



Skewering those ‘zombie facts’ - bogus arguments for mass immigration

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A number of bogus arguments are often deployed in favour of mass immigration. These can be lazily wheeled out and buttressed by misleading or ‘zombie facts’ which refuse to die no matter how often they are proven to be false. Some politicians and commentators love falling back on them, and they inevitably trickle down through public debate. What starts as expedient truth-bending can soon be heard in chatter across the land; from the boardroom to the bar, from Parliament to the pubs. These myths often sadly go unchallenged, but we’re going to tackle a number of the worst ones here.

1. ‘People who want to see a reduction in immigration are racist’

It’s outrageous that some deploy this vile slander to describe tens of millions of people who simply believe that it is not sustainable to push up [the](#) population by **a million every three years** (see [paper](#)), while massively dividing our community, with historically unprecedented levels of immigration to which voters never even gave their consent.

Sceptical views towards large-scale immigration are legitimate and rooted in real concerns about a UK population that is expanding much too quickly for public services, the NHS, the job market, housing and schools to cope. Millions of people are also worried that society is absorbing far too many people, far too quickly, for effective assimilation to occur (something that has been supported by the findings of a [report](#) by the government’s former integration czar). There is nothing racist about being concerned about high immigration when this is the driver of 80% of the UK’s rapid population growth – it’s basic common sense.

Far from being xenophobic, there is net support for reductions in immigration among all ethnic groups and age groups ([Hanbury](#), 2019).

2. ‘Overall, migrants pay in more than they take out’

This is incorrect. An [Immigration Briefing](#) published by the *BBC* in January 2020 uses research that was published by the government’s expert Migration Advisory Committee (MAC), and carried out for them by Oxford Economics. This concluded that *in 2016/17 migrants overall paid in £4.3bn less than they took out*. This is not an isolated finding. Research into the fiscal impact of immigration over the past two decades has consistently found an **overall negative contribution** by the migrant population year after year. As the *BBC* [reported in 2014](#), research published in the *Economic Journal* then showed the overall contribution of immigrants to have been *minus £114bn* between 1995 and 2011.

Different types of immigration have differing effects. The MAC reported that the average contribution to UK public finances of migrants from the EEA in 2016/17 was £2,310. The equivalent for migrants from the rest of the world was minus £840. As the *BBC* has put it, non-EEA migrants '*received on average more in benefits and public services than they contributed*'. It is worth bearing in mind that nearly two-thirds of non-British immigration in the year to September 2019 was from *outside the EU*.

In light of these figures, it is not at all surprising that a report by the House of Lords Select Committee on Economic Affairs concluded that '*the fiscal impact (of immigration) cannot be used to justify large-scale immigration*'.

3. 'Migrants are much less likely to claim benefits'

The tricks here are usually to give 'benefits' a specially wide definition so as to include all the retired Brits receiving the state pension they have paid for, or an especially narrow definition so as to count only unemployment or out-of-work benefits (such as Jobseekers Allowance or Employment and Support Allowance). Whilst figures from the Department of Work and Pensions show that working-age migrants to the UK are less likely to claim **out-of-work** benefits, more of the total benefits bill is paid to people who are **in work** – e.g. tax credits and housing benefit.

Working-age benefits to all migrants in 2015/16 cost an estimated £13.6 billion. EU migrants cost £4.7 bn (or £13 million per day). The estimated bill for non-EU migrants was nearly double this - £8.9 billion (see our briefing on the impact of immigration on [jobs and welfare](#)).

4. 'Britain is only the 39th most crowded country in the world'

Nearly 90% of immigrants to the UK come to England, and England now has a population density of 430 people per square kilometre. By comparison with large European countries, England is nearly twice as crowded as Germany, and three and a half times as crowded as France. Looking at it from a global angle, the only large countries that are more crowded than England are Bangladesh, Taiwan, Rwanda and South Korea.

