

# From backwater to battleground: The political importance of joined-up immigration and skills policy in the UK

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To address seeming ‘overreliance’ on international labour, the Labour government’s big idea is more joined-up policy on immigration and skills. This briefing sets out why this approach is unlikely to deliver lower levels of immigration, but how politically it can still be a success if the government takes the opportunity to win the public over by showcasing immigration as not only supplementing, but supporting, local skills.

## KEY POINTS

- The new Labour government views the perceived dependence of some sectors of the UK economy on overseas workers as unsustainable and contrary to the national interest.
- Joined-up immigration and skills policy is framed by it as key to reducing employer demand for immigrant workers, but this looks doomed to failure in the light of the government’s growth mission.
- This policy can still be a *political* success, however, even if it does not dramatically reduce immigration numbers. But, for this to be achieved, it must be actively and aggressively presented to the public in the right way.
- Public attitudes to immigration are deeply conflicted, not just between, but within, people. But it is clear that when opportunities for overseas workers feel like they come at the expense of local people, this drives political polarisation and fracture in the UK.
- In the face of the continued need for immigration, the purpose of the Charge should be to ensure local people do not feel ignored, undercut and supplanted by immigration, but supported, invested in, and trained. But the potential for the Immigration Skills Charge to sit at the core of a more joined-up immigration and skills policy has so far been wasted.
- With the Conservative leadership candidates and the Reform Party election manifesto also wading into this policy area, it is set to become a key political battleground. The main parties’ claims to joined-up immigration and skills policy may come to lie not only at the core of how the UK is to be governed, but even go some way to determining who will get to govern it.

## From Blair to Starmer: so close, yet worlds apart

In 2003, as the Blair government's expansionary policy towards legal immigration was picking up steam, the Home Office wrote a letter to businesses:

*"Dear Sir or Madam*

*Are you struggling to find the quality staff you need to run your business effectively? Do you want to employ an individual from outside Europe but aren't sure how? ... High, medium, or low-skilled vacancies can be filled from overseas ..."*<sup>1</sup>

The Home Office then went on to advertise the services of its Work Permits department to help businesses do just that.

Over twenty years on, we once again have a Labour government. But one with a very different political perspective on immigration for work. And Yvette Cooper, the current Home Secretary, has tasked the Migration Advisory Committee with finding out why – starting with the Information Technology & Telecommunications and Engineering sectors – UK businesses have become so reliant on recruiting from overseas.

Far from being lauded and encouraged by the new government, the recent high levels of international recruitment into the UK are framed by it not as evidence of success, but as highlighting the failure of the UK's labour market, and the UK's poor performance in producing its own skills base. Rather than look overseas, the government has committed to getting two million more people in the UK into work, and raising the UK's employment rate to 80%.<sup>2</sup>

Twenty years ago, overseas hiring was viewed by the then Labour government as the beneficial consequence of having a high performing economy in an inevitably globalising world. Whereas today, the new Labour government views the perceived dependence of some sectors of the UK economy on overseas workers as unsustainable, and contrary to the national interest.<sup>3</sup>

### The 'big idea'

To seek to address this, the new Labour government's big idea is more joined-up policy on immigration and skills. Starting by collecting evidence – from, and through, a 'quad' of expert bodies: the Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), Skills England, Industrial Strategy Council, and Department of Work and Pensions. The plan is that those bodies then sit down together, also with government and with businesses, to consider what that evidence indicates about which sectors are facing significant labour shortages, and why.

Key questions to be addressed will include:

- what are the drivers of the shortages?
- what have the affected sectors done to respond to those shortages other than to hire from overseas?
- what has been the impact of the UK's 'shortage occupation list' regime – which has allowed employers to hire overseas workers into designated

‘shortage occupations’ on lower salaries than those allowed for those roles not deemed to be in shortage?

Over twenty years ago the International Labour Organisation issued a report arguing that:

*“Any program which imports migrants into a sector whose employers are complaining of insufficient trained natives, can be expected to exacerbate (rather than alleviate) its native shortage. Rather than raising incentives to entice new workers to seek training to fill the empty slots, visas are likely to be used to avoid the needed market response.”<sup>4</sup>*

On the face of it this appears to have been the UK’s experience with its Shortage Occupation List approach. Recently, on the advice of the MAC, this List has been much reduced in size, and revamped into the Immigration Salary List. But the MAC will now consider this further.

