Social Market Foundation: Immigration briefing

by James Kirkup, SMF Director

Immigration and honesty: politicians think they know what voters want. They're wrong.

For many politicians, the British electorate's hostility to immigration at its current level and in its current form is taken as a given, a simple unchangeable fact. The assumption that voters will always favour the policies and rhetoric of lower migration informs much of our political debate.

The implications of this assumption are profound. If the Conservatives win the general election and fulfil their manifesto commitment of a Brexit that puts Britain outside the EU Single Market, that will be the consequence of their estimation of public opinion on immigration. Because, it is thought, voters are heavily opposed to current levels of migration, no Brexit deal that might allow continued large-scale movement of people from the EU could ever be acceptable. Perhaps the most fundamental change in Britain's economic settlement for a generation will come about because politicians believe that voters demand big cuts in net migration above all else.

The Social Market Foundation exists to make markets work better and more fairly, because markets are the best way to create and spread wealth. That includes the labour market. We also work to make political debate about facts and evidence, not conjecture and assumption.

Applying those principles to the immigration debate, we note the overwhelming weight of evidence, amassed by think-tanks, academics, businesses and governments, suggests that making a country's labour market open to people from other countries brings benefits to the economy. Inversely, closing that market to those people will reduce or even reverse those economic benefits.

We also believe that this evidence should be put more prominently before the British electorate, so they can reach the best-informed decision on an issue that, as noted above, has enormous implications for their country.

Yet few politicians are willing to put that evidence before the electorate, perhaps because of their belief that the voters' opposition to immigration is so great and so solid that doing so can only lead to electoral punishment. Some politicians actively seek to satisfy what they believe is a large and unquenchable public thirst for anti-immigration messages. The current election campaign has seen Theresa May re-state the Conservative promise to cut net migration to less than 100,000.

She has also repeated claims that immigration causes unemployment among the UK resident population. Jeremy Corbyn, meanwhile, has claimed that the same immigration cuts wages for the UK resident population. Neither of these claims is supported by the economic evidence.

Other politicians avoid making such claims, since they recognise the evidence about the economic merits of a sensible, open policy on immigration. But many of them simply stay quiet on the subject, declining to share with the voters their true views on this most fundamental issue, because they fear the public response that would follow. Privately, some senior members of all the main parties will admit that they dare not speak out in favour of an open immigration policy and its merits, or explain the risks of an unduly restrictive approach.

In short, the assumption that British opposition to immigration is large and unchangeable affects important public policy decisions, inspires some politicians to bend the truth and cows others into silence. This is not satisfactory.

In this context, the SMF and our partners at Opinium decided to explore public opinion on immigration. Our findings confirm part of that political story: a significant number of voters do indeed have concerns about immigration, and want things to change.

But looking beneath the surface of those concerns, we found reasons to think that public sentiment on immigration is more complex – and, most importantly, more changeable – than much current political debate implies.

The significance of these conclusions could be considerable. If even voters who say they are strongly committed to reducing immigration can change that view after thinking about the possible economic consequences of a restrictive immigration policy, politicians who currently run scared from what they imagine to be public opinion on this topic in fact have much greater scope for sensible policy-making. Of course, that happy outcome depends on politicians (among others) doing more to put those economic consequences before the public with more force and courage.

We hope that this research will help to demonstrate to politicians of all parties that a different, better approach to immigration is possible - if they are prepared to show more courage and candour when talking about the issue.

Key findings:

Some voters' unhappiness about immigration appears strong even in the face of economic risks.

Research shows that immigrants are net contributors to the British state, paying more in taxes than they use in services while their earning and spending also boosts the economy generally. With this in mind, which of the following best describes your view:

It is more important to reduce immigration significantly even if that means the economy slows and the deficit gets bigger	794 **40%**
Slowing the economy and growing the deficit is not a price worth paying just to reduce immigration	733 **37%**
Don't know	478 **24%**

Source: Opinium/SMF

However, broad macroeconomic concepts like growth and the deficit are not how most people experience the economy. So, isolating those voters who said lower immigration was more important than growth or fiscal balance, we tested their commitment to reducing immigration further with more tangible economic consequences: higher taxes, bigger cuts in public spending or a higher state pension age.

Imagine that net immigration could be reduced to 100,000 a year, but there would be some economic impact.

For each of the following, please tell us whether this economic impact would make reducing immigration still “worth it” or “nor worth it”

A)

Bigger cuts in public spending

Base: all respondents who said it is important to reduce immigration significantly	794 **100%**
Worth it	434 **55%**
Not worth it	257 **32%**
Don’t know	104 **13%**

B)

Higher taxes

Base: all respondents who said it is important to reduce immigration significantly	794 **100%**
Worth it	479 **60%**
Not worth it	232 **29%**
Don’t know	83 **10%**

C)

A higher state pension age

Base: all respondents who said it is important to reduce immigration significantly	794 **100%**
Worth it	417 **52%**
Not worth it	271 **34%**
Don’t know	107 **13%**

Source: Opinium/SMF

In each case, around one in three voters who initially said that a weaker economy was a price worth paying to cut net immigration significantly then change their mind when confronted with a more immediate illustration of that economic weakness.

The effect of those switches on the overall picture of public opinion is considerable, and significant.

Those voters who stick to their commitment to cut immigration even at the cost of higher taxes or lower spending or a later pension are very much a minority of the population as a whole. For each of those scenarios, the voters who remain committed to big immigration cuts are less than a quarter of the total.

Combined survey findings

With this in mind, which of the following best describes your view:

Base: all respondents	2005 **100%**
It is more important to reduce immigration significantly even if that means the economy slows and the deficit gets bigger	794 **40%**
Slowing the economy and growing the deficit is not a price worth paying just to reduce immigration	733 **37%**
Don't know	478 **24%**

Among those who think "it is more important to reduce immigration significantly even if that means the economy slows and the deficit gets bigger", number of respondents believing the following are a price worth paying (base for percentages is <u>all</u> survey respondents):

Bigger cuts in public spending	434 **22%**
Higher taxes	479 **24%**
A higher state pension age	417 **21%**

Source: Opinium/SMF

These findings strongly suggest that the demand for significantly lower immigration (for instance, in the "tens of thousands") is less solid and more fluid than is often assumed. A sensible, respectful debate with voters could well leave the balance of British opinion on immigration looking very different to the one that appears to inform many political calculations.

Control versus numbers

The research also sheds new light on one of the questions that was raised

We find voters are evenly split: as many are happy to keep net migration at its current levels, as long as it is administered by a system in UK control as want to cut the level.

To what extent do you agree with the following statement: "the current level of immigration is fine as long as we can control who comes here and who doesn't?"

Base: all respondents	2005 100%
Strongly agree	277 14%
Somewhat agree	517 26%
Neither agree nor disagree	424 21%
Somewhat disagree	409 20%
Strongly disagree	378 19%
Net: Agree	40%
Net: Disagree	39%

Source: Opinium/SMF

Public services provision

The survey findings also reveal that a majority of respondents believe that the UK should be welcoming about individuals moving here to work in public services such as healthcare and education.

Thinking about people moving to the UK to work in each of the following sectors, to what extent do you think the UK should be welcoming or restrictive about letting them move here?

Net % of all survey respondents believing individuals should be welcome:

Healthcare / NHS (e.g. doctors, nurses)	71%
Education (e.g. university academics, teachers)	55%
Agriculture and farming	37%
Banking and financial services	36%
Construction (e.g. builders, tradesmen)	34%
Hospitality (e.g. cafes, hotels, restaurants)	29%
Transportation (e.g. bus drivers)	27%
Retail (shop workers)	23%