

Immigration: an opportunity to lead

The real disconnect on immigration between British politicians and the public and where that might lead

Jonathan Thomas

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This paper was supported by Unbound Philanthropy, a private grant-making foundation that aims to improve the quality of political debate and policy around immigration in Britain and the US. The Social Market Foundation retains full editorial independence with respect to its research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jonathan Thomas

Jonathan Thomas is the Migration Researcher at the SMF.

Before joining the SMF in 2018, Jonathan had a career as a practising lawyer. He holds a BA in Modern History from Oxford University and an Immigration Law LLM from Queen Mary, University of London.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	2
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	2
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	4
BRITAIN, THE DEVIANT CASE	5
FIFTY SHADES OF GREY: UK PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION	7
THERE'S A KIND OF HUSH	12
THE STRANGE HALF-LIFE OF THE NET MIGRATION TARGET	14
FROM EMIGRANT TO IMMIGRANT NATION	20
A TALE OF TWO MAGIC IMMIGRATION TRICKS	25

Some British politicians are in danger of misjudging public opinion on immigration. Not only the UK's immigration policy, but also its wider political future, could be at stake.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UK public attitudes towards immigration have long been regarded as restrictionist. Indeed, a perceived public demand to better control immigration has been a central premise of political debate about migration (and the European Union) for some time. Yet even before the recent Windrush episode, there was significant evidence to suggest that UK public attitudes towards immigration are much more nuanced than is commonly appreciated.

That is not to minimise the concern and confusion that immigration causes in the mind of the UK public, and the impact that undoubtedly had on the outcome of the EU referendum vote. But to say that the data points to some fluidity of opinion, to opportunities for politicians to listen, to engage, but also to inform and to lead. And while one should be wary of overstating this, the events of the past few months have arguably born out the fact that sentiment on immigration can shift, and be shifted.

For those politicians who take an open approach to ideas, markets and migration (they can be found in all the main UK political parties) there is both an opportunity and a threat. The reduction in the perception of the relative salience of the immigration issue for now may have created a window of opportunity to be more open about the role that markets play in immigration and vice versa, that immigration is a key feature of an open market economy; the UK's experience over the last forty years is testament to that. This is an opportunity for a more open dialogue and more constructive political interaction with the public on the key questions around immigration. To genuinely engage with their concerns and experiences, but in a way that can catalyse different thinking and approaches, from both politicians and public alike, and help to lead a real shift in sentiment.

This will require addressing the public's concerns over control of immigration, better articulating, quantifying and demonstrating the benefits immigration can bring, and acknowledging and addressing the complexities, the problems, and tensions that immigration can create, including its differential impact across different regions and communities.

Beyond this window of opportunity lies a threat, embedded in the very immigration policies that open market politicians have acquiesced in. Nothing better encapsulates the failure of imagination of the current crop of open market politicians to address the opportunities and challenges of immigration than the net migration target, and all the consequences that flow from that. Those consequences include the inclusion of students in the target, the self-harming exclusion of skilled professionals under the Tier 2 cap, and the hostile environment designed to encourage migrant departures.

At last, from the new Home Secretary at least, there are some signs of recognition that this may be a more dangerous failing than open market politicians have realised¹. But even after the welcome decision to remove doctors and nurses from the Tier 2 cap, the overall ‘tens of thousands’ net migration target very much remains in place. By failing to take bolder action, ministers are opening up a space for Jeremy’s Corbyn Labour to position itself to take full advantage of the public’s divided feelings on immigration, and to steer Britain towards an immigration stance that would not maximise the benefits that can come from a more open approach.

Indeed it seems to continue to be assumed that immigration policy is the Achilles heel of the Labour Party, still held accountable as it is for the immigration explosion of the noughties, and its electoral chances undermined by its difficulty in appealing to both sides across the immigration debate divide. But this may be missing the wood for the trees. For the political ideology of Corbyn Labour in fact has the potential to reverse the polarity of the destructive UK immigration debate, with potentially seismic political consequences. So open market politicians absolutely need to take a ‘fresh look’. And they urgently need to ask themselves are they really willing to take such a huge risk by continuing to sit on their hands, rather than seizing back the initiative and properly engaging on this issue now?

BRITAIN, THE DEVIANT CASE

A strand of academic analysis of immigration has focused on the gap in liberal democracies between public attitudes and policy outcomes. In 1995, Gary Freeman posited that such states deliberately run “largely expansionist and inclusive” immigration policies in spite of the public’s desire to be much more restrictive, such states being captured by business and other pro-immigration interests². In recent years others have broadened out the analysis to highlight the different levels on which this policy gap can operate, and additional factors and constraints that may lead to a divergence in public attitudes and the political response, even when politicians do want to respond to the public mood.³ The idea that a political elite knowingly operates a more open immigration policy at odds with public opinion has obvious resonance in the recent political experiences of a number of developed economies.

Written around the same time, in *Britain, the Deviant Case*⁴ Freeman suggested that the UK was different though. That, in comparison with other countries, the UK’s restrictive immigration policy was actually much more aligned with its restrictive public opinion. Since then, different arguments have been suggested as to whether, and if so why, this

¹ ‘Sajid Javid pledges ‘fresh look’ at migration rules’ (BBC, 3 June 2018) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44346900>.

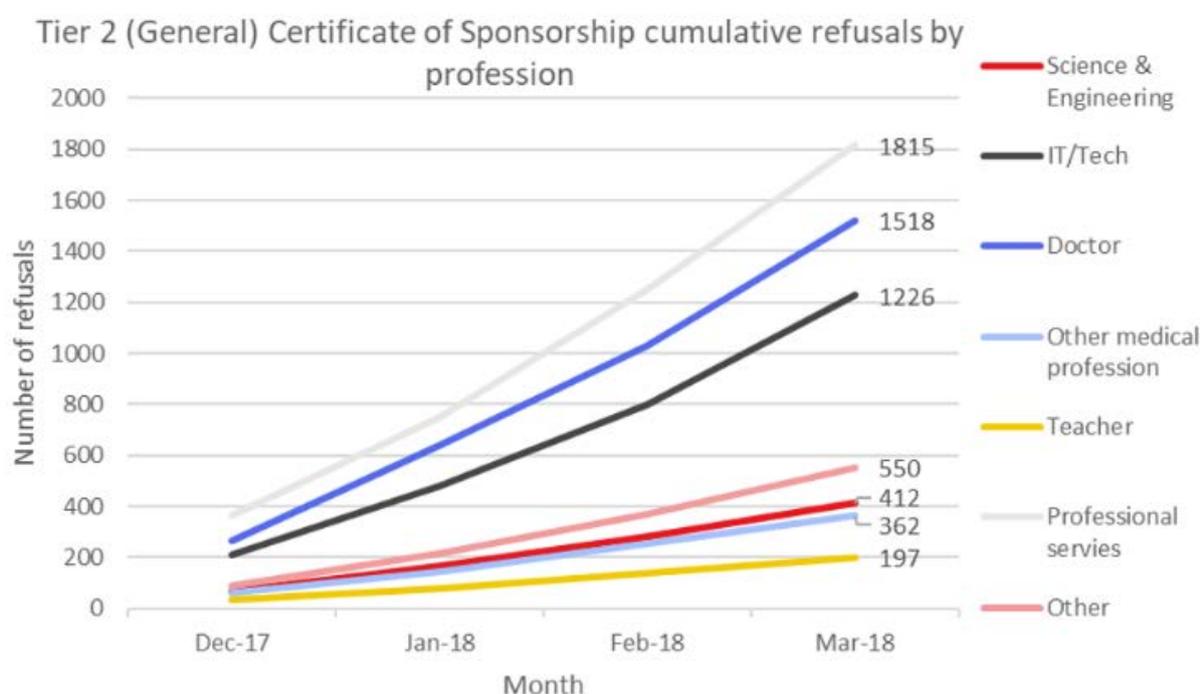
² Gary P. Freeman, ‘Modes of Immigration Politics in Liberal Democratic States’ (1995) 29(4) *The International Migration Review*, 881.

³ Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas, ‘The Effectiveness of Immigration Policies’ (2013) 39(3) *Population and Development Review*, 487.
Also Robert Ford, Will Jennings & Will Somerville, ‘Public Opinion, Responsiveness and Constraint: Britain’s Three Immigration Policy Regimes’ (2015) 41:9 *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 1391.

⁴ Gary P. Freeman, ‘Britain, the Deviant Case’ in Cornelius, Tsuda, Martin and Hollifield eds *Controlling immigration: a global perspective* (Stanford University Press 1994), 297.

might be? Does the UK exhibit stronger executive power? Do restrictionist forces in the media have greater influence in the UK than in other countries?⁵ Does the UK's parliamentary system make politicians more receptive to the preferences of ordinary voters? Does it provide fewer avenues for business interest group lobbying?⁶

On the face of it, it could be argued that the UK's current situation is consistent with Freeman's definition of deviance; indeed that, after the expansionist interlude of the New Labour years, the UK's deviance has returned with a vengeance. A perception of an unremittingly and monolithically negative public mood towards immigration, articulated by a populist campaign against EU membership, has driven political rhetoric and a policy response that now seems intent on restricting immigration at all costs. And not just at the lower end of the skills spectrum, but across a number of key professions where skills are very much in demand in the UK.



Source: Campaign for Science and Engineering <http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/news-media/case-comment/tier-2-refusals.html>

Yet the reaction to the Windrush generation revelations is perhaps evidence that the UK is now demonstrating a different kind of deviance, one that could have profound implications not just for the UK's immigration policy, but for its political future. Indeed it opens up the possibility that the UK's open market political forces could be electorally destroyed by a weapon of their own design.

⁵ Ford, Jennings & Somerville (n 3).

See also Liz Gerard, 'The Press and immigration: reporting the news or fanning the flames of hatred' (SubScribe, 3 September 2016) <http://www.sub-scribe.co.uk/2016/09/the-press-and-immigration-reporting.html>.

⁶ Erica Consterdine, *Labour's Immigration Policy: The Making of the Migration State* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

FIFTY SHADES OF GREY: UK PUBLIC ATTITUDES TO IMMIGRATION

Those who favour a more open approach to immigration should be wary of getting too carried away in the Windrush reaction. After all, it could be dismissed as largely irrelevant to divining the UK public's attitude to current and future immigration, concerned as it is with those whose immigrant status is now historic. However, closer inspection of other data suggests that the Windrush row may actually be rather telling. For it is an example of the fact that, when faced with definable groups, with individual stories, the UK public's attitude to immigration, often depicted as monochrome, in fact exhibits many shades of grey. Put simply, some British voters may express opposition to immigration in general terms, but have a different attitude when that position is applied to particular groups or individuals⁷.

The UK public does not view immigrants monolithically. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the evidence suggests that they respond more favourably to those they view as potential economic contributors, and less favourably to those they do not.⁸ But perceived social contribution is also important. The UK public are much more likely to welcome a migrant scientist, doctor, nurse or teacher than those in perceived lower skilled jobs. But even here there is significant flex in people's views. British Social Attitudes data shows that two thirds of people are happy to see no reduction in seasonal workers coming to the UK.⁹ And of course there is the further complexity that some of those labelled as lower skilled, such as care workers, are viewed as contributing some of the most socially important services as far as the recipients of those services are concerned.

Nor are the public themselves monolithic when it comes to their views on immigration. Indeed the BSA data suggests the polar opposite; that the UK public are the most divided of any European country in their views on immigration.¹⁰ Recent studies in the UK have all found a broadly even split between those against, and those open to, immigration. In between lies a large middle ground of the concerned and confused who are sceptical of immigration, and particularly the UK Government's response to it, but are not clearly in one camp or the other.

