Immigration: A Comparison of Party Policies

Summary

All three main political parties have couched their manifestos in tough sounding language. It is therefore necessary to examine their track records and their proposals with some care to see what is really meant.

Labour's record in recent years is one of a deliberate and substantial increase in immigration for employment combined with serious efforts to tackle the abuse of the asylum system. The latter have been partially successful but the major weakness remains – only a quarter of failed asylum seekers are removed. Labour proposals will further tighten the asylum system but will place no limits on the other, much larger, flows of work and family related immigration.

The Conservative record is creditable on immigration but not on asylum. Net immigration was held at about 50,000 a year (it has trebled since) and was not then a political issue. However, they failed to deal adequately with a sharp rise in asylum claims which, combined with the failure of a computer system, left a serious problem for Labour. The new Conservative proposals are tough but carefully considered. Their main difficulty over asylum will be to find a location for overseas processing but the deterrent effect of earlier policy phases could reduce numbers considerably. An overall limit on immigration, agreed by Parliament every year, could be important in reassuring the public that the system as a whole is being brought under control and in taking the heat out of the present political debate.

The Liberal Democrat track record is entirely in favour of immigration and they have no proposals for any significant limits. Their view is that diversity is to be celebrated and encouraged.

UKIP's strong opposition to immigration is well known. They are the only party to specify a target (zero net immigration) but their policy proposals are vague.

The Green party and SNP both favour immigration but without much specific policy. Respect appears to favour unlimited immigration. Veritas is strongly opposed to immigration and to multiculturalism but is equally light on policy. The BNP manifesto calls for an immediate halt to immigration and voluntary repatriation with government financial assistance.

I. LABOUR PARTY

(a) Track Record

Labour's Manifestos

2. The present government's immigration policy has developed over the years with, until recently, little explanation or debate.

3. The manifesto of 1997[1] made no reference whatever to an increase in immigration. It stated:

> "Every country must have firm control over immigration and Britain is no exception. All applications, however, should be dealt with speedily and fairly."

It continued with a promise to reform the marriage rules and to ensure swift and fair decisions for asylum seekers. The Primary Purpose Rule (designed to inhibit the use of arranged marriage as a means of immigration) was abolished the month after the election.

4. Nor did the manifesto for 2001[2] give any indication of what lay ahead. The section on immigration read as follows:

> "People from abroad make a positive contribution to British society. As our economy changes and expands, so our rules on immigration need to reflect the need to meet skills shortages. The primary purpose rule has been ended and a right of appeal for family visitors has been introduced. Immigration rules will remain clear, firm and fair, and help ensure that those who come and work here continue to make a major contribution to our economic and social life."

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[1] New Labour because Britain deserves better page 35
[2] Ambitions for Britain page 34

White Paper

5. The White Paper "Secure Borders, Safe Haven" issued in February 2002[3] reported that work permits had been more than doubled to 104,000 in 2001. It also foreshadowed a number of relatively minor expansions of work related routes into the UK:
- the introduction of a Highly Skilled Migrant Programme
- easing the rules to permit post graduate students to switch into employment
- considering ways to meet the demand for short-term casual labour
- reviewing the Working Holiday Maker Scheme.

6. These expansions have all taken place. A Sector Based Scheme has been introduced for the food processing and hospitality industries providing for 15,000 permits and a Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme has been expanded from 10,000 to 16,250.

7. The overall result has been an increase in work permits from 42,000 in 1997 to 156,000 in 2004.

8. Britain was the only EU country (apart from Ireland) to open her labour market as soon as the ten new countries of Eastern Europe joined the EU. New workers have since been arriving from these countries at the rate of 10,000 a month. This is in addition to those from elsewhere granted work permits.

9. Net immigration has tripled from 47,000 in 1997 to 151,000 in 2003.

10. The track record is clear. Despite the tone of the two previous manifestos, there has been a consistent policy of promoting immigration on a substantial scale.

