Tomorrow's Affairs
Analysis of today
Assessment of tomorrow

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Can UK's 'smash the gangs' strategy defuse a toxic immigration debate?

The UK government has pledged a £100 million funding boost to finance a crackdown on criminal gangs responsible for smuggling would-be migrants across the Channel in precarious small boats.

The weekend announcement was the latest in a drip-feed of measures announced in recent months to control the numbers of both irregular and legal incomers to Britain.

The extra spending will pay for an additional 300 investigators to target what the Home Office described as smuggling kingpins and to disrupt their operations across Europe, the Middle East, Africa and beyond.

The funding pledge came ahead of this week's launch of a so-called "one-in, one-out" agreement with France under which some of those arriving in the UK across the Channel will be detained and returned to the French side.

In return, the UK will take in an equal number of eligible asylum seekers, provided they have not previously attempted the seaborne smuggling route.

Labour inherits the small boats crisis

The Labour government inherited the small boats crisis from the Conservative government of Rishi Sunak, which failed to push through what critics always saw as a doomed plan to dispatch asylum-seekers to Rwanda.

Labour has blamed its predecessor for a failed policy that created a backlog of migrants still marooned in asylum hotels and elsewhere and waiting to have their applications processed.

> The measures have coincided with an increasingly toxic public debate

The government's latest initiatives were launched after official figures showed that so far this year more than 25,000 would-be migrants had crossed the Channel in small boats, some 50 per cent more than at the same point in 2024.

The measures have coincided with an increasingly toxic public debate about the benefits, but more often about the perceived threats posed by continuing high levels of inward migration.

A far-right narrative spreads to the mainstream

More than a dozen people were arrested in the latest protests outside hotels used to temporarily house asylum seekers, including one building in central London.

The demonstrations have been encouraged in part by a far-right narrative that the predominantly male small boat migrants are potential sexual predators and rapists, a perception that has now spread to the mainstream.

Robert Jenrick, the Conservative shadow justice secretary, supported peaceful protests when he told the BBC that there was "increasing evidence of a serious link between illegal immigration, migration generally, and crime, particularly sexual crime against women and girls".

Although Jenrick acknowledged that "we don't have good data at the moment", he went on to claim that Afghans and Eritreans were twenty times more likely to be convicted of a sexual crime than a British national.

> "Some people who come from certain cultures pose a danger to our society, it's as simple as that" - Nigel Farage

Whatever the validity of Jenrick's unsupported claim, the mood outside asylum hotels is likely to be further inflamed by the reported arrest of two men, identified in the media as Afghan

asylum-seekers, for the alleged rape of a 12-year-old girl in central England.

Nigel Farage, the right-wing Reform leader, jumped into the fray, accusing police of a cover-up by failing to confirm the origin of the alleged perpetrators.

While taking no personal responsibility for what he identified as a significant rise in the temperature of the immigration debate, Farage said the country had to recognise that "some people who come from certain cultures pose a danger to our society, it's as simple as that".

The language of division

These and similar comments from opponents of large-scale immigration appeared to reinforce the findings of the Runnymede Trust, a racial equality thinktank, that the British media and politicians had played a key role in creating a culture in which racial discrimination was permissible.

A recent Runnymede report reiterated findings from a decade ago that, in parliamentary debates and media reporting, negative terms such as 'illegal', 'flood' and 'influx' were persistently used in association with migrants, casting them as outsiders and a dangerous threat.

Comments from Farage, Jenrick and others appear to make little distinction between the alleged societal threat posed by irregular arrivals and the legal migrants on whom sectors of the UK economy and services continue to depend.

"An island of strangers"

In the latter case, Labour is also adopting a tougher stance, outlined in a policy paper prefaced by Prime Minister Keir Starmer. He said that, under his Conservative predecessors, Britain had become a one-nation experiment in open borders.

Starmer pledged to wean the national economy off its reliance on what he described as cheap labour from overseas.

The researchers at the Runnymede Trust might well have taken exception to the prime minister's vocabulary when he noted that in 2023 inward migration 'exploded' to over a million people a year.

> Starmer said Britain risked becoming "an island of strangers" in the absence of adequate immigration controls

But at least the published preface did not go so far as when he echoed far-right rhetoric in remarks in May, when the reforms were first unveiled, in which he said Britain risked becoming "an island of strangers" in the absence of adequate immigration controls. He later said he regretted using the phrase.

Among measures announced were a freeze on new care worker visas and a doubling of the automatic settlement period for newcomers from five years to 10.

The moves reflected pre-election remarks by Starmer that the goal of an incoming Labour government would be to help the British economy escape its immigration dependency by investing more in training the existing workforce.

Taking the poison out of a toxic debate

Whatever the pros and cons of that strategy, the government's more urgent challenge is to address the small boats crisis. Even the most ardent advocate of free movement would agree that the current situation is a mess.

Starmer and his ministers have a responsibility to take the poison out of the current toxic debate and avoid fuelling rhetoric that brands incomers as the chief scapegoats for the country's ills

Any positive consequences of the latest funding boost to 'smash the gangs' will take a while to filter through, while initially the deal with the French is not expected to result in more than 50 returns a week.

The government clearly hopes an effective, tougher line on immigration, both legal and irregular, will dent the rise in popularity of Farage's Reform.

However, Starmer and his ministers also have a responsibility to take the poison out of the current toxic debate and avoid fuelling rhetoric that brands incomers as the chief scapegoats for the country's ills.