Out of this coordinated, evidence-based process, the new government’s intention is that plans will be developed to address labour and skills shortages. And that these will carefully consider the interface and interaction between immigration and skills policy, including what policy levers within the immigration system could be used to more effectively incentivise sectors to focus on recruiting from the domestic workforce.<sup>5</sup>

While this is presented as the Labour government’s big idea, there is in fact some common ground across the political spectrum that more joined-up policy on immigration and skills is needed, and the role of the MAC within this. A recent report co-authored by the recent Conservative leadership candidate, Robert Jenrick, in conjunction with the Centre for Policy Studies, recommended that:

*“Immigration needs to be explicitly linked to skills policy. Any exceptional relaxation of visa rules for particular job types needs to be based on clear, funded commitments from the respective sector to train UK workers, backed by the relevant Government department. This will change incentives across industry and Whitehall, while helping to fix Britain’s skills problems ... We should expand the remit and resources of the Migration Advisory Committee.”<sup>6</sup>*

And Tom Tugendhat, speaking at this year’s Conservative Party Conference in support of his own Conservative leadership bid, set out his belief that ‘fixing’ migration needs to go hand in hand with:

*“fixing the gaps in education and skills ... so that we can recruit at home and not abroad. I will end the cap on apprenticeships and use the immigration skills charge to invest in further education and train our own people.”<sup>7</sup>*

## Turning failure into success

Joined-up immigration and skills policy is therefore being framed as key to reducing employer demand for immigrant workers, and therefore levels of immigration, into the UK. Framed in this way though, while this policy approach may achieve some targeted successes, more broadly it looks doomed to failure.

The scale of the challenge for achieving truly joined-up policy in this area should not be under-estimated. It is not as though a fully-fledged joined-up skills policy or industrial strategy already exists in the UK, which 'just' then needs to be connected with the work immigration system. Instead, the UK's skills policy is itself currently fragmented. Both Skills England and the Industrial Strategy Council are only just in the process of being constituted. At the moment, therefore, there are far more questions than answers around how a more structured and coordinated skills regime in the UK will work in practice.<sup>8</sup>

And the Labour government's initially cordial relationship with business – already coming under increasing pressure as the government raises taxes and enhances employee rights – will likely come under further strain to the extent that the government takes a more hands-on approach in the details of how businesses in key sectors choose to resource themselves, and seeks to have business play its part in skills investment and reforms, as a quid pro quo of business' use of the immigration system and access to overseas workers.

And even if these challenges are all somehow successfully navigated, to be a political success as currently framed, joined-up immigration and skills policy will need to lead to materially reduced immigration into the UK. Is that likely?

It may be thought helpful that the current trajectory of the reported immigration numbers into the UK is now downward, as the record levels of recent immigration experienced by the UK post-pandemic have to an extent abated, including in some sectors due to the restrictions to different aspects of the immigration regime introduced earlier this year by the last government, in what proved to be its final six months in power.

But, in the longer term, even if successful, indeed potentially particularly if successful, greater investment in, and coordination around, the development and use of the domestic skills base will unlikely of itself result in reduced immigration into the UK overall, or even specifically for work, save in a few specific sectors where demand is more constrained.

Growth is the Labour government's number one stated mission. And jobs are stated to be at the heart of its "modern Industrial Strategy", which is focused on scaling up "eight growth-driving sectors", earmarked for their high growth potential.<sup>9</sup> Any material success in doing so is likely to increase – not decrease – the UK economy's demand for immigration, regardless of any success in increasing the supply of domestic skills.

This is because increasing the local skills base, and jobs, in those higher growth sectors would increase the amount and types of work done in those sectors in the UK, with the result that the size of those sectors increases and therefore may also need immigrant workers to support their larger size. As jobs are created, the increased numbers of workers in those sectors will themselves also consume more goods and services which may in turn require significant numbers of immigrant workers to help provide those goods and services. It is therefore hard to make a

convincing case for the Labour government being able to hit both its growth target – up – and its work immigration target – down.

The good news though is that a more joined-up approach to investing into, and developing, local skills is good for people, the economy and society, regardless of what impact this may have on levels of immigration. And, importantly, that joined-up immigration and skills policy can still be a *political* success – both in terms of being an attractive policy to the public, and in helping the government to govern better, for the benefit of a broader cross-section of the public – even if it does not dramatically reduce immigration numbers. But, in order to be so, it must be framed, and actively and aggressively presented to the public, in the right way.