(b) Proposals

(i)   Work Permits

11. The government's "Five Year Strategy", published in February 2005, re-arranges the present scheme into four tiers, confines settlement to the skilled and introduces financial bonds to ensure the departure of those from high risk countries. The Sector Based Schemes are to be gradually unwound. A points system will be introduced for work permits. The criteria on which the points are based are, however, the existing criteria,

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[3] CM 5387

i.e. skills at NVQ3 level(A levels) and either a shortage occupation or a vacancy that cannot be filled by an EU worker. There appears to be no finer selection on the basis of 'points'. There will be pre-entry screening for TB in high risk countries (but not for HIV). The 2005 election manifesto also states that appeal rights for non-family immigration cases will be removed.

12. The main weakness is that there is to be no upper limit so the system will continue to be entirely employer driven. It is hard to see the purpose of a points system without a ceiling on numbers.

13. The 2005 manifesto states; "Our philosophy is simple: if you are ready to work hard and there is work for you to do, then you are welcome here". In 2004 the government gave permission for over a third of a million people to enter (or remain in) the UK for the purpose of work[4]. Some will, of course, later leave but the government have no means at present of knowing whether they have done so. Nor, apparently, is any account to be taken of the social impact of such large scale immigration.

(ii)   Asylum

14. The government's "Five Year Strategy" and 2005 manifesto commitments in respect of asylum amount to more of the same – continued efforts to speed up consideration and to reduce the scope for appeals, combined with fast-tracking and tagging applicants with apparently unfounded cases, expanding the use of detention and making greater efforts to remove failed asylum seekers. By 2008 all visa applicants will be finger printed to prevent people concealing their identity after entry. Asylum will be initially for five years only.

15. These are useful measures but they do little to address the major weakness of the system – the failure to remove the vast majority of those whose claims fail. Over the past six years, only one in four has been removed.

(iii)   Family reunion

16. The "Five Year Strategy" notes that the minimum age for spouses and partners has been raised to 18 and that the government will consider raising it to 21 if necessary to address the problem of forced marriages.

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[4] This number comprises 156,000 work permits, 130,000 East European Workers Registered, 46,000 working holiday makers, 16,000 seasonal agricultural workers, 15,000 au pairs, 5,000 highly skilled (estimate). Total 368,000.

The marriage must subsist for two years before settlement is granted. Those so admitted will not be able to sponsor further family members for five years.

17.   The 2005 election manifesto promises "an end to chain migration", but these are minor measures which will have very limited effect on it. The main factor is transcontinental arranged marriages.

(iv)   Other matters

18.   The government have promised to introduce Identity cards for all citizens.

19.   They have declined to introduce HIV or Hepatitis B tests for immigrants, although 47 other countries conduct such tests. They have also declined to test medical staff before they are recruited overseas.

II. CONSERVATIVE PARTY

(a) Track Record

20. For the last fifteen of the Conservative years (1982- 1997) immigration was not a significant political issue. Their declared policy was " to restrict severely the numbers coming to live permanently or to work in the United Kingdom."[5]

21. In fact, net immigration continued steadily. The average annual figure was 59,000 over the period 1988 – 1997.

22. Through much of the 1980s work permits were issued at a rate of 20-30,000 a year, rising to 42,000 in 1997. By comparison, 156,000 were issued in 2004.

23. The settlement of spouses ran at about 30,000 per year.

24. The weakest part of the record is asylum where the response to a surge in claims to 43,000 was inadequate. The introduction of a computer system (which failed) combined with a reduction in staff left an extremely difficult situation for Labour to inherit.

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[5] Home Office IND Annual Report, 1994.

25. Overall, acceptances for settlement (which lag several years behind immigration numbers) ran at about 50–60,000 a year compared to the present level of some 140,000.

(b) Proposals

(i)   Work Permits

26.   The Conservatives propose that there should be two types of work permit – temporary permits that would not lead to settlement and permanent ones that would.   The former would be primarily for transfers within international companies but would be subject to strict conditions. Employers would have to post a bond to guarantee departure and there would be no switching to other types of visa. Applications could be made for a settlement permit but within the quota.