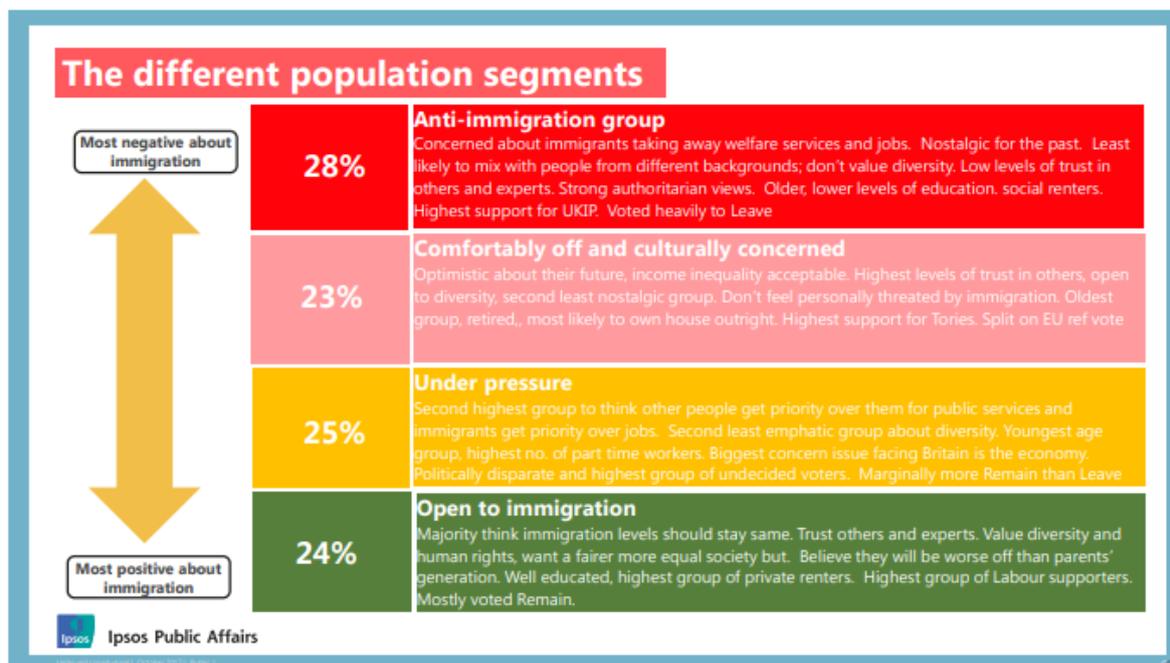
⁷ Sunder Katwala, Jill Rutter and Steve Ballinger, 'Time to get it right: Finding consensus on Britain's future immigration policy' (British Future, September 2017) <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Time-to-get-it-right-.pdf>: if you ask the question "for this group would you prefer the number of people coming to Britain to increase, decrease or remain about the same", and you refer to the group as 'other unskilled', then a majority want numbers reduced. But if you define the group as 'construction workers' or 'waiters' or 'fruit pickers' you get a majority against reducing their numbers.

⁸ *ibid.* And Ford, Jennings & Somerville (n 3).

⁹ *ibid* British Future 'Finding Consensus'.

And Social Market Foundation: 'Immigration Briefing' (5 June 2017).

¹⁰ British Social Attitudes Survey (34) 2017 <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-34/immigration.aspx>.



Source: Ipsos MORI: 'Shifting Ground: 8 key findings from a longitudinal study on attitudes towards immigration and Brexit'

But most importantly for the political agenda, just as views are not monolithic, nor are they fixed. People's views, both on different aspects of immigration, but also more fundamentally on the relative importance of immigration as an issue facing the country – its salience – do change. And as they do so, they both respond to, but also drive a response in, immigration policies¹¹. Longer term surveys have shown continued cultural concerns, but an increase in the number of those viewing immigration as positive for the British economy. Indeed in this respect, from the turn of the millennium the UK has exhibited the biggest positive change in attitudes of any country across Europe, albeit from a low base.¹²

	2002	2014	Change 2002- 2014
Is immigration good or bad for the British economy	%	%	%
Good	27	40	+14
Neither good nor bad	28	22	-6
Bad	43	36	-7
Net good - bad	-16	+4	+20

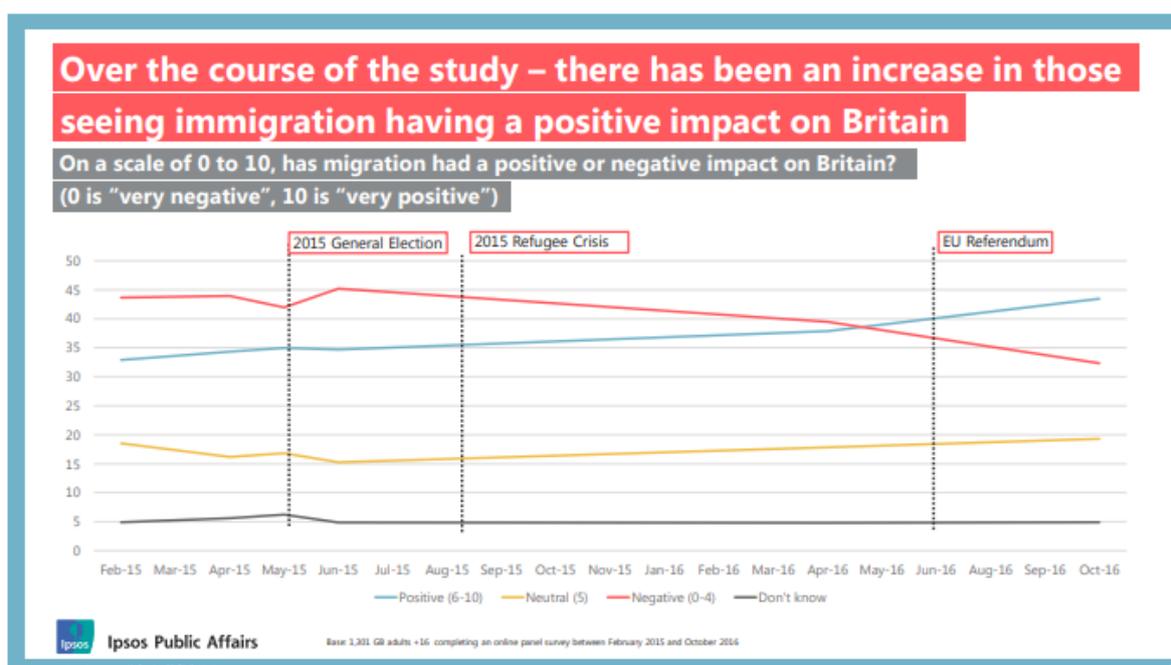
Source: UK respondents to the European Social Survey wave 1 (2002) and wave 7 (2014), British Social Attitudes Survey (34) 2017

In line with this, the deepening divide within the UK public over immigration policy “is not the result of mounting hostility in the sceptical group but instead because the social

¹¹ Ford, Jennings & Somerville (n 3).
¹² British Social Attitudes Survey (n 10).

groups with more positive views have become even more positive about immigration”. In turn the least divided EU country over immigration is Hungary, which has experienced the opposite effect; the “aggregate positivity of young graduates having disappeared”.¹³ From this perspective, the UK having the most divided society in Europe over immigration can in fact be viewed as containing a positive potential that is not present to the same extent in other, less divided, societies.

Perhaps surprisingly for those simply taking the public pulse by following the political rhetoric and the media coverage, even before the Windrush episode the evidence suggests that in the last few years the UK public have become more, not less, positive about immigration in the UK. Those in the “anti-immigration” group are over a third more likely to have changed their views than the ‘open to immigration’ group, with an acceleration of this shift following the EU referendum.¹⁴



Source: Ipsos MORI: ‘Shifting Ground: 8 key findings from a longitudinal study on attitudes towards immigration and Brexit’

Of course there are different explanations as to why this might be. A pro-immigration narrative might suggest that the aftermath of the EU referendum vote has brought a consideration of its consequences, and a growing realisation that immigration may be more beneficial, and certainly involve more complex trade-offs, than many politicians had the public believe at the time of the vote.

By contrast, an anti-immigration narrative might argue that in offering even the prospect of the Government having new scope and willingness to restrict immigration, even if no

¹³ British Social Attitudes Survey (n 10).

¹⁴ Ipsos MORI: ‘Shifting Ground: 8 key findings from a longitudinal study on attitudes towards immigration and Brexit’ (17 October 2017) https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/ct/news/documents/2017-10/Shifting%20Ground_Unbound.pdf.

new restrictions have yet been put in place, the Brexit vote has for now largely placated anti-immigrant sentiment.

And a “power of the media” narrative might say that as the media has turned its attention to the Brexit negotiations with the EU, where immigration has (perplexingly to some) yet to meaningfully feature, this has reduced the relative salience of immigration as an issue of public concern.

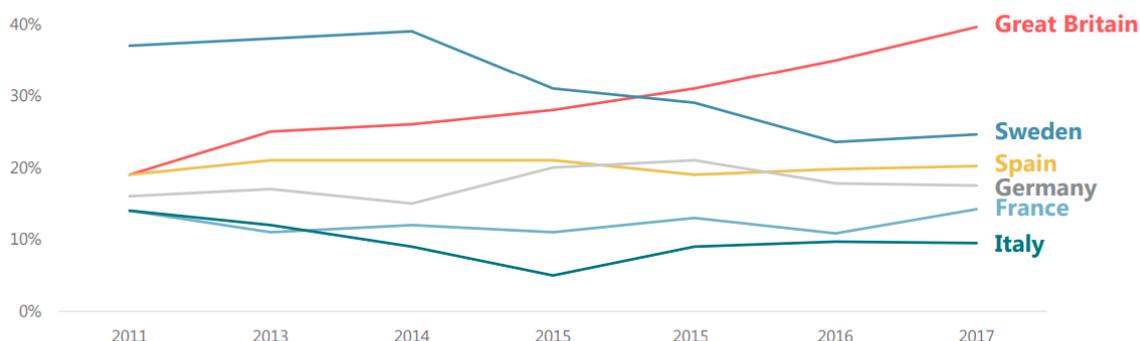
An important finding of the Ipsos MORI longitudinal study though has been that the positive shift in views of immigration has not been driven by only one or two segments of the population, and indeed has been relatively equally shared between Remain and Leave voters. Others have noted the same phenomenon.¹⁵

This positive shift is also in contrast to the UK’s near neighbours.

**Britain moves up, Sweden down,
rest negative but relatively stable...**

Ipsos Public Affairs

% saying immigration’s impact on their country has been *Very/Fairly positive*



GAME CHANGERS Ipsos

Source: Ipsos Public Affairs, ‘Attitudes to Immigration: National Issue or Global Challenge’

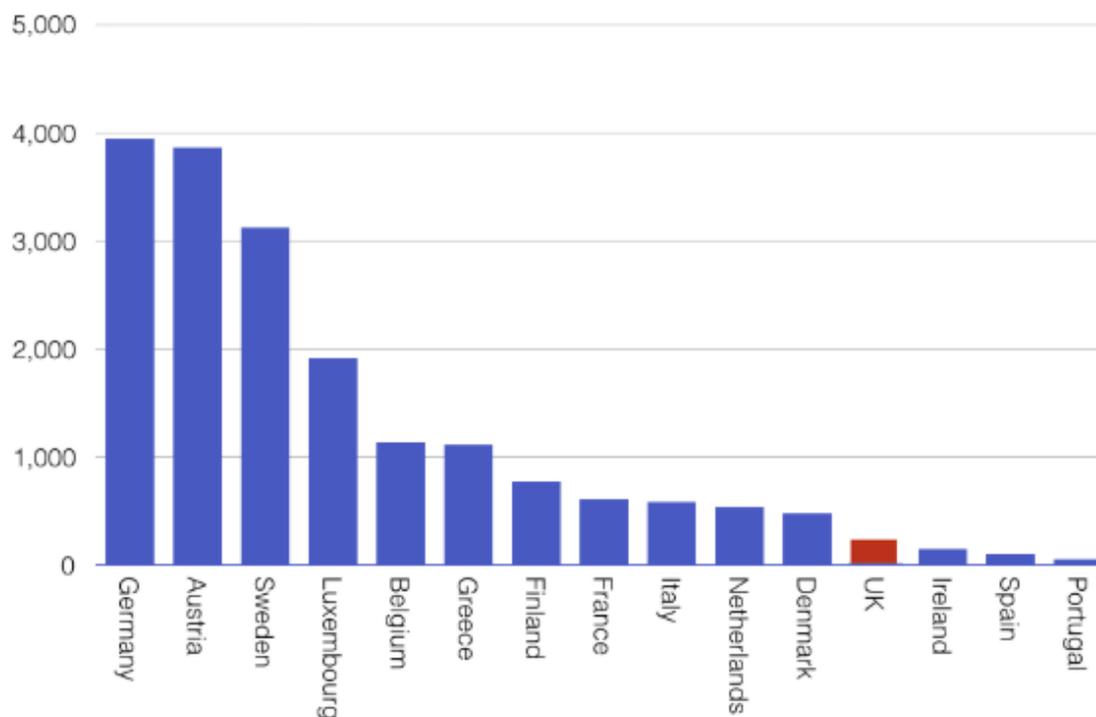
In fact the UK, 40% viewing immigration as having had a positive impact on their country stands alongside a country with Canada, a country with a more liberal reputation on immigration, where the figure is 38%¹⁶.

