



By: **Harvey Morris**

More panic than policy in UK's immigrant crackdown



The Labour government this week introduced **measures** to slash the number of legal migrants coming to the UK with language that echoed rhetoric from its political challengers on the insurgent right.

An explosion of inward migration in the last years of the Conservative government had done 'incalculable' damage to the country, according to Prime Minister Keir Starmer in an introduction to the government's plans.

Pledging to restore control, Starmer said he would end a situation in which Britain had become "a one-nation experiment in open borders".

The prime minister faced accusations from opposing sides in the immigration debate that he was reflecting panic within the Labour Party at the rising popularity of right-wing Reform.

Nigel Farage's anti-immigration party has increased its lead in opinion polls since capturing seats in local **elections** at the start of May that eclipsed the Conservatives and left Labour trailing.

Starmer may be hoping that a tougher line on immigration will help to claw back support. But, by elevating the topic, he also risks fighting future electoral battles on the territory of his rival's choosing.

An island of strangers

Legal migration did not even figure in Labour's five-point **plan** for change, published before its landslide win in last July's general election. This week's immigration crackdown was nevertheless launched as a major political event, with a press conference by Starmer before the measures were presented to parliament.

Mixed reactions have focussed as much on the tone as on the substance of a plan that aims to further slash inward migration from near-record highs in the final years of the Conservative administration.

Starmer faced **criticism** from within his own party for suggesting that, without adequate immigration controls, Britain risked becoming "an island of strangers".

There was also a backlash from the social care sector and universities, which will be most impacted by the tougher requirements imposed on existing and would-be migrants.

The government plans to toughen English language requirements for incoming workers and their families

Under Labour's plans, social care visas will be scrapped despite rising vacancies in the sector, while foreign students will see a reduction in the time they can remain in the UK after they complete their studies.

The government also plans to toughen English language requirements for incoming workers and their families and double the current five-year wait before they can apply for permanent settlement.

Too much pressure

Whether or not it was his intention, Starmer's presentation of the plans appeared to lean on an age-old political tactic to blame a country's ills on the presence of too many foreigners.

He said public services and availability of housing had been placed under too much pressure, while the economy had been distorted by 'perverse' incentives to import workers rather than invest in the skills of the existing population.

His injunction that people who wanted to come to Britain to start a new life must contribute, learn English and integrate carried the unspoken implication that currently they do not.

Starmer even challenged the economic orthodoxy that immigration contributes to national wealth

Faced with the government's failure so far to fulfil its key promise of promoting significant growth, Starmer even challenged the economic orthodoxy that immigration contributes to national wealth.

Both Starmer and Home Secretary Yvette Cooper paid lip service to the historic contribution of generations of immigrants to the UK. Their focus, however, was on the perceived problems linked to rising migrant numbers, even though these were coming down by the time Labour came to power.

Net **migration** approaching one million was unusually high in the year before the general election, reflecting high demand in the health and care sectors and an increase in the number of international students, whose fees prop up higher education.

Prioritising the problems generated by immigration

Although inward migration has been a topic of political contention since Britain's imperial decline, active hostility to incomers has tended to be confined to the extreme right.

That shifted just over a decade ago when the Conservative-led government announced a hostile environment policy in 2012, aimed principally at irregular migrants seeking leave to remain.

The strategy was widely criticised at home and abroad, including in a United Nations human rights report that subsequently said it had entrenched racism and stoked xenophobic sentiment in the UK.

Then as now, the danger of prioritising the problems generated by immigration over the benefits it brings is to increase mistrust of

existing established communities who have made their homes in the UK.

This rich history has been eclipsed in the search for scapegoats to blame for the country's current ills

Britain, even more than its European neighbours, is in part the product of centuries of inward migration, from fleeing French Huguenots to eastern European Jews escaping pogroms.

The post-war establishment of the National Health Service relied heavily on citizens of Britain's overseas colonies, who were actively encouraged to join the enterprise.

This rich history has been eclipsed in the search for scapegoats to blame for the country's current ills. A study published this year by the Runnymede Trust, which studies structural racism in the UK, found that negative political and media discourse towards immigrants had fostered and legitimised the hostile environment policy of 2012.

The acknowledged challenges facing the UK are stagnant growth, low productivity, a struggling health system, elevated housing costs and an ageing and increasingly inactive workforce. Many of the responses required, including attracting trained overseas talent, will require a continued reliance on inward migration.

Labour confronts the right's rise

Although immigration figured in the 2016 Brexit debate, polling shows public attitudes to migrants are relatively benign when compared to some of the UK's European neighbours.

A **poll** this week for British Future, which researches public attitudes to immigration and race, found that concern largely focused on the unresolved crisis of small boats bringing irregular migrants and asylum-seekers to

Britain rather than migration for work or study. Comfortable majorities rejected reducing immigration for a range of jobs.



Labour has decided to play the immigration card as it confronts the right's rise - Keir Starmer

Voter defections to Reform may have more to do with a general disenchantment with the established parties rather than an embrace of its anti-immigration policies.

Labour has nevertheless decided to play the immigration card as it confronts the right's rise, although a similar attempt failed to salvage the Conservatives just a year ago.

Some in the ruling party clearly regard it as a cynical move that risks resurrecting shallowly buried divisions within Labour itself. Merely reducing migrant numbers will have little effect if Labour fails to solve the more fundamental economic challenges it was elected to address.