

The UK's coming election and the politics of immigration: Five key themes – and what they mean – for any party wanting to govern for all

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Divisions over immigration and asylum have been a feature of British politics for decades. Much of the debate in this policy area has become tired and repetitive. This short briefing sets out a different perspective, and a challenge to the parties ahead of the next election. It highlights five alternative themes that, while generally overlooked amid the fractious debates, are in fact key to addressing concerns, bridging divides and restoring public faith.

THE FIVE KEY THEMES

- Society's divisions over immigration are quite natural and are mainly not about immigration. They must primarily be addressed through providing good work, affordable housing and core public services.
- Trying to change people's minds on immigration without changing their experience risks making matters worse. The aim should be to make those most concerned about immigration forget about it, not love it. Constant immigration policy shifts and ceaseless immigration rule changes achieve the opposite.
- You need to properly frame immigration policy for the public, and immigration as being not in binary opposition to the local, but as part of a connected holistic approach which in fact supplements and enhances the local, through mechanisms such as the Immigration Skills Charge and Immigration Health Surcharge.
- The real challenge of immigration control is not about arrivals but returns. Failure to be able to return people who should not be in the UK fundamentally undermines the public's faith in the system, and provides the impetus for policies such as the hostile environment and the Rwanda plan. This is a tough area, but even in recent times this part of the system worked much better and can do so again.
- The real challenge of immigration control can only be met through cooperative diplomacy, at the international, national and local levels:
 - Internationally: to achieve a tougher but fairer multilateral system
 - Nationally: requiring the two sides of the divide to work together and to accept trade-offs in the mutual interest of a better functioning system

- Locally: the complementary skills and experience of central and local government – currently often at odds and wasted – must be brought into a much more productive relationship.

SOCIETY'S DIVISIONS OVER IMMIGRATION ARE QUITE NATURAL AND ARE MAINLY NOT ABOUT IMMIGRATION

Ordinary people's experiences and views of immigration are largely formed at the local level in terms of what they see happening in their own lives.¹ How do they feel their locale has been impacted by, and responded to, population changes and migration flows in terms of being able to adjust and provide the required school places, health services, and housing? How do they view immigration as having impacted their own access to:

- Good work – proper training, fair wages, job opportunities
- Affordable housing
- Core public services – particularly health and education

It is not surprising that different people, indeed parts of society, will experience and perceive many of these things quite differently. Those most struggling in society are most likely to be most concerned with access to these things and most likely to experience and perceive adverse impacts from immigration in these terms. Whereas those most succeeding in society may not only not recognise such concerns or adverse impacts in their own lives, but indeed experience and perceive significant benefits from immigration in terms of supporting their own economic activity and better public services within a thriving, diverse society.

What does this mean?

1. Society's divisions over immigration are quite legitimate and natural.
2. These divisions are important, but they should not become a focus of national obsession and endless hand-wringing.
3. Immigration policy is important, but the most fundamental answers/responses to seeking to bridge divisions over immigration lie not in immigration policy, but in making those most concerned with immigration feel better about the core building blocks of their own lives in their own communities.

TRYING TO CHANGE PEOPLE'S MINDS ON IMMIGRATION WITHOUT CHANGING THEIR EXPERIENCE RISKS MAKING MATTERS WORSE

With so much 'he said/she said' countervailing polling from all sides on what the British public think about immigration, one can get totally entangled in the weeds. What is more important, though, than how many do/do not have concerns over some or other aspect of immigration or immigration policy is whether, and how, those with concerns about immigration become so animated about them that those concerns become a voting issue, translating a personal issue into a political issue for the country.

Counterintuitively, rising tensions around immigration policies across Europe appear to have been driven not by growing, but by reducing, anti-immigration sentiment across the voter base as a whole. And, as immigration attitudes have tended to liberalise across the population as a whole, those people who do not share those attitudes have felt increasingly sidelined at best, threatened at worst, and more likely then to be sufficiently animated to regard immigration and immigration policy as an important factor in deciding for whom to cast their vote.²

What is more, “you will never fully convince someone that he is wrong; only reality can”.³ The very act of trying to convince someone to change their mind on immigration runs the risk of further stoking, rather than allaying, their concerns. The UK experienced a concentrated version of this effect in the run up to the EU referendum.⁴

What does this mean?