5. 'The public are not opposed to immigration'

This is another attempt to avoid the central issue which is about the *level* of immigration. Of course very few people are entirely opposed to all immigration whatever the circumstances (although only a tiny fraction want to see an increase). Migration Watch UK has always been clear that some immigration is welcome indeed, but this does not mean that unlimited immigration is.

The sensible majority of the public agree. Recent surveys have found that an average of 30 million people (about six in ten UK adults) want the level of immigration to be reduced (see our [paper](#) explaining this figure). One poll found this was as high as 73%. Meanwhile, nearly two-thirds see the level of immigration as a major public concern (see [paper](#)).

Although, some commentators suggest that views of immigration have become more positive in recent years, polling (for example by Ipsos) suggests that a sizeable number of those who feel more positive do so only because:

- a. they believe that Brexit will reduce the number of migrants coming to the UK and/or
- b. The EU migrant crisis has dropped out of the headlines.

Should post-Brexit immigration changes fail to deliver a significant reduction in immigration levels - or even lead to an increase - public concern is likely to rise sharply (see our [brief](#) on public opinion). Similarly, the public will be aware that, despite the UK having been relatively shielded from the impact of the migrant crisis, grants of asylum and resettlement are now at the highest level since 2003, while the asylum system is beset with serious abuse problems.

6. 'Targets for net migration are pointless so the government is right to abandon them'

Between 2010 and 2017, the Conservatives stood on a repeated election manifesto commitment to reduce the level of net migration to the tens of thousands (it is now over 200,000). This target had a sound basis of being aimed at reining in unprecedented population growth in an unusually crowded country. With net migration at less than 100,000 per year the population would continue to grow gradually over the next twenty years but stabilise at lower than 70 million. In contrast, with net migration at current levels (over 200,000 per year), it is set to surpass 70 million within the next decade or so (see [ONS projections](#))

Partly for that reason, the target was very popular. A June 2018 poll found that 73% of the public supported the target. Thus, it was baffling that the government dumped this policy just as Brexit was on the verge of giving them more power to meet it.

Targets are extremely useful tools for focusing policy without which the level of net migration today would undoubtedly be considerably higher. Efforts to meet it were not helped by the free movement rules which allowed EU migration to double between 2010 and 2015. However, simply replacing EU with non-EU migration, while keeping the overall level unsustainably high, is no substitute for delivering on this important and popular promise.

7. 'The NHS would collapse without immigrants'

A number of migrants make a very valuable contribution to the NHS but only a very small proportion of immigrants in the UK work in the NHS. The reason we have a large number of vacancies is because the UK has failed to invest properly in the training of UK staff over the past two decades or so, and in retaining those staff who are trained. There is no reason why the UK should have to rely so much on foreign-qualified doctors when other countries in Europe have only 5% (Italy), 10.5% (Germany) and 15% (France) of foreign qualified doctors, while the UK has 35% (OECD figures – also see our [piece](#) on this topic).

Scrapping nursing bursaries and requiring a degree for those who want to go into nursing threw up unnecessary hurdles to many capable applicants. We're glad to see the Government is promising to reverse the first of these.

The shortage of training places for doctors is particularly acute. According to consultant surgeon Professor J Meirion Thomas, the annual number of applications to UK medical schools fluctuates between 70,000 and 85,000. However, with around 7,000 places available, many potential medics with the required A-Level grades are being turned away. That is shameful.

8. 'Migrants do not take social housing'

It is often claimed that migrants do not significantly occupy social housing. However, priority for social housing is given to those considered most in 'need'. So whilst most migrants do live in private rentals, official data shows almost 10% of social housing in England is occupied by non-UK nationals. In London this figure is around 20%. These are migrants who have not been here long enough to become British citizens (usually five years) or who have chosen not to do so.

9. 'Immigration has no effect on jobs'

The Migration Advisory Committee reported in January 2012 that 100 additional non-EU migrants might be associated with a reduction in employment of 23 native workers over the period 1995-2010. The government [noted](#) that this occurred *'both during periods of economic growth and downturn'*. There is considerable evidence of job displacement in key sectors such as construction, transport, hospitality and retail.

