of the UK's everlasting quest for immigration control, sufficiently malleable and aspirational to simultaneously explain away disappointment – if the promised outcomes have not been achieved that is because we have not yet fully taken back control – while also providing the necessary hope – that, once we do, all will be good.

The concern weaponised in the final month of the EU referendum campaign – in the shape of the phantom of Turkey's joining the EU causing a further influx to the UK – was around a perceived dual threat to which lack of control gives rise; to both national security and to public services.¹⁰⁵ And regarding the latter, costs more broadly were an important element of the Leave campaign's messaging. The famous claim on the side of the Leave campaign bus: 'We send the EU £350 million a week, let's fund our NHS instead' – was about *what* we should be spending our money on, and *whom* we should be prioritising looking after.

In these increasingly cash-strapped times this question looms even larger. And public concerns that scarce resources spent on 'others' are not then available to be spent on 'ourselves' are increasingly being weaponised in support of significant changes being proposed to immigration and asylum policy.

Why are we spending money on housing asylum seekers, rather than spending it on housing ourselves? Why must asylum seekers be housed when local people are allowed to be homeless? Why are we granting people who need temporary safety, access to our welfare state and public services forever? These are key questions at the heart of the government's recently announced reforms to the UK asylum system.¹⁰⁶

Ironically, the concern that 'others' are getting unduly favourable treatment, which the British public are paying for, may have been exacerbated by Brexit. The EU Settlement Scheme allowed lower-skilled EU migrants to come to stay in the UK and access public services and the welfare state in perpetuity. On top of which the post-Brexit immigration system's initially liberal requirements allowed low-skilled migrants subsequently arriving an accessible route to settlement in the UK.

Today, migrant access to the welfare state and public funds are a key part of the debate around ILR – when, and in what circumstances, it should be granted, and what claim on public funds ILR status should give rise to. Various estimated numbers are being asserted. In June 2025, the Department for Work and Pensions reported that 213,000 migrants with ILR status were claiming Universal Credit.¹⁰⁷ Under the existing 5-year qualifying period, the Home Office estimate "that between 1.3 million and 2.2 million people will settle in the UK between 2026 and 2030". Under the current rules these people will secure access to lifetime support and entitlements from the British state. The concern is that their skill/pay characteristics – as in the YE June 2024 over half of all skilled worker main applicant visas were issued for roles below RQF6 – may mean that over a lifetime they will require more in support than they contribute.¹⁰⁸

Under the latest government proposals, advanced English language skills are to reduce the qualifying period for ILR. Ever-increasing English language requirements, across a range of different immigration routes into the UK, is another feature of the current shift in UK immigration policy which may be viewed as having its roots in concerns that led to Brexit. Under EU freedom of movement EU workers coming to the UK did not have to meet any English language requirements at all. And, in some sectors of the economy, it was not uncommon for employers to deploy Eastern European workers in 'language shifts' – teams of workers all speaking the same foreign language. This practice may have boosted business productivity, but it did not help acceptance or integration of the arrivals, and was not popular with the British public.¹⁰⁹

Indeed, perhaps the greatest impact of all that one can map from Brexit to today is the increasing taking back of control *from employers*. In the context of Brexit one thinks of the UK taking back control *from* the EU, but this also affected the balance of power *within* the UK. Brexit was the launchpad for the government to start taking back key elements of control from employers.

From the perspective of the Migration Advisory Committee, "in making recommendations about migration policy, the objective is to maximise the total welfare of the resident population ... We consider that ... a thriving economy is important for the consequences it has for peoples' lives rather than being an end in itself".¹¹⁰ Or, as a former Chair of the MAC put it: "Employers are likely to present their case as being in the national interest but, first and foremost, what they are asking for is generally in their interest. In many situations what is 'best for business' is 'best for Britain', but not always."¹¹¹

Under EU freedom of movement, employers did not need to worry too much about not always being on the same page as the MAC, given their access to a huge pool of EU workers without any extra costs, restrictions or requirements. Brexit allowed the rules of the game, and the balance of power, to be changed. But, initially at least, key relatively liberal elements of the post-Brexit immigration system meant that employers in some sectors were not immediately as adversely impacted as they might have been, some even benefiting from the greater ability to hire non-EU workers.

105 *The Guardian*, 'Vote Leave embroiled in race row over Turkey security threat claims' (n 21).

106 HM Government, 'Restoring Order and Control: A statement on the government's asylum and returns policy' (n 93).

107 HM Government, 'Universal Credit statistics, 29 April 2013 – 12 June 2025' (15 July 2025).

108 HM Government, 'A Fairer Pathway to Settlement' (n 88).

109 'National Conversation on Immigration: Final Report' (n 30).