These outcomes may reflect the fact that public concern in those other countries has been largely focused on the influx of refugees, whereas in the UK the influx of EU economic migrants, coupled with the UK’s relatively miserly intake of refugees, has seen the focus more recently much more focused on economic migration.

¹⁵ Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, ‘Briefing: UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and level of Concern’ (The Migration Observatory, 7 June 2018) based on the British Election Study <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Briefing-UK-Public-Opinion-toward-Immigration.pdf>

¹⁶ Ipsos Public Affairs, ‘Attitudes to Immigration: National Issue or Global Challenge’ (16 March 2018) <https://www.slideshare.net/IpsosMORI/attitudes-to-immigration-national-issue-or-global-challenge>.

Asylum grants per million of population



Positive first instance and final decisions on asylum, 2017, EU-15 countries
Source: Eurostat news release 67/2018 (19 April 2018), page 3



Source: Free Movement, 'Five things you didn't know about refugees in the UK'¹⁷

In case this seems a rose-tinted view, none of this should diminish the fact though that the attitudes survey data also clearly demonstrates that concerns of certain sections of the UK public over immigration are very real, that a consistent majority of the public still want to see immigration reduced¹⁸, and that this had an impact on the outcome of the EU referendum vote.

What to conclude from all of this? One conclusion might be that simply doing more to publicise the outcomes of these attitudinal surveys may itself have the potential to materially change the angle of the immigration debate in the UK¹⁹. Not least because the evidence suggests that in general the public tend to believe that their fellow citizens' attitudes to immigrants are in fact hardening, not softening.²⁰ Such a perception can itself generate a "bandwagon effect" where people base their positions on what they believe are positions that are increasingly popular with others.²¹

¹⁷ Free Movement, 'Five things you didn't know about refugees in the UK'

<https://www.freemovement.org.uk/statistics-refugees-uk/>

¹⁸ Blinder and Richards (The Migration Observatory) (n 15).

¹⁹ See for instance the reporting of Michael Gove's statements highlighting some of the Ipsos MORI attitudinal data in 'Brexit's not made UK less welcoming to immigrants', *BBC* (19 April, 2018) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-43821484>.

²⁰ IPSOS Mori Global Trends survey 2017.

²¹ Ian McAllister and Donley T. Studlar, 'Bandwagon, Underdog, or Projection? Opinion Polls and Electoral Choice in Britain, 1979-1987' (1991) 53(3) *The Journal of Politics*, 720.

Another conclusion might be that a healthy dose of scepticism is required of all this data – questions worded differently, concepts not explained, (non)inclusion of a ‘neither’ or ‘don’t know’ option; all of these can turn minor differences into what can look like materially different survey results.²² Nevertheless, longitudinal surveys, while not without their own challenges, can help to show important ebbs and flows over time when based on more consistent questioning. Perhaps most significantly though, if people’s responses to important questions on immigration can change so materially depending on how the question is framed²³, this in itself is an important finding, suggesting that there is all to play for in engaging with the public on these topics.

THERE’S A KIND OF HUSH

Reframing questions, making statistics tangible, highlighting consequences and challenging perceptions, in a way that respects and resonates with people’s concerns and experiences but potentially encourages different approaches; these are some of the key tenets of the SMF’s approach on immigration policy. Surely they should also be important for British politicians?

Rather than worrying about the exact accuracy of the data, the most important conclusion must surely be that there is enough here for the UK’s political leadership to get their teeth into. Listening and discussing would be a start. The National Conversation on Immigration²⁴ is therefore a welcome development. But politicians need to lead as well, to help the public draw connections in a highly complex area where disconnections inevitably abound. This means informing, and explaining the complexities and (un)intended consequences of policy, but also challenging opinions and perceptions.

Yet the vast majority of British politicians have shied away from this approach, perhaps fearful that any challenge will be portrayed as elitist arrogance, as a refusal to accept the EU referendum vote, or to understand ‘the will of the people’. But there is a way to find common ground but also to engage and debate respectfully, while not belittling the views of those you are challenging. This is what an open and honest debate is. If at least in some polls a majority of the country believe that immigration has been a good thing for the country, but still want it reduced²⁵, it is for politicians to seek to engage with and to understand, but also to drill down into, and to probe, the concern that lies behind this.

If the direction of travel of the bandwagon is to be reversed, rather than just slowed, those politicians who seek a more open debate on immigration should start by talking about the growing body of evidence on shifting, and shiftable, public attitudes. A bandwagon effect in favour of a more open immigration policy may still seem a fanciful prospect. But one

²² Blinder and Richards (The Migration Observatory) (n 15).

Also Scott Blinder and William Allen: ‘UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern’ (The Migration Observatory, 28 November 2016) <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Briefing-Public-Opinion-Immigration-Attitudes-Concern.pdf>.

²³ See exactly this effect in the Opinium polling for the Social Market Foundation (n 9). Also British Future ‘Finding Consensus’ (n 7).

²⁴ <http://nationalconversation.uk/>.

²⁵ Populus polling in Global Future: ‘Open Owns the Future’ (28 February 2018), also citing Lord Ashcroft polling on June 2017 General Election day <http://ourglobalfuture.com/reports/open-owns-future/>.

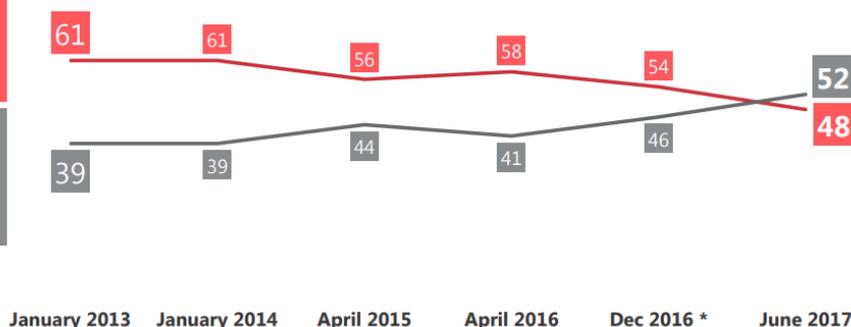
should not forget the positive influence that political leadership can have on public opinion:

Politics, and economics, can impact – more optimism in France...



Globalisation is a threat to France

Globalisation is an opportunity for France

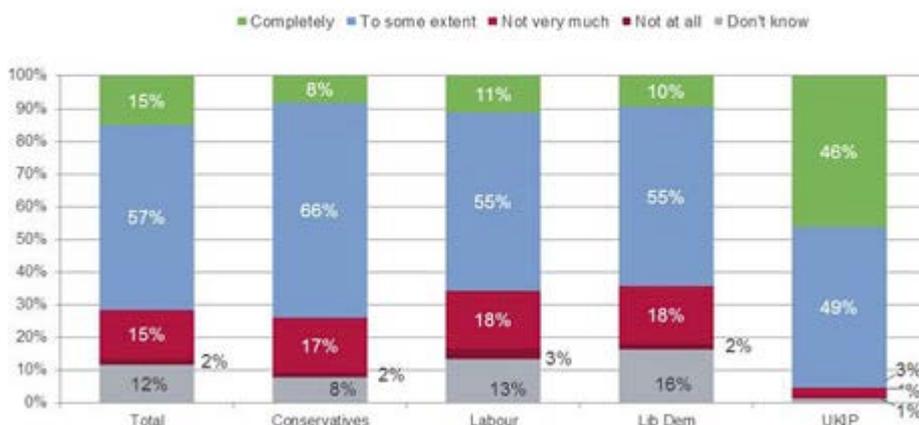


Source: Ipsos Public Affairs, 'Attitudes to Immigration: National Issue or Global Challenge'

Or that, on the issue of immigration, mere political followership is a losing game for all political parties; even for UKIP under half of their supporters at the 2015 election thought that the party completely reflected their views on immigration:

Only 15% say their party completely reflects their views on immigration – but this rises to 46% for UKIP

To what extent does [party's] position on immigration reflect your own views?



Source: Ipsos MORI, nationally representative sample of 4,574 British adults 16+ (Feb-March 2015)



Source: Ipsos MORI, 'Changing attitudes to immigration during the election campaign'²⁶

²⁶ <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/changing-attitudes-immigration-during-election-campaign>

To be fair to some British politicians though, even when they do try to engage with the immigration issue, they seem to be blocked off by the Government's straight-bat, reveal nothing, approach. Repeated parliamentary requests for answers on the impact of the Tier 2 visa cap being hit over recent months were met with nothing more than a repeated non-answer, in effect closing off the possibility of a properly informed political debate on a key cog of the UK's immigration machinery.²⁷ Whereas when the cap was last hit, that information was provided in response to the same parliamentary questions²⁸, this time it was withheld. That would be troubling at any time. But in the context of having an informed and open post-referendum debate on what immigration policy should look like going forwards, it seems unforgivable that Home Office accounts of the impacts of current UK immigration policy are becoming more, not less, opaque. Indeed it required a freedom of information request from the Campaign for Science and Engineering to prise out the information from the Home Office²⁹.

THE STRANGE HALF-LIFE OF THE NET MIGRATION TARGET

If anything has been monolithic, it has not been UK public opinion, but rather the Government response; a relentless mantra of restrictionist rhetoric to the backbeat of the net migration target. Counterintuitively, if one believes the evidence that immigration control matters more to the UK public than reducing numbers³⁰, the UK Government's focus on the net migration numbers serves merely to undermine the public's confidence in the Government's control of immigration. The quarterly net migration figures have become a media fixation.

²⁷ Michael O'Connor, 'No answers ...' (31 March 2018) <https://medium.com/@StrongerInNos/no-answers-f3a8dd489a36>.

See also Oral Evidence of Professor Alan Manning to Home Affairs Committee on Post-Brexit migration policy, HC 857 (18 April 2018) <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/postbrexit-migration-policy/oral/81813.pdf> which confirms that not even the Migration Advisory Committee had access to this data.