In 2018, the Migration Advisory Committee [found](#) *'some evidence 'immigration reduces employment and raises unemployment of some groups (e.g. the young and less well-educated)'. These results were 'subject to significant uncertainty'*.

The law of supply and demand dictates that increasing supply to the labour market will create more competition for the same jobs, thus leading to wage suppression and failing to reduce unemployment in line with job creation. Furthermore, increased strain on infrastructure, public services, and housing makes the cost of living higher and quality of life lower. Many people therefore need to seek supplementary work to maintain the same standard of living. This puts even more competition into the jobs market.

A policy which prioritises giving UK workers the training, hours and pay they would like rather than seeking ever more staffing from abroad would not only see a real-terms increase in wages, but could also help to keep cost of living and taxation down.

10. 'Immigration makes no difference to wages'

As previously mentioned, wage suppression is often caused by increasing competition in the labour market.

A report by the Bank of England, published in December 2015, found that immigration may have some, small, negative impact on wages for some low-paid workers. In 2018, the Migration Advisory Committee [found](#) *'some evidence that migration has reduced earnings growth for the lower-paid'*.

11. 'Britain is a nation of immigrants'

Census data shows that in 1851 the UK had a very small foreign-born population, with just 100,000 people (1.5% of the population) born overseas. By 1951 this figure had reached 4.3% of the population.

More recently, from 2004 until 2018, the non-UK born share of the population jumped from 9% to more than 14% (see [ONS statistics for the UK](#)).

The suggestion that *'Britain is a nation of immigrants'* may have been borrowed from American political discourse but is inappropriate as a description of the UK.

Since the Norman conquest, Britain has grown and changed with waves of invasion, war, and some occasional examples of immigration. Previous cases of immigration to the UK have been small-scale and single waves. For example, the Huguenots who came to Britain from France at a rate of around 1,000 per year over the course of 40-50 years. This is obviously different from the historically unprecedented level of net migration which we have experienced recently – immigration levels tripled in just two years from 1997 onwards and net migration has averaged about 250,000 (the size of a small city) every year over the past decade.

12. 'Britain has been closed to the world's top talent – instead we should loosen visa controls to create a "Global Britain"'

With 3.1 million visas granted in the year ending September 2019 - a 9% increase compared with the previous year - claims that the UK is not already accessible to the world fly in the face of the facts. International companies are free to post senior staff in and out of Britain as they choose (using the intra-company transfer route) and there are routes for high net worth individuals such as entrepreneurs and investors to come to Britain. In 2016, Deloitte completed a Global Immigration Study which ranked the UK third in the world in terms of speed of processing times for visas for skilled workers. As an illustration of the fact that a huge number of workers already come here, there were grants of 190,000 work visas in the year to September 2019 – *the highest level since 2008* (and this does not include EU citizens who came for work but did not need a visa).

13. 'Curbing immigration would prevent the Nobel winners of the future migrating to the UK'

There is no evidence to back this up. The first Nobel prizes were awarded in 1901 with the first Nobel Prize being awarded to a Briton the following year. Since the inception of the Nobel Prize, there have been 97 winners from Britain. Of those 97, 20 were born abroad, of which seven had British heritage i.e. their parents were British. Of the remaining 13, five came to the UK as refugees and the remaining eight came to the UK to continue with their academic careers with the exception of one who came to study his undergraduate degree in the UK. Therefore, not one Nobel Laureate would conceivably have been prevented from coming to the UK as a result of the kind of immigration controls implemented since 2010.

14. 'Foreign students are vital to British universities'

The government has placed no restriction on the number of overseas students that can come here for study and genuine international students can be a great boon for the UK. However, it is not so good if British students are crowded out of some of the UK's best institutions simply because university vice-chancellors are keen to bring in more money by accruing higher fees.