110 Migration Advisory Committee, 'EEA-workers in the UK labour market: Interim Update' (n 39).

111 Alan Manning, 'UK labour shortages and immigration: looking at the evidence' (LSE, 10 September 2021).

Nevertheless, the wind was changing direction. Here was a government formed by the traditionally most pro-business party whose guiding mantra for the post-Brexit immigration system was greater restrictions on untrammelled access to cheap overseas labour.¹¹² A position very much echoed by the Labour Opposition, even as, in its bid for power, it sought to woo the business lobby.¹¹³ An *Economist* column in September 2021 was particularly telling. It highlighted the work of Cedarwood Trust, a North-East community organisation helping local socially disadvantaged youth into work:

“For years Cedarwood has been swimming against the economic tide because employers preferred young Eastern Europeans. But after Brexit, foreign workers have become less readily available and local employers are suddenly keener on making the discouraged workless employable.”¹¹⁴

That a publication so aligned with the ethos of the global business world would express such sentiments is startling. Back in the 2000s, the idea of ‘British jobs for British workers’ was considered highly controversial – the then Conservative leader condemning the phrase as inappropriate and incendiary. Today the opposite. Prioritising the British worker, in some form, has now become a key tenet amongst mainstream politicians. The government’s White Paper highlighted the desire to ensure “that action on skills, employer strategies and increasing UK workforce participation are the first response to labour market shortages rather than employers turning to immigration to fill gaps”¹¹⁵. Reform UK has gone as far to say that, were it in power, it would be a government of ‘national preference’.¹¹⁶

The UK’s post-Brexit immigration system for work is not truly a points-based system, but one ‘controlled’ by employers in the sense that, to come to the UK, overseas workers must have a UK employer sponsor. But this is a very different, and much more circumscribed form, of control than employers enjoyed pre-Brexit. They must pay significant fees and charges for the privilege of hiring overseas workers. In the past two years, under successive governments, the screws on business have now really been tightened: increasing restrictions on the job roles such workers can fill, the skills they must have, the minimum salary they must be paid, the right to work checks that must be carried out on them, and whether they can bring their families with them. The minimum salary general threshold now stands at over £40,000, a level which only four years ago – when the threshold stood at only £25,600 – less than 5% of both then Conservative and Labour MPs said they supported.¹¹⁷

Some of these developments are connected to the political leanings of the current government, not least in terms of a greater focus on worker protection and on a more state planned industrial strategy – including which sectors should be prioritised – supported by sector workforce plans and skills policy designed so the UK can maximise its own resources and be less dependent on immigration. But the idea that immigration be explicitly linked to skills policy, and that employers should have obligations and be held to account in this regard is now also a key theme in Conservative party thinking and in Reform UK proposals. After all, it was the Conservative government that in 2017 implemented the Immigration Skills Charge paid by employers hiring from overseas, the proceeds of which were in theory intended to fund domestic skills training.¹¹⁸

While these policies remain still to be fully developed, this is where Brexit, and the move away from EU freedom of movement, has led. If pre-Brexit it was about what the immigration system could do for the UK employer, now it is about what the UK employer can do for the immigration system.

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112 Boris Johnson, Keynote Speech at Conservative Party Conference 2021 (6 October 2021).

113 Keir Starmer, Speech to the Confederation of British Industry (22 November 2022).

114 The *Economist*, ‘North of the Tyne is mine’ (9 September 2021).

115 HM Government, ‘Restoring Control over the Immigration System’ (n 85).

116 Danny Kruger MP, Speech (28 October 2025).

117 Alan Wager and Paula Surridge, ‘What do MPs think? Expectations, issues and identities’ (UK in a Changing Europe, 2 December 2021).

118 Jonathan Thomas, ‘From backwater to battleground: The political importance of joined-up immigration and skills policy in the UK’ (Social Market Foundation, 25 November 2024).

The final word

The UK's huge pendulum swing on immigration policy – in which Brexit played its part – has now delivered us politically to a mirror image of the liberal immigration era of the 2000s. Back then, mainstream politicians of varied stripes broadly aligned behind, and competed to present, a relatively open approach to immigration. Now, the alignment is behind a relatively restrictionist approach to immigration. In both cases political competition has supported a move towards the extremes.

Today, a feature of this political competition has been that those with more extreme positions have both driven this development, but in turn also been driven by it. The increasingly tough immigration policy proposals of the Labour government in 2025 have seen the Conservatives respond by continuing to denigrate their own immigration record in power, and advocating even tougher positions than Labour, with Reform UK responding by becoming tougher still. Indefinite Leave to Remain is a prime example; if the mainstream position becomes extending the qualifying period for ILR, and restricting the entitlements ILR provides, the most extreme position is then incentivised to propose abolishing ILR status entirely.

These developments are not without countervailing forces though. Just as in the 2000s, when the openness of the politics of immigration significantly overshot where the public was on the issue, the same is almost certainly the case again now, but on the other side of the ledger. Indeed, evidence suggests that public attitudes towards immigration – as opposed to the public's level of concern over it – tend to be relatively stable.¹¹⁹

Where next? As the net migration number is now falling considerably, and it is hard to think of many more restrictive immigration policy proposals that could be floated, an obvious conclusion would be that we must now be nearing the restrictionist extreme of the pendulum's immigration policy arc. We might. But in the last few years there has been such a dramatic change in how immigration is thought, and talked, about in the UK's corridors of political power. And there are now so many and so much invested in the political battles around immigration that notwithstanding how far the pendulum has now travelled since Brexit, its momentum may mean it has further yet to travel before moving back the other way.

One thing that does seem certain though is that the pendulum will keep swinging back and forth. In terms of demand, the need for migrant workers in certain sectors in the UK is likely to persist, even grow. And, in terms of supply, the UK has deep, longstanding connections with India, Nigeria and Pakistan, the three countries with the largest number of under-18 year olds on the planet, and continuing large income differentials to the UK. With the gains achievable from gaining access to the UK likely to remain so large, for so many, for the foreseeable future, the UK will surely continue to experience the full force of the tides of international migration, and the ebb and flow of immigration numbers and policies.

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119 Alexander Kustov, Dillon Laaker and Cassidy Beller, 'The Stability of Immigration Attitudes: Evidence and Implications' *Journal of Politics* (2020).

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