### The public perspective – Everything Everywhere All At Once

The back and forth between the claims and counterclaims arising from all the different polling around what the British public really think about immigration can seem endless. And the takeaways muddled. The only thing that seems clear is that conflicts and contradictions abound in the public's views on immigration. What is often overlooked though is that this is not just *between* people, but *within* people. Indeed, if the British public's attitudes towards immigration were a film, they would be *Everything Everywhere All At Once*.

The same person may have quite different perspectives on immigration depending on which lens they are looking through. Their perspective as a worker may be different to their perspective as a consumer, and to their perspective as a member of their community – which in turn may depend on how they define their community.

There is often a disconnect between what people say they want, and the consequences they are willing to bear. A majority of the public may indicate a preference for lower numbers of immigrant workers into the UK overall, but often then struggle to name any particular sectors or roles where they would like to see this reduction happen in practice. In more recent times, despite increasing disquiet over overall immigration numbers in the UK, the sectors with by far the largest inflows and impact on those numbers – health and care – are exactly those where the public seem most relaxed and supportive of workers coming from overseas.<sup>10</sup>

And those wanting less immigration often are not so keen on the risk of disruption and dislocation caused by shortages to which reduced immigration might give rise. At least from their perspective as a consumer, concerned that a shortage may lead to a reduced supply, and rise in prices, of goods or services which they consume. From their perspective as a worker though, some might look favourably on the risk of labour shortages if they think wages might rise as a result, from which they themselves might benefit.

The recent pockets of civil unrest around the UK this summer directed towards immigrants has of course put public attitudes towards immigration and immigrants back in the spotlight. While there will likely always be some people in the UK with feelings of antipathy towards immigrants, whether racially motivated or otherwise, for the large majority of the British public the evidence suggests that it is wrong to characterise people's concerns with levels of immigration as stemming from their

concerns about immigrants. In fact that, even while having concerns around levels of immigration, the British public is among the most accommodating worldwide in terms of their openness to accepting, and living alongside, people who have arrived in the country as immigrants.<sup>11</sup>

Even in the most deprived areas, concerns over immigration may even stem from the locals looking up to, rather down on, immigrants. A study of the white working class in one post-industrial community in the north-east of England, for instance, found that opposition to levels of immigration there resulted more from respect for – almost envy of – the social status of immigrants arising from the types of jobs they had been able to secure. As a result, the local population tended to both esteem and valorise immigrants' economic activity and social status in their community while, at the same time, also supporting lower levels of immigration into the UK, because of the frustration the local population felt that they had not been able to access the same opportunities, and that employers' access to that immigrant workforce meant that there was no need to invest in local people like them.<sup>12</sup>

Viewed from this perspective, one can see how politically important the intersection and interaction of immigration and skills policy is, and how crucial a better approach to investing in homegrown skills could be, regardless of whether it actually leads to materially lower levels of immigration.

### Defusing the 'tyranny of merit'

This is even more so given the framing of the messaging in the UK over the past twenty years of the need for, and the benefits of, bringing in overseas workers into the country. And the politically damaging way that this messaging has both fuelled, and been fuelled by, narratives associated with the 'tyranny of merit'.

The tyranny of merit is the American philosopher Michael Sandel's argument that today's developed societies are founded on a meritocratic ideal, which tells both those who succeed in these societies – the 'winners' – and those who do not – the 'losers' – that they deserve their fate. In essence, that they get what they deserve, through their own (lack of) application and efforts. As a result, the winners in society – who increasingly come from only the most highly educated portion of society – tend towards hubris and smug contentment. And look down with scorn – 'credentialled condescension' – upon the demoralised losers in society, who feel their failure all the more deeply personally for that. This has undermined a sense of solidarity in society, has been corrosive of social bonds, and has set the scene for a politics of humiliation which populist politicians can exploit.<sup>13</sup>

One can argue that this has been hugely consequential for the politics of immigration. For, when it comes to immigration, society's winners tend to be more likely to appreciate the benefits of, and be comfortable with, a more open approach to immigration than its losers. As a result, differences over immigration can become the perfect breeding ground for a particularly divisive form of the tyranny of merit. Particularly where those most open to, and comfortable with, immigration are only too happy to parade their claimed evidence-based rightness and righteousness over



the benefits of immigration in front of those who are more concerned about immigration.

The message of the more open and comfortable perspective could be summed up as: *'Immigrants, they get the job done!*'. This is a great line for a musical number, but in the real world it is not a helpful message for building broader social cohesion around immigration. It is not that immigrants do not get the job done. They very much do. What is highly damaging and must be guarded against though is any perception that immigrant workers are valued more highly than local workers, or that immigrant workers' success is being achieved, and celebrated, at the expense of, or to the exclusion of, the potential and opportunities of local people.