15. '97% of international students leave at the end of their studies'

This is incorrect. Although Home Office [analysis](#) finds that genuine students will usually go home at the end of their course, between 50,000 and 60,000 extend their visa for further study, work or family each year. As the government has [noted](#): "*Not all students depart the UK when they have completed their studies and significant numbers are granted settlement.*" Indeed, between 2009 and 2015 an average of 27,000 non-EU

migrants who originally arrived as students, or as the dependants of students, were granted permanent settlement each year. It is also the case that, based on the average between 2015 and 2017, about 12,000 per year do not leave on time in line with the requirements of their visa ([ONS analysis](#), Figure 5). In light of the experience of widescale abuse of the student route, tough measures must be kept in place to encourage compliance. As the Home Office has said: *“Investigation into the abuse of English language testing [as part of the student visa application process] revealed systemic cheating which was indicative of significant organised fraud.”* This cannot be allowed to rear its head again.

16. ‘Foreign students are being deterred from studying in the UK’

In the year to September 2019, the number of UK university visa grants for overseas students was 222,000 – the highest level on record. What has fallen is the number coming to study courses at below degree level since the government cracked down on widespread abuse of the student visa route. Interviews have been rolled out and nearly 1,000 bogus colleges have been closed down.

Genuine international students should be welcomed. However, there needs to be robust measures to guard against those who exploit the system to pursue low-value degrees in order to gain entrance to the UK with no intention of serious study.

17. ‘Immigration is necessary to grow the economy’

The economic impacts of immigration depend on what is being measured. While an increase in population will usually increase the size of the economy simply through there being more people in the country, this does not mean that anyone has any more than they had before or would have had without immigration. It is misleading to point to growth in GDP which measures the size of the economic pie rather than the size of each slice of the pie which is measured by GDP per capita. For more on immigration and the economy, read this [briefing](#).

18. ‘Nasty UK policy prevents us helping the vulnerable around the world’

On the contrary, in 2017 and 2018 the UK resettled more refugees from outside Europe than any other EU member state. In total, the UK offered protection – in the form of asylum, humanitarian protection, alternative forms of leave and resettlement – to just under 19,500 people in the year ending September 2019 (up 28% compared with the previous year). This was the highest number of people granted protection in the UK in a single year since the year ending September 2003 (HO [visa statistics](#)).

19. ‘Immigrants are needed to pay our pensions’

This is a ludicrous argument which the Labour government dropped after years of use. The reality is that immigrants themselves grow older so that there would have to be a continuing and increasing inflow of immigrants to have any long-term effect. The Turner Commission on pensions made it clear that *‘only high immigration can produce more than a trivial reduction in the projected dependency ratio over the next 50 years’*. They calculated that even net migration of 300,000 a year would produce only a temporary effect unless still higher levels of immigration continued in later years. The ONS has [noted](#) that *‘higher levels of net migration slow population ageing but will not prevent it’*.

20. 'Immigration will help pay off Britain's debt'

The former Labour government also dropped this ridiculous argument after realising how unsound it was. The claim is that, without immigration, public sector net debt will rise to 187% of GDP by the middle of the century, up from 74% today. This is based on the misleading Office for Budget Responsibility's Fiscal Sustainability Report of 2013 in which they compare the impossible scenario of 'natural change (which would require no movement in or out of the country), against more reasonable estimates of net migration over time.

But the OBR conclusions are based on the false assumption that migrants outperform the UK-born because they are more likely to be of working age. This assumption ignores the fact that migrant groups have very different outcomes in the labour market. In fact, our analysis shows that the numbers of non-UK born in the labour market with relatively weak economic characteristics compared with the UK-born outnumber those with stronger economic characteristics by around two to one.

Moreover, the OBR fails to take into account the cost of additional infrastructure spending for the larger population and, in any case, they admit themselves that immigration only delays the problem of debt since immigrants also grow old. It is well recognised by those on different sides of the immigration debate that immigration is ***not*** a sustainable solution to an ageing society unless immigration is allowed to increase continuously.

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