1. Don't try to get those concerned about immigration to love immigration, but, rather, to forget about immigration.
2. Concerns over immigration are best addressed and allayed not by trying to change people's minds about immigration, but by changing their experience of their own lives so they feel less concerned and animated by immigration.
3. Constant immigration policy shifts and ceaseless immigration rule changes are more likely to make those concerned about immigration even more concerned. They keep immigration in the news spotlight, and demonstrate that even the politicians responsible for it never really seem to be comfortable with the details of the immigration system they have put in place.

YOU NEED TO PROPERLY FRAME IMMIGRATION POLICY FOR THE PUBLIC

British immigration policy really isn't so bad. Behind all the rhetoric and posturing, underlying policy has for the most part proceeded in a relatively sensible fashion on most fronts. The real failing has been how this policy has been positioned and presented, or, rather, has not been positioned and presented. This has been a huge missed opportunity.

At the core level of setting immigration in its proper context, immigration policy needs to be presented, marketed, sold to the public. This may seem contrary to the idea of keeping immigration policy out of the spotlight but it is not. Because, if you do not do this, immigration policy is then always at risk of being presented out of context, and as a weapon to score narrow political points or increase divisions and tensions for political purposes.

Immigration has largely become a battleground because it has been framed as such. Of course, some will always seek to frame it that way. But that does not mean that those in charge of immigration policy should join in. On the contrary, framing and presenting immigration policy in its proper context can build greater public understanding and acceptance, and help to defuse and deflate the tensions around it.

What does this mean?

1. Immigration policy should be presented as a component part of a much greater and more important whole; part of a connected holistic approach, working for all of Britain, to make the most effective use of both the available domestic and overseas resources to support the UK's society and way of life into the future.
2. Rather than being framed as a simple binary, local versus foreign, immigration should be framed as part of a continuum of potential resources, supplementing not supplanting what is already in the UK.
3. Emphasise real, tangible win-win benefits. The UK imposes an Immigration Skills Charge – which employers must pay when sponsoring overseas skilled workers into the UK and is meant to be used to help address skills gaps – and an Immigration Health Surcharge – to ensure that migrants pay appropriately for their healthcare. Such policies should help assuage people's concerns that immigration is undermining investment in local skills and unfairly draining the NHS' resources. Indeed, instead it is helping fund local skills investment and healthcare.

But this opportunity to frame a clear, positive, win-win message to the public has been spurned. First, because there is no transparency that the proceeds of these charges are actually used for their proper purposes. Second, because, other than those who pay these charges, no one knows about them. The first needs to happen, and this fact should then be aggressively advertised.⁵

THE REAL CHALLENGE OF IMMIGRATION CONTROL IS NOT ABOUT ARRIVALS BUT RETURNS

The reason that there is so much focus on policing arrivals is precisely because so many unwanted arrivals cannot be returned. Whether over worker, student, or family migration, or asylum and humanitarian migration, 99% of the public debate and deliberation is about who should be allowed to come to the UK, 1% about what should happen to those who are here but never were, or no longer are, allowed to be so.

It is estimated that there are around one million such people.⁶ It is understandable that neither side of the immigration debate divide in politics wants to talk about them. But this is hugely consequential. If these people were not here, there would not be the same impetus for the hostile environment, nor for the Rwanda plan. If people could be returned whose claim to be here had failed, there would not be the same impetus to so aggressively dissuade them from coming here, and to seek to make their lives so miserable when they are here to incentivise them to remove themselves.

Of course, returns are really hard in practice; many migrants don't want to be returned, many countries don't want to take them back. The UK is not alone in facing this quandary.⁷ Even so, the UK's trend line on achieving returns has been determinedly downward.⁸ And the current government's endless twisting, turning and tightening of the asylum rules has most recently gummed up most of what remained of any functioning returns system.

Yet, as we have argued time and time again in the context of asylum, failure to return people who it has been determined should not be in the UK is a core problem at the heart of the system, because it undermines the public's faith in and support of the asylum system and for allowing people into the UK to get access to that system.⁹ The problem of returns is one of the main reasons that the Rwanda plan is even being attempted, and one of the main reasons that such extreme measures attract even the level of public support that they do. For this reason, it is a core problem which both sides of the immigration debate divide should see a common interest in seeking to address, at least to substantially improve.

What does this mean?