This is a particular risk because those arguing for the need for, and effectiveness of, immigrants' contribution in certain areas of the economy have tended to frame this in ways that have suggested that immigrant workers are needed because local workers are simply not up to the task. Lauding both immigrants' work ethic – on the basis that it is said they are willing to work harder and longer hours, are more willing to work more flexibly and more anti-social hours – but also their skills, can give the impression – sometimes expressed, sometimes implied – that local people are considered either too lazy – 'won't do' – or useless – 'can't do' – to get the job done.

Local people may understandably then question why is it that – despite all the advantages they are told that they have: being in their home country, operating in their native language, and having been through their home country's education system – they apparently do not have what it takes to successfully compete in their home market with workers who have come from outside. They may then form the impression that they are not only being unfairly under-invested in, but totally overlooked. That they are simply not needed any more, and that their society is now geared more towards the success of others than of themselves. This is a recipe for an unravelling of the national community, and for the political fracture and polarisation that accompanies that.

The culmination of the fictional – yet entirely realistic – immigration focus group scene in the TV drama *Brexit, The Uncivil War* perfectly articulates the feelings of someone for whom the topic of immigration triggers anger and despair:

*"I'm sick of feeling like nothing. Like I have nothing. Like I know nothing. Like I am nothing. I'm sick of it."*<sup>14</sup>

A sentiment expressed not because of animosity felt directly towards immigrants, but because those who think like this feel that they and their families are stuck in a dead-end while they think they see immigrants accessing all the opportunities and getting on. This anger and despair only becomes intensified, not ameliorated, when it is faced with those dismissing and deriding such concerns on the basis that they are not evidence-based.

This state of affairs is not good for anyone. This sense of grievance and being neglected is actively damaging for more than just those directly affected by it. Damaging to the dynamism of the economy and to the cohesion of society. To get away from this dynamic requires improving the outcomes for the people who are sick

of feeling like nothing – regardless of what impact that improvement may have on levels of immigration.

Some people will likely always remain unreconciled to immigration whatever. But most will become less animated by it where they see it operating on what they think is a reasonable, controlled, and fair basis. And, most importantly, that depends on them feeling better about themselves. About their own lives, and their own abilities, capabilities, capacities and opportunities to achieve the dignity, esteem and recognition that comes through making an economic contribution and productively earning a living. Then immigration can become less of a focal point for their anxiety, and less of a beacon for their frustration.

### **‘Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can’**

Key to achieving this is that immigrant workers must be seen as supplementing, not supplanting, what the UK has – including what with some effort and investment it could have – available in terms of potential skills and resources already in the country. Imagine a policy tool that went further though, where the hiring of immigrant workers incorporated a mechanism to actively provide for, and support, investment in local skills and training. In fact, such a policy tool already exists – it is the UK’s Immigration Skills Charge.

In a 2005 paper arguing for an alternative approach to immigration to that being pursued by the then Labour government, the Conservative MP, Peter Lilley, proposed that employers should be “charged an annual fee of at least a four figure sum for the privilege of employing a work permit holder”.<sup>15</sup> But it was not until 2017 that the then Conservative government brought that concept into being in the form of the Immigration Skills Charge. Importantly, also, with the promise that the money raised from the Charge would be put towards addressing skills gaps in the UK workforce.<sup>16</sup>

On one hand the Immigration Skills Charge has been very successful. The requirement – every time they sponsor a skilled worker from overseas into the UK for one year – for an employer to pay a £1,000 charge (reduced for smaller employers) has seen over £2 billion raised by the Charge since its introduction.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand though, the Charge remains totally unheralded, and there is no evidence what the money raised by it has been spent on, and certainly no indication that it has been spent on investing in the skills of the UK workforce.

Arthur Ashe, channelling Theodore Roosevelt, once said that, in the face of any challenge: “Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can”.<sup>18</sup> And, in terms of a more joined up immigration and skills policy, the Immigration Skills Charge represents where we are, and what we have, already in place today. It is the starting place from which we should be doing what we can.

Given that the most recent Conservative government presided over record levels of immigration, which in turn drove record receipts raised by the Immigration Skills Charge, one might have imagined that government would have been keen to at least highlight the compensating high level of the Charge proceeds generated for



investment in local skills by the high level of immigration. But it was not, and it did not.