27.   Settlement permits would be subject to an annual quota and would be allocated on a points based system. Points would be given for work skills, age, English language competency etc.

28.   This system, similar to that in Australia, has the advantage that it is not entirely employer driven.   It also takes into account the wider impact of immigration on society, public services etc.

(ii)   Asylum

29. The Conservatives propose a fundamental reform of the asylum system. They would withdraw from the present EU and international legal framework, attempt to negotiate fresh international agreements and pass national laws to implement a tighter and swifter asylum system. Those who destroyed their documents or who claimed only on discovery would be refused. The use of detention would be expanded. The effect of these changes would be to facilitate the return of failed asylum seekers. The long term aim is to end the present system whereby you have to get to Britain to claim asylum here. The Conservatives regard this as an incentive to people smugglers. The proposals involve setting up centres overseas where claimants could be sent to have their claims assessed. There would be an annual quota.

30.   This outcome would not be easy to achieve. The later stages depend on finding suitable sites overseas and there would be considerable legal and practical difficulties to overcome. The shift of processing of claims

to offshore centres could be expected to deter many asylum seekers, 70% of whose claims failed in 2003. However, it might also result in a significant increase in illegal immigration by people who are determined to enter the UK despite the tightening of the asylum system. It could, however, improve the climate for the reception of those who are genuine refugees. They have said that no genuine asylum seekers will be refused simply because the quota is full – although they might have to wait for a place.

(iii)   Family reunion

31.   The Conservatives have undertaken to consult on proposals involving raising the minimum age for spouses to 21 and tightening the rules on accommodation and support.

32.   This is an important area on which neither of the main parties has produced an effective policy.

(iv)   Other matters

33.   The Conservatives have proposed full medical tests for those coming to Britain for more than 12 months. Only TB will automatically preclude entry. Other conditions will be dealt with on a case by case basis. Applicants will pay their own costs. Asylum seekers will not be affected.

34.   The Conservatives' main proposal is that there should be an annual limit to immigration, agreed by Parliament. Within this there would be quotas for the three main streams of immigration – work permits, asylum and family reunion. They have not said what that limit should be but have spoken of "a substantial reduction" in immigration.

35.   This last is of cardinal importance. It will not be easy to achieve but it is feasible. Each major category would have to be managed downwards in the light of circumstances. Whatever the pace of progress, it would have the major advantage of transparency. If the limit was exceeded the government would have to explain why. The effect could well be to reduce substantially the widespread concern about the scale and pace of immigration into Britain.

III. LIBERAL DEMOCRATS

36.   The Liberal Democrats have played little part in the recent public debate about immigration, but they do have policies on the issue that have been developed over the last year. During a recent interview on *The World at One*, Charles Kennedy sought to play these down, emphasizing that his party was bound only by manifesto commitments.

(i)   Work permits

37.   The 2005 manifesto commits the Lib Dems to consulting with business and the public services to agree numbers of work permits for economic migration. At their 2004 Party Conference, they resolved to institute a quarterly, sector-based quota system, with input from bodies including the trade unions, as well as a green card scheme based on a points system, to replace the current work permit schemes.

38.   A quota system of this kind would be largely employer driven with little consideration of the social effects. The Lib Dems are opposed to any overall limit on immigration. The ratification, which they support, of the UN Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and their Families would increase the social security costs of economic migrants to the UK.

(ii)   Asylum

39.   The Lib Dems' manifesto commits them to establishing an agency, separate from the Home Office, for assessing asylum claims, continuing to adhere to the Common European Asylum Policy and allowing asylum seekers to work on arrival. The 2004 Party Conference also resolved to fast-track "manifestly founded" asylum cases, "front-load" resources into the initial decision-making process and made a number of proposals in respect of the National Asylum Support Service, many of which would entail increased costs.