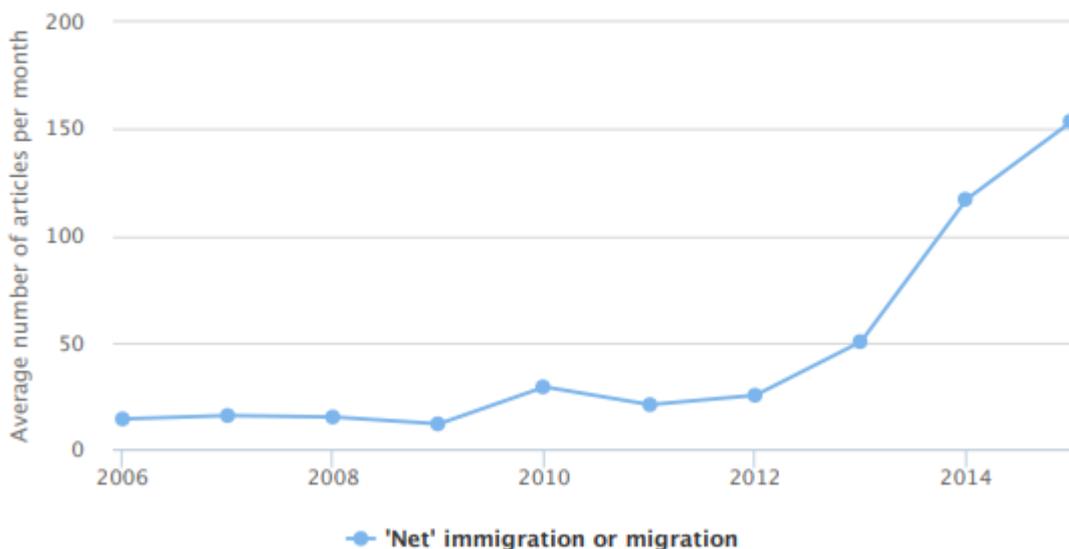
²⁸ *ibid* Manning to Home Affairs Committee.

²⁹ Campaign for Science and Engineering, 'Home Office FOI reveals scale of skilled worker refusals due to visa cap' (16 May 2018) <http://www.sciencecampaign.org.uk/news-media/press-releases/home-office-foi-reveals-scale-of-skilled-worker.html>.

³⁰ Oral Evidence of Mats Persson to Home Affairs Committee on Post-Brexit migration policy, HC 857 (27 February 2018) <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/postbrexit-migration-policy/oral/79263.pdf>.

Frequency of 'net immigration' or 'net migration', monthly averages, 2006–May 2015

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

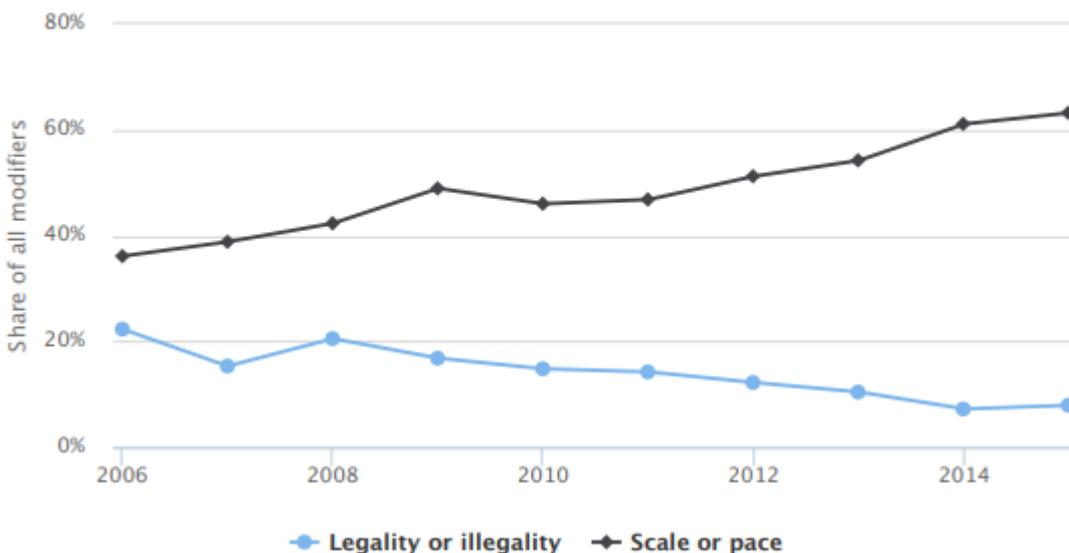


Source: William Allen: 'A Decade of Immigration in the British Press'

Alongside the political and media focus on the net migration number (and the missed target) has perhaps not surprisingly come a shift towards framing immigration overwhelmingly in terms of its scale and pace.³¹

Shares of modifiers relating to illegality or scale, all publications, 2006–May 2015

Chart provided by www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk



Source: William Allen: 'A Decade of Immigration in the British Press'

³¹ William Allen: 'A Decade of Immigration in the British Press' (The Migration Observatory, 7 November 2016) <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/reports/decade-immigration-british-press/>.

The framing of immigration into the UK as an aggregate problem which is out of control and needs to be reduced has proven an unhelpful pole around which to anchor any real immigration debate. It generates a great deal of heat, but not much light.

As if it were not sufficiently unpopular in itself, the obsession with the net migration target drives secondary effects which if anything have proven even more unpopular. One is the question of whether or not foreign students should be included in the target, which often seems to overshadow what is surely the more important debate of how should immigration policy towards foreign students best be designed. This is doubly baffling. The evidence suggests that not only are foreign students one of the most popular migrant segments with the UK public³², but also that, in paying higher fees, they generate significant revenue for the UK. To the extent that they are arguably cross subsidising education for a number of home students³³. But, as the foreign student lever may be the most effective for the Government to grab to bring about a swift reduction in the immigration numbers, there is a risk that policy towards foreign students may be hijacked by this desire to meet the appetite created by the headline target.³⁴

The adverse publicity experienced as a result of the Tier 2 cap being hit, and doctors being turned away,³⁵ springs from the very same poisoned well, since the level of the Tier 2 cap is set by the Migration Advisory Committee within the context of the overall net migration target.

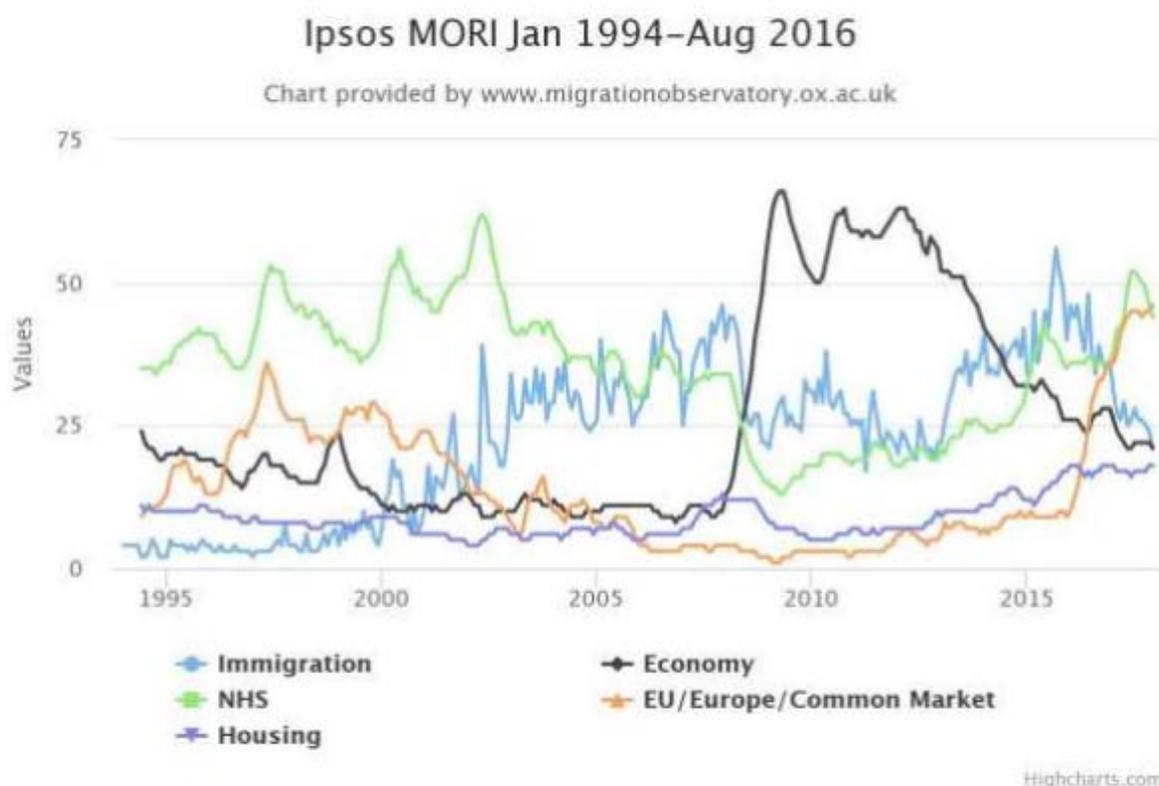
This development also demonstrates an interesting aspect of the interplay between the salience of different issues, which shows the degree to which the net migration target can give rise to unintended consequences which undermine not just the trust of the UK public in the Government's approach on immigration, but also faith in the Government's approach on other important issues. As the portion of the UK public naming immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country has fallen, so the number citing the NHS as one of the most important issues has risen. The Tier 2 cap being hit in effect amplified these developments. The fact that the Government until recently seemed intent on sacrificing optimum NHS staffing on the altar of strict immigration control made the plight of the NHS seem even more urgent (a better resourced health service might need fewer migrant workers) and the decision to prioritise strict immigration controls above all else seem increasingly counterintuitive.

³² British Future 'Finding Consensus' (n 7).

³³ For instance see: Ruchi Hajela and Madeleine Sumption, 'Non-EU Higher Education Students: Impact on the UK Economy' (The Migration Observatory, 2 October 2017). <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/non-eu-higher-education-students-impact-uk-economy/>.

³⁴ Anna Fazackerley, 'UK considers plans to nearly halve international student visas' *The Guardian* (12 December 2016) <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/dec/12/uk-halve-international-student-visa-tougher-rules>.

³⁵ Mary Bulman, 'Doctors told to leave UK after Home Office refuses to issue them visas' (The Independent, 5 June 2018) <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/nhs-doctors-visas-home-office-uk-leave-immigration-cap-a8383311.html>.



Source: Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, 'Briefing: UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and level of Concern'

From the latter days of the New Labour government, through the Coalition to the current Conservative government, an increasing fixation on the net migration number has been quietly accepted, even encouraged, by a number of open market politicians who did not believe it was necessarily sensible or helpful to do so. Today the same feeling persists. The fact that, when pressed, the last two home secretaries have refused to be drawn on the net migration target, and have chosen to deflect the question rather than express their public commitment to it, is telling.

As Freeman might be left scratching his chin at this particular form of deviance, it is worth pausing to fully appreciate the significance of this. Many of the politicians who backed the net migration target despite their private doubts would describe themselves as advocates of an open market approach to economics and politics, believing that it is generally better for private actors to allocate resources (including labour) than for the state to make such allocative decisions. Much of the political commitment to that approach can be traced to the rhetoric and (sometimes) the policies of the Thatcher governments, whose economic and labour market liberalisation in the UK (whatever their immigration policy) initiated the UK's demand for migrants and also contributed to the UK's attractiveness to them.

Yet politicians who say they admired and supported such liberalisation have aligned themselves with a restrictionist commitment that aims to reduce net immigration to tens of thousands per annum, a level last seen twenty years ago. And a target that aimed to rebuild trust that politicians could manage immigration in the public's best interests has instead seemed designed from its inception to do the very opposite.