Quite the opposite. Indeed, rather than reporting the amount of the Immigration Skills Charge proceeds alongside the reported immigration numbers, the Charge proceeds have been given no publicity at all. Instead, they are buried away in the notes of the Home Office's annual accounts. Perhaps because the money raised by the Charge has disappeared into a black hole at the Treasury, and no one wants to highlight the fact that that money may not in fact have been used as intended to help address skills gaps in the UK.

As a consequence, apart from the employers who have to pay it, hardly anyone has even heard of the Immigration Skills Charge. And its potential to sit at the core of a more joined-up immigration and skills policy has thus far therefore been totally ignored and wasted. But what if, instead:

- The money raised through the Immigration Skills Charge was used for its proper purpose, to help address skills gaps in the UK workforce.
- Employers received due credit for having provided this funding.
- The public were made aware of the Immigration Skills Charge and what it was providing.

Billboards across the UK could proclaim:

- **EACH TIME an EMPLOYER HIRES a worker from OVERSEAS they CONTRIBUTE to a TRAINING POT for YOU.**
- **This charge has RAISED BILLIONS for INVESTMENT in SKILLS TRAINING in the UK.**
- **APPLY HERE to ACCESS YOUR SHARE of that training.**

Of course, the level of the Charge's proceeds is not of itself enough to fully constitute a more joined-up immigration and skills policy. But it could, and should, provide a key building block of how such a policy could work. And, most importantly, of how such a policy should be presented. And it is a building block that already exists, that we can begin to work on building up and out from, right now, starting from where we are today, from what we already have in place.

To do this we must show *and* tell. The new government's ideas for a new industrial strategy and more joined-up immigration and skills policy is, quite understandably, full of talk of missions, plans, strategies, frameworks, pathways, roundtables. But, even if successful, it will take time for all of these, and for a more joined-up immigration and skills policy that they will bring to fruition, to have any demonstrable impact that ordinary people will understand and be aware of.

This is where the *tell* comes in. And why the Immigration Skills Charge is so important. Because the Immigration Skills Charge is the mechanism by which the government can publicly demonstrate *up front* that immigration is not only supplementing, but supporting, local skills, with employers actually funding investment in local people every time they hire an overseas worker.

It is therefore crucial from the outset, far ahead of any visible success, that the existence and rationale of joined-up immigration and skills policy is actively, aggressively and imaginatively presented to the broader public. The public need to be shown and told that, while the UK absolutely needs, and will continue to need, immigrant workers in a number of different sectors, this does not mean that local people are being ignored, undercut, and supplanted. Rather, they are being supported, invested in, and trained.

Of course, billboards are not the only way to get the message across. But something with that type of impact is needed in order to penetrate the public consciousness. Any political party that can do that will have a clear path to political success; not only in the sense of winning power, but also of then using that power to better govern for all.

### The Employer Immigration Tax waits in the wings

The Reform UK 2024 ‘Our Contract with You’ – i.e. the Reform Party’s election manifesto – sets out its proposal for an Employer Immigration Tax:

*“The National Insurance rate will be raised to 20% for foreign workers. This would incentivise businesses to employ British citizens whose National Insurance rate would stay at 13.8%...This would boost wages and could raise more than £20 billion over five years to pay for apprenticeships and training for young Brits.”<sup>19</sup>*

Framed in this way this would in essence be a turbocharged – 10x – version of the Immigration Skills Charge, taking the concept and ramping it up dramatically.

Of course, one might question the £20 billion figure, coming as it does on the same page of the manifesto as Reform’s commitment to ‘Freeze Non-Essential Immigration’, as that commitment might suggest that the proceeds of an Employer Immigration Tax would then be much lower. But it might also suggest that perhaps even the Reform party considers that quite a lot of immigration is in fact essential – and not just “essential foreign health and care workers”, who Reform said would be exempt from the application of the tax anyway.

How might a promise to the British public to “boost wages and raise more than £20 billion over five years to pay for apprenticeships and training for young Brits” look on a billboard?

Having then for so long been a largely technical backwater, far removed from public interest or scrutiny, it seems that, right across the political spectrum, the idea of joined-up immigration and skills policy is now stepping out into the spotlight and being transformed in a way that could well become a key political battleground going forward. If so, the stakes of the success or failure of this policy in the eyes of the public could not be higher. In the near future, it is even possible that the main parties’ claims to joined-up immigration and skills policy will lie not only at the core of how the UK is to be governed, but even go some way to determining who will get to govern it.

## ENDNOTES

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