40.   An ongoing commitment to the EU framework for asylum policy precludes fundamental reform of the system, whilst it is unlikely that separating the IND's functions from the Home Office would improve performance. (A somewhat similar system has been heavily criticised in Canada). Allowing asylum seekers to work risks encouraging the use of asylum as a back-door form of economic migration. The Lib Dem proposals would be likely to entail a rise in the number of claimants and in the cost of the asylum system.

(iii) Family Reunion

41.   The Liberal Democrats have not announced a policy on family reunion.

(iv) Other Matters

42.   The Lib Dems have also stated that they would establish an Independent Documentation Centre to provide independent country of origin information – but there is no evidence to suggest that the current Country Information Unit is deficient. The main issue, almost invariably, is whether the applicant is to be believed.

IV. UKIP

43.   UKIP's 2005 election manifesto states that the goal of their immigration policy is to approach zero net immigration. Withdrawal from the EU would enable national control to be reasserted. They insist that their policies would be so effective as to preclude the necessity for quotas.

(i) Work Permits

44.   UKIP would introduce a points system for work permits based on an identified need for specific skills and "other tests of suitability".

45.   Whilst withdrawal from the EU would expand the government's room for manoeuvre on labour migration, UKIP does not say how skills shortages would be identified nor whether and, if so to what extent, settlement rights would be retained.

(ii) Asylum

46.   UKIP would set national criteria for refugee status based on a "reinterpretation of parts of the 1951 Convention" and a revision of human rights law. The party also says it would resolve asylum cases within two weeks of the applicant's arrival in the UK as well as accelerating removals.

47.   Conservative and UKIP policy on asylum both entail substantive withdrawal from the EU and international legal framework and the re-

establishment of domestic, parliamentary control. UKIP's ambitions for improving the efficiency of the system (with commensurate cost savings) are unsubstantiated by any detail.

(iii)   Family Reunion

48.   UKIP promises stricter control over immigration via family reunion, indicating that this may require the reinstatement of the "primary purpose rule".

(iv)   Other Matters

49.   UKIP would institute "Britishness" tests for immigrants and encourage "full" assimilation. It would also introduce health checks for communicable diseases.

50.   The general thrust of UKIP's proposals is clear but there is little on which their feasibility can be judged.

V.   THE GREEN PARTY

51.   The Greens state that they expect their policies to reduce the "push" factors in asylum; that there should be full co-operation with countries of origin in asylum and immigration matters; that resources should be front-loaded into the initial asylum decision-making process; that asylum seekers should receive access to work and benefits; and that the UK should sign the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and their Families. The party supports the EU and international legal framework on asylum but would review social security aspects of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act.

VI.   THE SNP

52.   The SNP promises to "pursue an immigration policy that welcomes new Scots and encourages people to move back to Scotland". What this policy is, the SNP do not say.

VII.   VERITAS

53.   Veritas's manifesto is explicitly anti-multiculturalist. It includes commitments to introduce health and language tests for immigrants. Immigration would be based on the UK's need for particular skills and immigrants must have no criminal convictions. The manifesto also promises that the current "immoral" cost of the asylum system should be cut and the savings spent on "genuine" refugees.

VIII. THE BNP

54.   The BNP's manifesto calls for an immediate halt to all further immigration, the deportation of criminal and illegal immigrants, with a lifetime ban from entering the country for those who break immigration rules. It also calls for the introduction of a two-stage system of voluntary resettlement whereby legal immigrants and descendents of legal immigrants will be "afforded the opportunity to return to their lands of ethnic origin assisted by generous financial incentives both for individuals and for the countries in question". There would be an immediate 500% increase in spending on border controls, with further measures as necessary. Meanwhile, asylum would be limited to refugees from the UK's neighbouring countries.

55.   This is rhetoric, not serious policy.

IX.   RESPECT

56.   Respect calls for the defence of the rights of refugees to political asylum, reinstatement of their right to seek employment, an amnesty for illegal workers, ending dispersal of asylum seekers and an and to deportations.   This is clearly not a serious policy since it would mean that anyone who arrived in Britain could stay indefinitely with full access to the welfare state.

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