In fact nothing seems to epitomise more the hollowness of political promises on immigration and has become such “a measurable instrument of policy failure”³⁶. The Commons Home Affairs Committee recently “heard [evidence] that the Government’s net migration target undermined public confidence³⁷ because it acted as a quarterly reminder that the Government was unable to control immigration in the way it had promised”. Or perhaps just unwilling. The same report pointed out that net immigration of non-EU migrants, which the Government could in theory exercise significant control over, itself consistently exceeded 100,000 on its own.³⁸

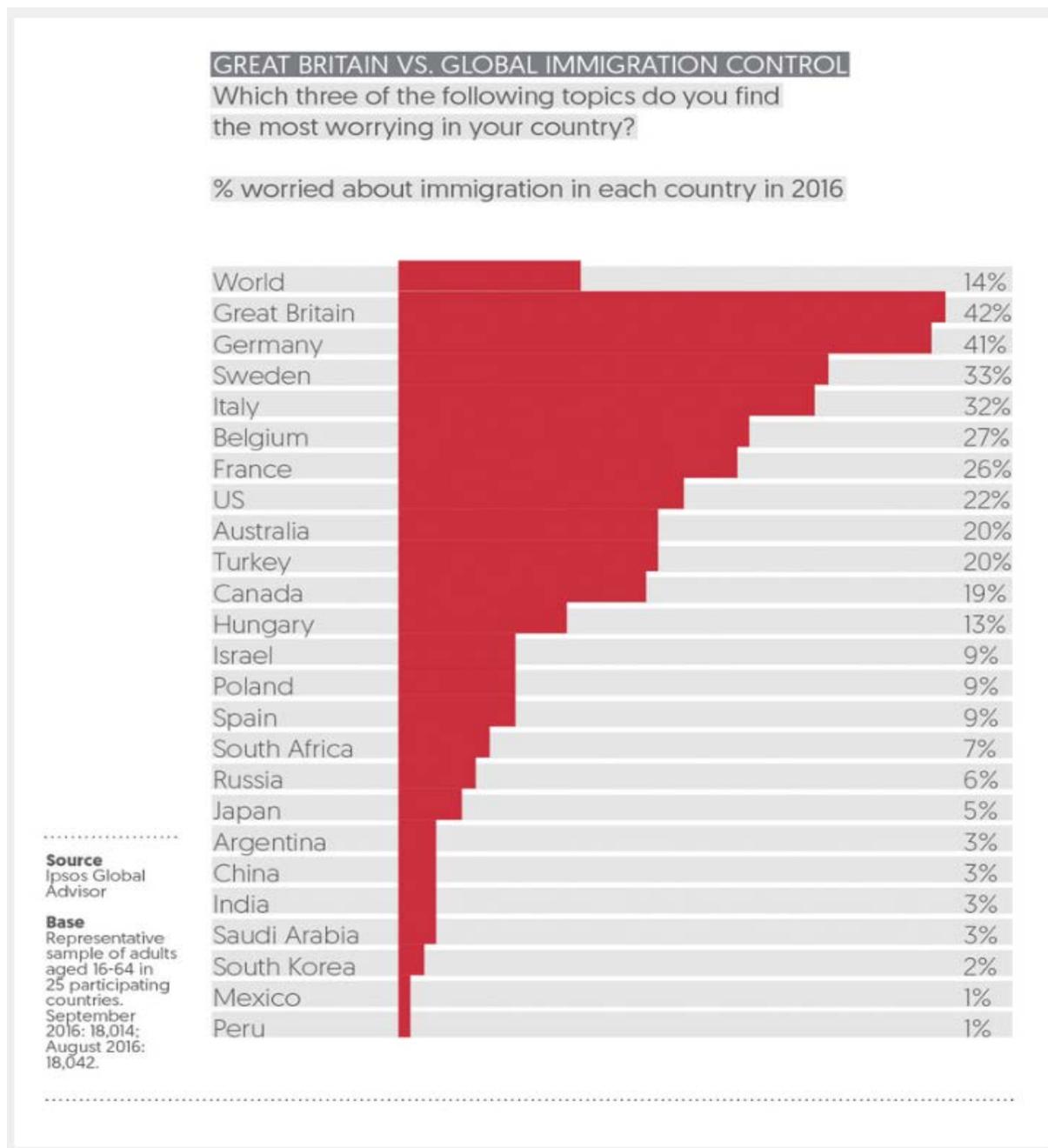
Given that its politicians are so inclined to argue that immigration is a problem, perhaps it is no coincidence that the UK constantly tops the charts of countries whose public is *worried* about immigration³⁹.

³⁶ British Future ‘Finding Consensus’ (n 7).

³⁷ In fact the SMF has previously suggested that the ‘target’ the UK Government should best measure its immigration policy against is a target measuring the public’s confidence in the immigration system; in Social Market Foundation: ‘Targeting Immigration: What does a good migration target look like?’ (26 February 2015).

³⁸ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, ‘Immigration policy: basis for building consensus’ (10 January 2018) <https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmhaff/500/500.pdf>.

³⁹ At the same time however, one should perhaps be wary of attributing too much of the public concern about immigration to the failure to meet the net migration target. Some of the discussions of the National Conversation have highlighted that the level of awareness of the target amongst a number of sections of the public is relatively low: Jill Rutter and Rosie Carter, ‘National Conversation on Immigration: An interim report to the Home Affairs Committee’ (British Future, January 2018) <http://nationalconversation.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/01/national-conversation-interim-report-2018-01-v4.pdf>.



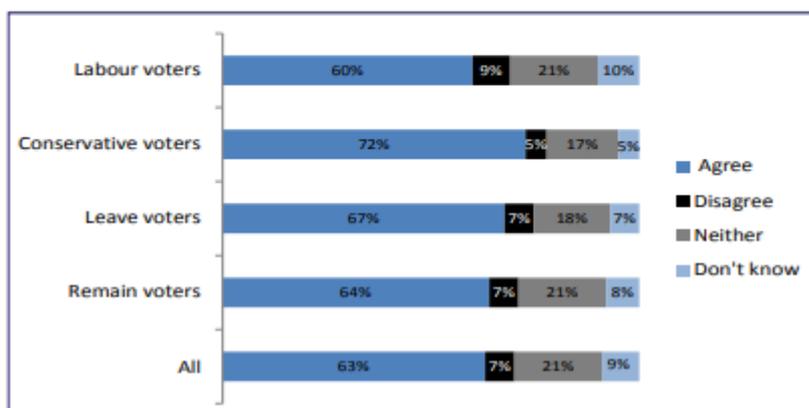
Source: Ipsos MORI, 'The Immigration Conundrum'⁴⁰

Yet even amid this worry, nearly two thirds of the UK public think that the Government should drop the net migration target – nominally proposed to address public worry about immigration – and replace it with separate targets for different types of immigration.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Ipsos MORI, 'The Immigration Conundrum' <https://almanac.ipsos-mori.com/838/>

⁴¹ British Future 'Finding Consensus' (n 7).

Figure 10. “The Government should replace the net migration target with separate targets for different types of immigration, like skilled workers and low-skilled workers.”



Source: British Future, September 2017

Further underlining the disconnections at work here, the strongest support for replacing the “one size fits all” net migration target appears to come from over-65, Conservative leave voters, the very people generally supposed to be most receptive to restrictionist promises.⁴²

FROM EMIGRANT TO IMMIGRANT NATION

It is easy now to forget that in 1960 the UK was, in absolute terms, one of the top ten net *emigration* countries globally.⁴³ Indeed, recognising the UK’s long tradition as a net emigrant country may help to frame the cultural concerns that many, particularly older, voters feel today with the degree and nature of net immigration which the UK has recently experienced. For them the UK has undergone nothing short of a culture shock.

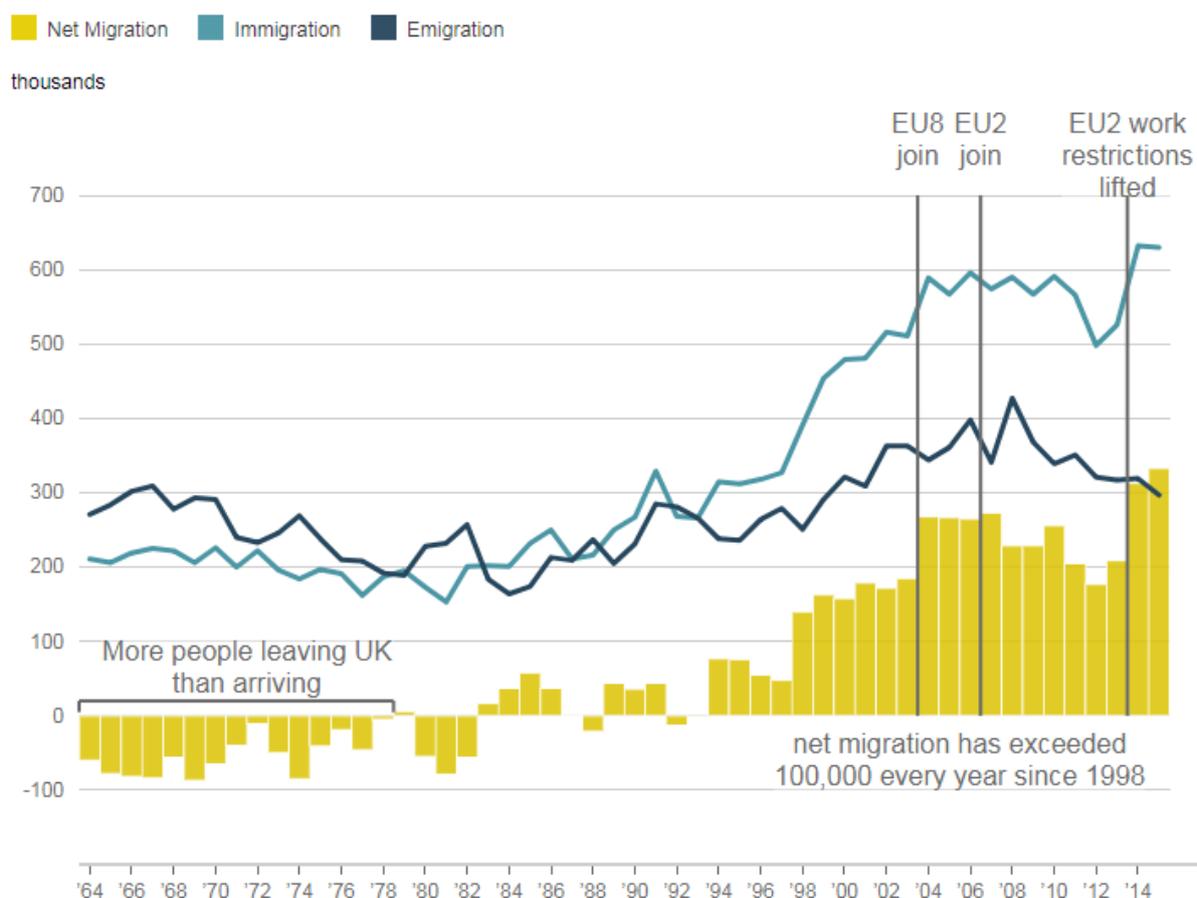
Indeed it was not until 1979 that the UK’s net migration balance tipped over to immigration. Another political event that year in the UK that might begin to explain why⁴⁴. Indeed, when looking at the longer timeline it is hard to escape the conclusion that changes to the UK’s economy and labour market, more than immigration policy itself, have been the primary driver of the UK’s transition to becoming a net immigration country.

⁴² *ibid.*

⁴³ Mathias Czaika and Hein de Haas, ‘The Globalization of Migration: Has the World Become More Migratory?’ (2014) 48(2) *International Migration Review*, 283.

⁴⁴ This was also coincidentally the year that Freeman pointed out that immigration for work was “not merely a temporary convenience or necessity, but a structural requirement of advanced capitalism”, in Gary Freeman, *Immigrant Labor and Racial Conflict in Industrial Societies: The French and British Experience, 1945-1975* (Princeton University Press 1979).