1. In the current hyper-adversarial and confrontational nature of the asylum system debate, it seems scarcely believable that the two sides could come together to cooperate in some of the most contested spaces of the operation of returns policy. Yet this is exactly what happened in the very recent past, when Refugee Action led the UK's assisted returns programme.¹⁰ This sort of thing can, and should, happen again.
2. You cannot fully control something you do not fully understand. Unlike other immigration control strategies, proper operation of a collaborative assisted returns programme provides information and builds knowledge about migration choices, decisions and strategies from the ground up. This can then inform the development of more effective and responsive immigration management and control strategies.
3. The relationship of immigration rules on the one hand, and labour market rules on the other, is a minefield of sensitivities and conflicting priorities in often the most fraught and exploitative of situations. Yet there are clearly instances where employers and workers are acting together in flouting the law, with all the knock-on consequences that that potentially has in terms of the activities being carried out but also the undercutting impact on wages. Overhaul of the UK's overly laissez-faire labour market enforcement is long overdue. It should not be kept waiting any longer.

THE REAL CHALLENGE OF IMMIGRATION CONTROL CAN ONLY BE MET THROUGH COOPERATIVE DIPLOMACY

Unless you are as far away from everyone else as Australia, going it alone can make it harder, not easier, to control migration flows. Indeed, even Australia itself recognises that, and in fact collaborates with a number of other countries in controlling both legal and illegal migration across its borders. And even at the height of his go-it-alone Rwanda plan the current prime minister understands that having other like-minded European leaders moving in the same direction would be useful.¹¹

The need to cooperate is particularly the case in the area of asylum and humanitarian migration as, by definition, you are generally receiving people you were not expecting nor planning for. When, at any moment, any number of people may arrive, from anywhere, it is hardly surprising that these flows can create significant stresses internationally, nationally and locally. Indeed, when thinking about the power and potential of cooperative diplomacy it is important to consider this at all three of these different levels, encompassing not only relations between, but as importantly within, states.

What does this mean?

1. **At the international level:** as we have written before, both in terms of the dysfunctional international system of refugee protection where a few under-resourced states bear the bulk of the burden for doing the protecting, and in terms of the specific case of combatting the disorder in the Channel, there is a case for diplomacy to achieve a tougher but fairer multilateral approach which sees the burden and responsibility for refugees distributed more fairly between states in a way that undermines the incentives for dangerous journeys. Under this approach those claiming asylum would have to compromise their ability to specifically choose their final destination in return for more certainty about receiving meaningful protection, support and opportunities where they do reside.¹²
2. **At the national level:** a little more diplomacy needs to break out between the Home Office and the refugee NGO and legal sector. It is quite right that the sector fully and professionally represents a migrant's claim to stay in the UK, and that the Home Office fully and professionally interrogates that claim. Even so, there is room for a less openly aggressive and antagonistic, often childish, relationship between the two sides. Any new government should broker this, promising to invest in processing claims more efficiently, with access to legal advice up front, but with a quid pro quo that in return the sector accepts the outcome once it has been reasonably challenged, and actively cooperates on returns for those whose claims have failed.
3. **At the local level:** is where the positives, but also the harsh reality of the main challenges, of immigration are experienced. Finishing back where we started this piece, so much of people's response to immigration comes from their experience and perception of how it is responded to, and what impact it has, in their own local area and community. This is where the rubber of international commitments and national policies meets the road of real life. Yet here, where it is most crucial that things are coordinated and joined up between the Home Office, DLUHC and local government, is where things often fall apart. Examples such as the Homes of Ukraine Scheme show that things can work better at the local level when these different sources of power acknowledge, and deploy, their complementary skills and work together. But all too often it seems that rather than an ongoing modus operandi this only happens when there is no other option, in the direst of emergencies. A rapprochement is needed to make this complementary coordination a day-to-day, not exceptional, experience.

ENDNOTES

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⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YpP6ZdsBgmE>.

⁵ Jonathan Thomas, 'Use it or lose it: The government should use the £1.5 bn Immigration Skills Charge proceeds for their proper purpose' (Social Market Foundation, 19 September 2023) https://www.smf.co.uk/commentary_podcasts/immigration-skills-charge-purpose/.

⁶ Peter William Walsh, 'Irregular Migration in the UK' (The Migration Observatory, 11 September 2020) <https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/irregular-migration-in-the-uk/>.

⁷ *The Economist*, 'How the border could cost Biden the election' (25 January 2024) <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2024/01/25/how-the-border-could-cost-biden-the-election>.

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¹² Jonathan Thomas, 'A tale of two human rights lawyers: Could a Labour government realise a better future in the UK for refugee protection with control?' (Social Market Foundation, 24 October 2023) <https://www.smf.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Tale-of-two-human-rights-lawyers-October-2023.pdf>.