Long-Term International Migration, UK, 1964 to 2015⁴



Source: [International Migration Time Series](#) and [Long-Term International Migration Estimates](#), ONS

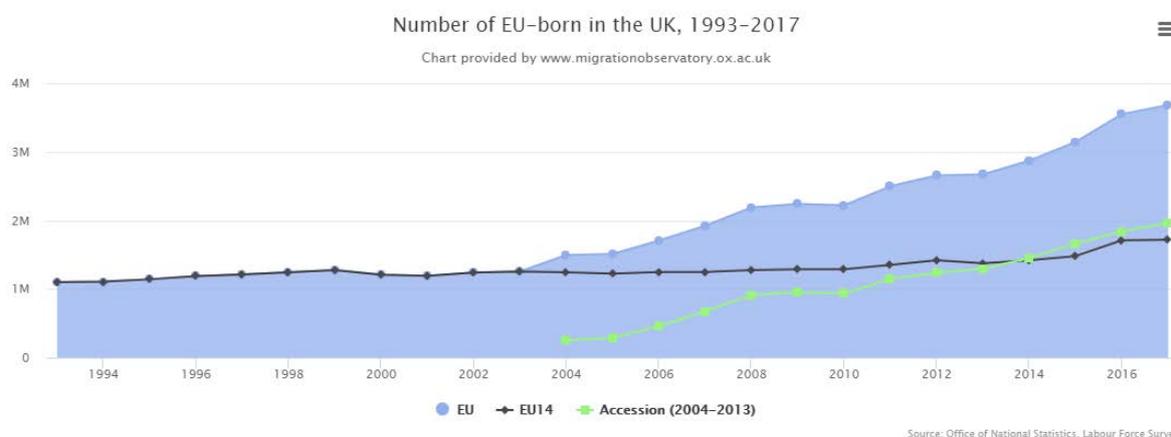
Indeed there has been a similar pattern and experience across much of Western Europe, as countries with recent histories of war, disruption and closed economies have transitioned into thriving, open market economies. For those countries that have followed the opposite course, migration flows have moved in the opposite direction. In 1960 Argentina had one of the largest net immigration rates, and the second biggest immigrant stock, of any country.⁴⁵ Today it does not much trouble the immigration scorers.

It was the reforms of the Thatcher era that tipped the balance of the UK's net migration. Having been a country of net emigration, Britain's migration balance then oscillated largely in tune with the economic cycle, with net immigration in 1983-87 and 1989-90, and net emigration in 1980-82 and 1988. That pattern continued under her successor (1991 and 1994-96 net immigration; 1992-93 net emigration).

But it was with the conversion of the Labour party to the cause of economic liberalisation, and the Labour government's decision to immediately open up to immigration from the

⁴⁵ Czaika and de Haas (n 43). It is important context that the world is not unprecedentedly awash with migrants. Indeed in proportional terms the world migrant population has held relatively stable (at around 3%) and even slightly declined over the past fifty years. What has changed over that period is that a number of migrant flows have reversed direction, and migrants are now being generated from a wider range of origin countries while being attracted to a narrower range of recipient countries.

new A8 EU members' labour forces in 2004, that net immigration into the UK began to significantly increase, and become entrenched.



Source: Carlos Vargas-Silva and Yvonne Markaki, 'Briefing: EU Migration to and from the UK'

Because of the UK's approach to both registration and exit checks (not requiring them), there is still debate as to whether the exact scale of EU immigration into the UK may have been underestimated⁴⁶. But even on the current understanding of the figures, half of Britain's foreign born population arrived in the decade from 2001. This represented the largest decade growth in the UK population since the census began⁴⁷. Or to frame it even more starkly, more people arrived each year from 2004 than in the whole period from the Battle of Hastings to 1950⁴⁸. It was not just the scale of this, but also its focus on particular locales, that was a real culture shock, and not just for the older generation.

This outcome was not though the result of a deliberate and coordinated policy to increase immigration. Indeed it is well documented that the New Labour government did not expect its policies to result in anything like the net immigration increase that was seen, since it was assumed that other EU15 states would also allow A8 citizens' to enter and work freely⁴⁹. However, allied to its espousing of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, New Labour's assumption that globalisation, and immigration as 'the human face of globalisation', "was both inevitable and an intrinsically positive thing" informed policies that, even if indirectly, had a significant expansionary effect on immigration to the UK.⁵⁰

But this was never divorced from economic developments. The booming economy and low unemployment may have bolstered the political popularity that helped to leave New

⁴⁶ Jonathan Portes, 'Misunderstanding Migration' (The UK in a Changing Europe, 7 June 2018).

<http://ukandeu.ac.uk/misunderestimating-migration/>.

See also Carlos Vargas-Silva and Yvonne Markaki, 'Briefing: EU Migration to and from the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 30 August 2017).

<http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/eu-migration-to-and-from-the-uk/>.

⁴⁷ Consterdine (n 6).

⁴⁸ David Goodhart, *The British Dream: Successes and Failures of post-war Immigration* (Atlantic Books, 2013).

⁴⁹ Erica Consterdine, 'One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: Evaluating the Institutions of British Immigration Policymaking' (Institute for Public Policy Research, April 2013).

⁵⁰ Consterdine (n 6).

Labour's approach relatively unchallenged. But more importantly it was those conditions, with the attendant skills shortages, which pulled in the potential immigrants. This was particularly the case for lower skilled labour, which in previous economic cycles had never been so free to come to the UK from countries with such large income differentials with the UK⁵¹.

As a result, from 2011 the number of EU workers employed in the UK from those Eastern European countries that joined the EU from 2004 onwards surpassed those workers from those countries that had made up the EU prior to 2004.⁵² And as labour became increasingly mobile, relative economic performance meant that, even when the UK economy was not firing on all cylinders, the impact of the eurozone crisis on a number of Southern European countries saw EU migrant inflows to the UK continue.

The ONS Labour Force Survey continues to show that, in the UK, EU nationals are more likely to be in employment than are UK nationals. Indeed of EU nationals employed in the UK, almost half come to take up a definite job offer. And the ONS Migration Statistics Quarterly Report reinforces how central employment is to the UK's migration patterns. Work is not only the primary driver of immigration, but also of emigration.

UK, year ending (YE) September 2017

	Immigration			Emigration		
	YE Sep 2017	95% CI	Change since YE Sep 2016	YE Sep 2017	95% CI	Change since YE Sep 2016
Work	248	+/-24	-45*	179	+/-15	+12
Definite Job	173	+/-21	-17	118	+/-12	+13
Looking for Work	75	+/-12	-28*	62	+/-8	0
Study	163	+/-19	+29*	22	+/-5	-1
Accompany or Join	81	+/-13	+7	25	+/-5	0
Going home to live	15	+/-6	-3	53	+/-13	+5
Other	21	+/-10	+5	20	+/-6	-4
No reason	9	+/-4	-6	18	+/-6	-9

Source: Long-Term International Migration and International Passenger Survey, Office for National Statistics

The same figures also act as a reminder that emigrants include not just UK citizens, but also departing longer term migrants now choosing to take their skills elsewhere.

⁵¹ Manning to Home Affairs Committee (n 27).

⁵² Vargas-Silva and Markaki (The Migration Observatory) (n 46).

UK, year ending September 2017

Thousands

	Immigration			Emigration		
	YE Sep 2017	95% CI	Change since YE Sep 2016	YE Sep 2017	95% CI	Change since YE Sep 2016
Total	578	+/-35	-20	334	+/-23	+9
British	73	+/-15	+1	125	+/-12	-3
EU	220	+/-23	-47*	130	+/-17	+28*
(of which) EU15	111	+/-16	-22	70	+/-13	+18*
(of which) EU8	51	+/-11	-6	39	+/-9	+1
(of which) EU2	53	+/-11	-21*	20	+/-8	+10*
Non-EU	285	+/-22	+26	80	+/-9	-15*
(of which) Asia	180	+/-17	+21*	45	+/-6	-7
(of which) Rest of World	88	+/-13	+5	28	+/-6	-11*

Source: Long-Term International Migration, Office for National Statistics

For a number of migrants with less deep roots here, “these workers have options ... they are very mobile”. As many of these migrants have access to other European economies and labour markets, the key determinant of whether or not they remain in the UK is their calibration of the relative attractiveness of a number of different European labour markets, factoring in the strength or weakness of sterling and the revival of the eurozone economies⁵³.

This has some UK employers very worried: “Many employers expressed the view that EEA migrants are more motivated and flexible than UK-born workers – this included a greater willingness to work longer and unsociable hours, to welcome overtime, and a consistently strong work ethic ... The MAC view is that it is hard to assess objectively many of these claims”⁵⁴. A perhaps less inflammatory framing of this issue might be to say that the evidence suggests that, in comparison with those in the most developed economies, those from developing economies may view success at work as much more central to their own perception of their personal success, and are therefore much more likely to say they are willing to totally change the way they live to achieve that success⁵⁵.

⁵³ Manning to Home Affairs Committee (n 27).

For an interesting take on this from the other end of the lens see the Centre for European Reform: ‘The biggest Brexit boon for Germany: migration?’ (11 December 2017) http://www.cer.eu/sites/default/files/insight_Germany_CO_JS_11.12.17.pdf.

⁵⁴ Migration Advisory Committee, ‘EEA-workers in the UK labour market: Interim Update’ (March 2018). The tone of the MAC’s Interim Report is decidedly less supportive of business interests than might have been imagined by those who see the MAC as an important legacy of the New Labour regime in providing business interest groups an influential forum in which to convey their views and evidence.

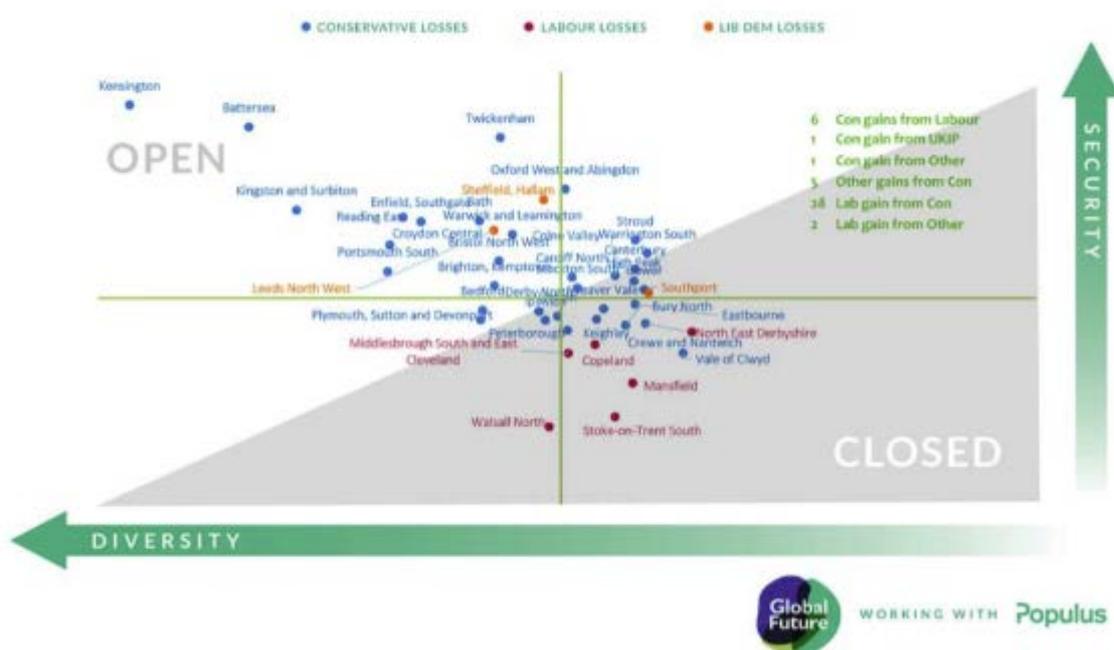
⁵⁵ Ipsos MORI, ‘The Optimism Divide’ in 2017 Global Trends survey (n 20).

A TALE OF TWO MAGIC IMMIGRATION TRICKS

In the UK political context what do we make of all this, beyond noting the irony of a Conservative Party enduring deep internal tensions over a phenomenon that can ultimately be traced back to Thatcher-era ideas of individual and economic liberty that the party generally venerates? One possibility is that there could be much worse to come for the Conservatives, as they are sacrificed on the altar of their own net migration target. How could that come about?

Global Future’s ‘Open Owns the Future’ report⁵⁶ includes polling which suggests that politics in the UK is now witnessing a generational split, with an Open/Closed values divide replacing the traditional left/right divide as the prime determinant of voting patterns. The consequence has been a rotation of the political axis. This has seen Labour increasingly appealing to voters who are more affluent, and have more open attitudes and values, including towards immigration. The Conservatives’ support has shifted in the opposite direction, increasing amongst those who are less affluent and with a more closed outlook.

UK GENERAL ELECTION 2017: SEAT LOSSES BY PARTY



Source: Populus polling in Global Future: ‘Open Owns the Future’

Others may take issue with this way of representing the split, but not with the notion that there is such a split.⁵⁷ And whichever way you frame it, the message seems clear; there is a seemingly irreconcilable divide that any political party is going to find it hard to straddle. Global Future’s answer is that the power of demographics and the passage of

⁵⁶ Global Future (n 25).

⁵⁷ *The Economist*, ‘The politics of illusion’ (24 March 2018), 32.

time means that Open views will win out over Closed ones⁵⁸. That would be a dramatic development. But it is by no means assured. Things might be different this time, but in prior generations, as they have aged the under-45s have become more “closed”.

There is though another possibility, the outcome of which would be as dramatic, and which could potentially be realised over a much shorter timeframe. And this is that the Labour Party succeeds in straddling this divide, successfully appealing to voters on both sides of the immigration debate. At first glance, this seems implausible. Indeed, some suggest that the current Labour Party is instead more at risk of failing with both sides on immigration⁵⁹ which “may signal their demise as a key political force” or at the least “may have a detrimental effect on the Party’s future as a governing party”⁶⁰.

And there are of course several reasons to think that Labour is poorly placed to straddle the public divide on immigration. Firstly, the Conservatives are still generally viewed by the public as more likely than Labour to bring about a reduction in immigration⁶¹, not least because Labour is still tagged as the party whose decisions, most notably the 2004 decision on Eastern European immigration, were responsible for the immigrant influx of the noughties. Second because of the fundamental tensions that immigration causes on the Left, between anti-discriminatory international solidarity on the one hand and national welfare state/labour market protectionism on the other. Those in any doubt about these tensions need look no further than the immigration policy fudging and ambiguity of both the Miliband and Corbyn oppositions.⁶²

So what are the reasons then for thinking that Corbyn Labour could successfully straddle the divide and appeal across it to both sets of voters?

The more prosaic answer would be that while, on the face of it, Corbyn Labour appears to be continuing the full fudge ambiguity, it is doing so in rather different form, delivering different, sometimes seemingly contradictory, messages through different spokespeople.

On the one hand the recent messaging from Diane Abbott, the shadow home secretary, has emphasised Labour’s “value-led and humane” approach on migration⁶³, and has committed to closing two of the UK’s immigration removal centres⁶⁴. She has also said that⁶⁵:

⁵⁸ Similar conclusions, albeit focused on views towards Europe, are to be found in Rob Ford and Maria Sobolewska, ‘Demographic change and public opinion’, in *Article 50 one year on* (The UK in a Changing Europe, 2018).

⁵⁹ British Future ‘Finding Consensus’ (n 7).

⁶⁰ Consterdine (n 6).

⁶¹ Ashcroft National Poll 2015.

⁶² Consterdine (n 6).

⁶³ Jessica Elgot, ‘Some use immigration as euphemism for race, says Diane Abbott’ *The Guardian* (21 February 2018) <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2018/feb/21/some-use-immigration-as-euphemism-for-race-says-diane-abbott>.

⁶⁴ ‘Diane Abbott: Labour would close two immigration detention centres’ (BBC, 16 May 2018) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44137353>.

⁶⁵ Diane Abbott, Keynote Speech at ‘Where next for UK immigration policy?’ (Westminster Legal Policy Forum, 15 March 2018).

- Immigration policy should be based on the humanity, not the scapegoating, of the migrant.
- Stress on services comes not from immigrants, but from austerity.
- Immigrants do not drive down wages. It is the weakness of the unions, the predatory nature of employers, and globalisation, that do.
- Jobs and prosperity will not play second fiddle to “bogus immigration targets”. A Labour government would scrap the net migration target.
- Delay in immigration outcomes is “incredibly cruel” and the continued status uncertainty for EU migrants has been “intolerable”.
- There is an inbuilt unfairness in the UK immigration system for those born outside of the EU. A Labour government would end the hostile environment.
- Indefinite immigration detention will be brought to an end; private outsourcing of the management of the detention facilities will be reviewed.
- Immigrants will no longer be viewed as “a cash cow”; the level of visa and naturalisation fees will be reviewed.
- A Labour government will not break up families and will respect the right to family life under the European Convention of Human Rights. Child refugees will have the right for their parents and carers to join them, and to stay in the UK after age 18 if brought up here.

Yet even as Abbott depicts a more tolerant and open approach to immigration than either the Conservative government or indeed previous Labour administrations, the current Labour leadership is committed, in the context of Brexit, to ending British participation in the EU free movement of citizens.

While the Labour leadership often places more emphasis on withdrawal from other aspects of the European Single Market (especially those that might affect state aid decisions and wider industrial policy), senior party spokesmen have also signalled a new and more restrictive approach to migration that is presented as having primarily economic motivations and consequences. John McDonnell has suggested that the free movement of labour within the EU “undermines standards of living in this country”⁶⁶. This is an argument Corbyn has also frequently made. Earlier this year he described free movement as a regime that means “employers being able to import cheap agency labour to undercut existing pay”⁶⁷. These statements seem hard to reconcile with Abbott’s. But it should also be noted that even as Abbott has attempted to send a message of compassion, she has reiterated the Labour manifesto commitment to hire 500 additional border guards.

What to make of all this? There is, of course, a chance that this mixed Labour messaging on immigration will simply appear confused and inconsistent to many voters. But it is also possible that voters from both sides of the spectrum will take away what they want to hear, and ignore what they don’t want to hear. It is possible that, even as it decries the policies of the Blair era, Corbyn Labour can succeed with the sort of political triangulation on immigration that marked that government’s approach. To those on the Open side of

⁶⁶ <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/aug/18/john-mcdonnell-labour-interview-power-tories-incompetent>>.

⁶⁷ Jeremy Corbyn, ‘Speech to the Scottish Labour Party Conference’ (9 March 2018) <https://labour.org.uk/press/jeremy-corbyns-full-speech-scottish-labour-conference>.

the divide, Corbyn Labour emphasises a compassionate approach to the humanitarian aspects of migration. To those on the Closed side, it offers control over the economic aspects of migration.

The most important lesson though from the New Labour experience on immigration is that immigration outcomes might not be determined solely, or even primarily, by narrow immigration policy. But rather by a government's overarching political ideology. New Labour's policies witnessed a sea change in immigration to the UK as a corollary of other policies rather than as a core, articulated aim.⁶⁸ A liberal entry policy for economic migrants was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the rise in immigration. It was New Labour's "ideological commitment to globalisation and free markets"⁶⁹ that created the required cultural and economic pull factors.

If the immigration expansion of the noughties in the UK was based more on New Labour's vision of 'Cool Britannia' and a 'third way' than any specific reforms which it made to the immigration system, so a Corbyn Labour government, which took office clearly committed to ending the open market approach and reversing the economic and labour market liberalisation of the last thirty years in the UK, would send a very different message to would-be immigrants about Britain and its offer to them. Indeed if they are really listening, they may take away an even starker message⁷⁰.

Corbyn Labour's potential to perform a magic immigration trick is rooted in the fact that, alongside, and notwithstanding, the headline compassion and relatively liberal approach to certain categories of immigration, it is possible that a Corbyn government could oversee a significant reduction in the UK's net immigration numbers. New Labour emphasised control in asylum policy partly in order to reassure voters about the overall migration system, and to seek tacit permission for a more liberal approach to economic migration⁷¹. It was the latter which drew in migrants in large numbers.

Interestingly Diane Abbott now seems rather keen to admit to the 'inhumanity' of certain of New Labour's asylum policies⁷², presumably partly as an attempt to highlight Labour's conversion to the compassionate cause now, but also as a reminder that Labour can be tough on immigration when it wants to be.

The detention of families with children is a case in point. Scarcely used at all throughout the 1990s, the number of children detained with their families was estimated to have risen to a level of 2,000 per annum between 2005 and 2009 before dropping off.⁷³

⁶⁸ Consterdine (n 6).

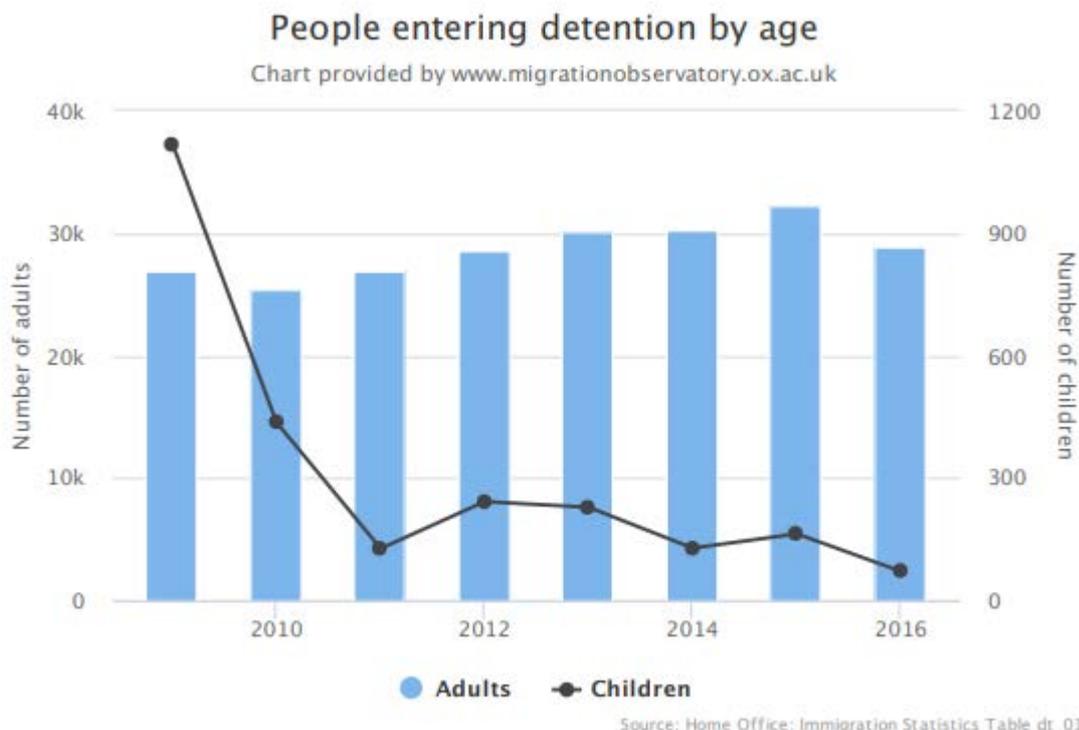
⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ See John McDonnell's remarks about "overthrowing capitalism"; whatever the substantive policy platform proposed here, the rhetoric itself is important: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-politics-44189922/john-mcdonnell-says-overthrowing-capitalism-is-his-job>.

⁷¹ Consterdine (n 6).

⁷² Diane Abbott Westminster Speech (n 65).

⁷³ Stephanie Silverman: 'Immigration Detention in the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 2 May 2017).



Source: The Migration Observatory⁷⁴

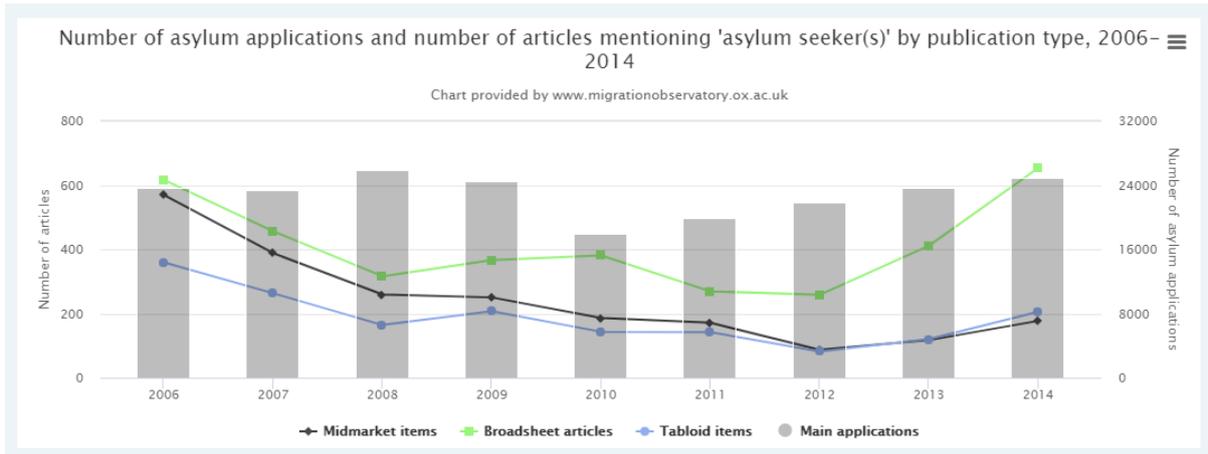
A Corbyn Labour administration could flip the switch the opposite way, emphasising its liberal and compassionate approach to selected groups of non-economic migrants while adopting economic policies and rhetoric that significantly reduce the incentives and opportunities for economic migrants to come to the UK.

Based on the Open-Closed analysis, this could be just the approach to win over the Open quadrant. Frankly, it would not take much to win over the Open quadrant on immigration from where things currently stand. And many of the Shadow Home Secretary’s proposed changes – an end to indefinite detention, an end to the hostile environment, shutting some detention centres – could be put in place relatively simply and swiftly, through administrative action. But given that, the crucial question is could a Corbyn Labour government really simultaneously successfully appease the Closed quadrant?

It is possible. On the humanitarian side, perhaps assisted by the distractions of the EU economic migration debate of Brexit, the interest of the (generally adverse) tabloid and midmarket press in asylum seekers has fallen significantly from its level in the mid noughties⁷⁵.

⁷⁴ The Migration Observatory, ‘Immigration detention in the UK’ <http://www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/immigration-detention-in-the-uk/>

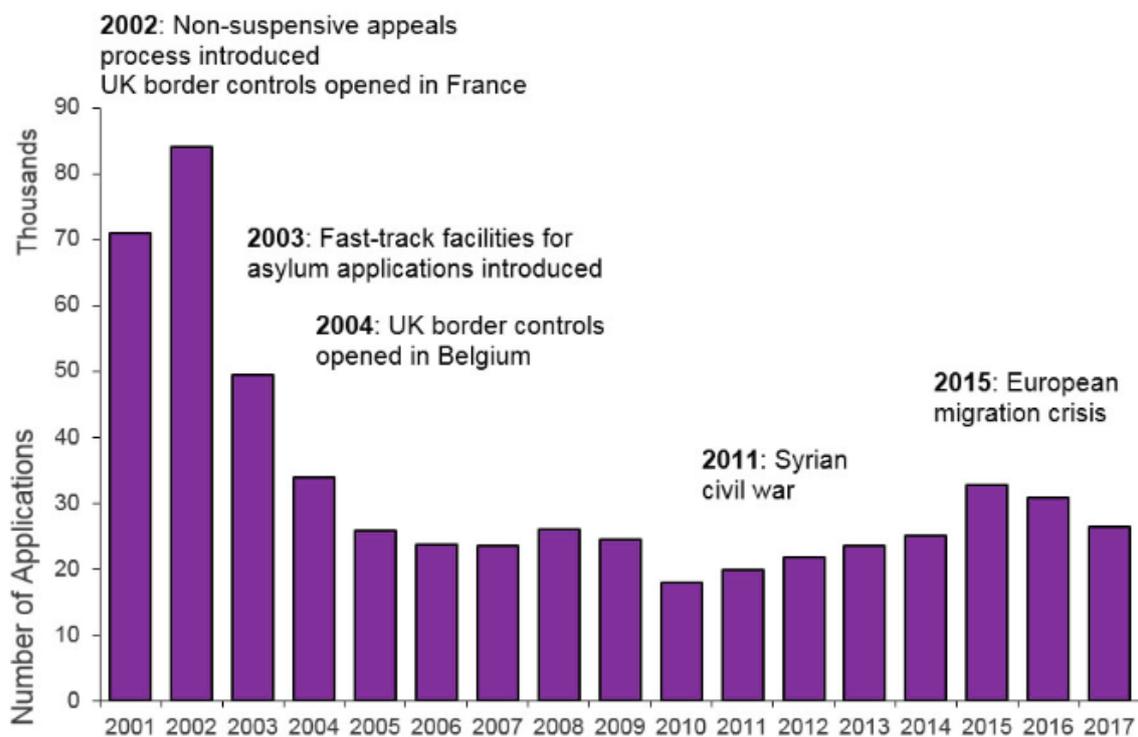
⁷⁵ Allen (The Migration Observatory) (n 31).



Source: William Allen: 'A Decade of Immigration in the British Press'

This is reflected in the public’s mood; immigration from outside of the EU is viewed as a less salient issue than EU migration, and while attitudes towards refugees may still be fragile, there does seem relatively widespread acceptance of refugees across most of the UK⁷⁶. This may also reflect the fact that the UK has in recent times far more successfully controlled its intake of asylum seekers in comparison with the early New Labour years, even in the face of the Syrian crisis.

Number of asylum applications in the UK, 2001 to 2017¹



Source: UK Government Immigration Statistics, February 2018

⁷⁶ British Future 'National Conversation Interim Report' (n 39).

There is therefore little to suggest that, positioned appropriately, more compassionate treatment of refugees would offend the sensibilities of much of the UK public, not least because the numbers are relatively so small. Indeed the UK has so successfully controlled its intake of Syrian asylum seekers that even the current government has felt able to offer resettlement places under the Vulnerable Person Resettlement Scheme⁷⁷. Even increased resettlement numbers would likely be dwarfed by the impacts of economic migration. So the key question is what would economic migration look like under a Corbyn Labour government?

And it is possible that it could look quite different than it does now. The Migration Advisory Committee may be paving the way. While the MAC's final report on EEA migrants in the UK labour market is not due until the autumn, its interim report suggests a clear direction of travel. While the MAC acknowledges that existing EU free movement rules have been a fantastic boon to the profitability, and even viability, of some UK businesses, the MAC does not view it as the purpose of immigration policy to maintain this state of affairs at the expense of the interests of other sections of society, which may have competing claims.⁷⁸

Amongst those interests are the native labour force. The MAC's final advice may well be that the respective claims of capital and labour in the UK need some rebalancing, and greater labour market controls and protections should be put in place, with the aim of raising wages and conditions at the lower end of the market. There is also a renewed focus on supporting the collective bargaining power of labour, not just from the more obvious advocates⁷⁹, but also from less obvious sources who are concerned about the impacts of wage stagnation⁸⁰. This would obviously chime with concerns of a Corbyn Labour government, which would be intent on carrying out various forms of rebalancing away from business and towards labour.

The significant dampening effect that labour market regulation can have on labour immigration, even when immigration policies themselves have been liberalised, has been witnessed in other EU countries. A prime example being Sweden's experience of how labour market regulation of wages in practice restricted low skilled immigration from the EU, even though, alongside the UK, it was one of the few countries that opened up its market to Eastern European workers from 2004⁸¹. Elsewhere in Europe, Switzerland provides an example of where a much broader labour inspection regime, together with the imposition of joint liability for the sub-contracting chain (in the food industry and construction sectors), seem to have had a significant impact on managing migration⁸².

⁷⁷ Home Office 'Over 10,500 refugees resettled in the UK under flagship scheme' (22 February 2018) <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/over-10000-refugees-resettled-in-the-uk-under-flagship-scheme>.

⁷⁸ Migration Advisory Committee (n 54).

⁷⁹ Oral Evidence of Rosa Crawford of the TUC to Home Affairs Committee on Post-Brexit migration policy HC 857 (22 May 2018) <http://data.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/committeeevidence.svc/evidencedocument/home-affairs-committee/postbrexit-migration-policy/oral/83305.pdf>.

⁸⁰ *The Economist*, 'Power is money' (2 June 2018), 74.

⁸¹ Harvey Redgrave 'Balanced Migration: A Progressive Approach' (Institute for Global Change, 28 March 2018).

⁸² Oral Evidence of Prof. Guglielmo Meardi to Home Affairs Committee on Post-Brexit migration policy (n 79).

And there are potentially even more ways that Corbyn Labour policies could in practice impact the level of inward economic migration. The Labour Shadow Chancellor has floated alternative models of ownership⁸³, such as worker owned cooperatives. Obviously much is unclear about how such would work in practice, even if introduced. But what is interesting is what impact such potential changes could have on the position of more transient, migrant labour. If certain lower skilled employment sectors were to become more tied to co-ownership within a cooperative structure, could this result in the development of working structures which may be less fluid, more tightly knit and locally focused, which may render such structures less amenable and accessible to migrant labour?

If so, then making it harder or less attractive for more mobile, migrant labour to get a foothold in more locally focused structures would be the exact reversal of New Labour's embrace of cosmopolitanism and globalisation. It is therefore perfectly possible that the economic and labour market policies of a Corbyn Labour government could, while being perfectly pleasant to immigrants, make a much more significant dent in the net immigration numbers than any hostile environment can. By this time a Labour administration may well of course have abolished the net migration target, but such an 'achievement' would not go unnoticed.

In this context of all this, the chronic failure of imagination of the open market political forces in the UK over immigration begins to look a particularly risky strategy. The Open quadrant is alienated by the petty meanness of the hostile environment, of which the furore and the Government's embarrassment over the Windrush episode is just the most visible manifestation, the deals with unsavoury third countries to keep migrants at bay, and the use of one of the most extensive immigration detention systems in Europe. While the Closed quadrant fumes around the seemingly intractable net immigration numbers, and the adverse local impacts the immigrant influx is viewed as causing, from cultural to housing to access to services. Which all leaves the Confused Middle still, well, just confused.

The immigration issue has been such a lightning rod for all sorts of dissatisfaction to rise to the surface in the UK that if a Corbyn Labour government really could reverse its destructive power as a political issue the consequences could be profound. Not just for the immigration debate, but for UK politics more broadly. Of course, this is only a possibility, not a prediction. But the open market political forces, from whatever party they may be, need to wake up to this risk right now. A 'fresh look' is a start. But more concerted action is required.

Open market politicians now have a window of opportunity to show they can do a lot better. To work out how to best make immigration work for this country. To take the shifting public attitudes and engage with, but also seek to shape, them. This requires more than simply acknowledging the 'legitimate concerns' of large sections of the public about immigration. That of itself does not constitute an open and honest conversation; indeed it may well signify the patronising opposite⁸⁴. Open market politicians need instead

⁸³ https://www.john-mcdonnell.net/alternative_models_of_ownership.

⁸⁴ Helen Lewis, 'From immigration to gender, the left is avoiding the hard work of persuasion' *The New Statesman* (19 March 2018).

to honestly admit to the public that immigration is complex and messy, and also to make clear that it is part and parcel of an open economy.

A net migration target that has never been met, and whose own advocates largely believe would be harmful if it ever were, has no place in the honest conversation with the electorate that is badly needed on immigration. Leadership means explaining to people what is true and important, not what you think they want to hear. The 'tens of thousands' target should be abandoned, not least since it is feeding the very problem of public trust it is nominally intended to answer.

Instead of empty, counter-productive promises, politicians seeking to show leadership on immigration must much more clearly and honestly set out and explain the controls on immigration that currently do exist, how those are deployed, and what is, and what is not, achievable in practice. They also need to better make visible and articulate immigration's benefits to the UK public in a way that is both understandable and tangible. But they also need to face up to, and respond to, immigration's challenges, to consider and debate new ideas that might better address the concerns of different groups. This would be a better magic immigration trick to perform.