



The Great British Migration Crisis

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THE GREAT BRITISH MIGRATION CRISIS

The question of migration is at the forefront of the British policy debate. The question has been on the agenda for nearly a quarter of a century now, ever since the recent waves of mass migration to the country began. But the actual dynamics of the debate—together with the underlying drivers of migration—remain unclear. This, arguably, is why the debate appears interminable with one side becoming increasingly embittered and taking increasingly radical actions.

MIGRATION AND PUBLIC OPINION

Until 1993, the level of net migration in the United Kingdom was roughly [balanced](#). But in 1994, it started to increase at around 77,000 people per year. By 2000, when the issue started to register as a major concern for the British public, net migration had reached 158,000 people per year. When we compare net migration with public concern, there is a clear trend: As immigration increases, so too does public concern.

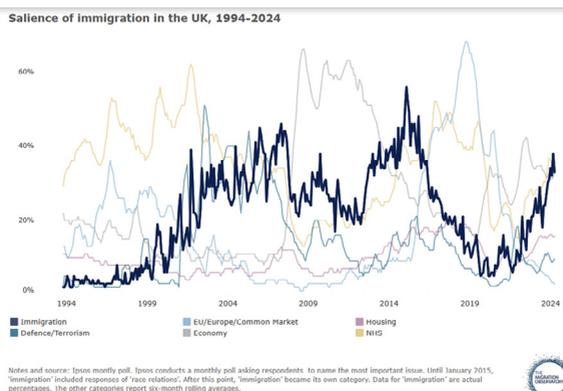


Figure 1. Salience of Immigration in the UK, 1994-2024. Source: The Migration Observatory.

We see a massive break, however, in the early 2020s. As Figure 2 shows, after a dip during the pandemic, net migration soared to record levels with around 1.2 million visas issued in 2022. This migration appears to have been of the type that is typically most controversial politically. Due to the impact of Brexit, the number of high-skilled and culturally similar workers immigrating from Europe went negative, while the number of non-EU migrants skyrocketed. There was also a large increase in “humanitarian and asylum” visas granted, and the number of dependents rose, indicating a large amount of so-called “chain migration.”

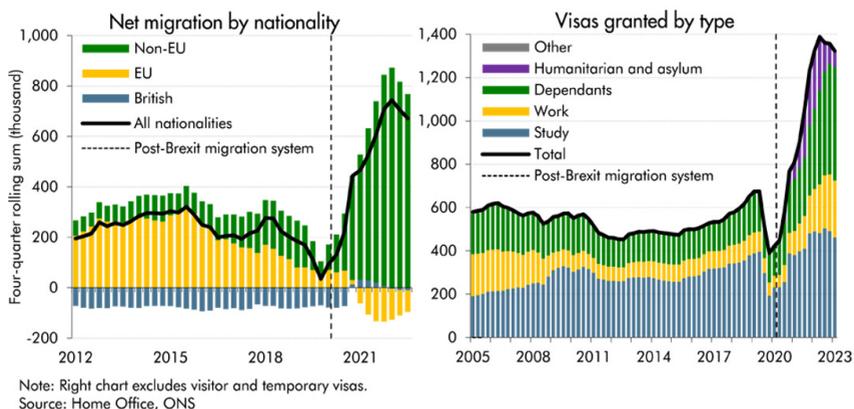


Figure 2. Net Migration by Nationality and Visas Granted by Type. Source: Home Office.

Yet as Figure 1 shows, the level of public concern over migration never returned to its peak in the mid-2010s. Why was the public not paying as much attention, even though immigration had reached record levels? Figure 3 gives us a clue. During the waves of migration in the 2000s and 2010s, concern about migration changed in a similar manner throughout the population regardless of party affiliation. While Labour Party voters expressed consistently lower levels of concern, their concern about migration nevertheless increased in step with that of Conservative voters. During the most recent wave of migration, however, the correlation is much weaker. While Conservative voters became much more concerned about migration, many Labour voters were indifferent. The cause was very likely the post-Brexit media and political environment.

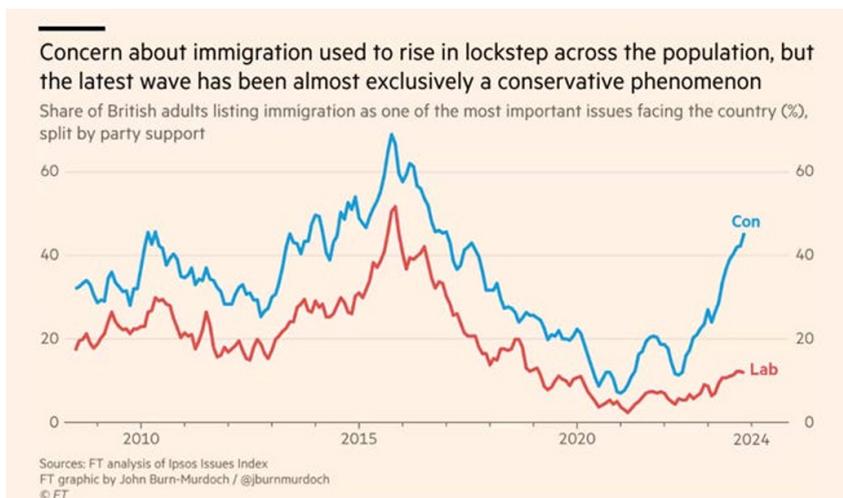


Figure 3. Share of British Adults Listing Immigration as One of the Most Important Issues Facing the Country, by Party Support. Source: Financial Times.

After the Brexit vote, severe political polarization took hold in Britain. As in the United States, polarization spread from an initial issue—Brexit—to a host of other issues. So, the immigration issue became “coded” as an issue related to Brexit. This means that a person firmly against Brexit will be reticent to express concerns about immigration, as doing so might “code” them as having sympathies for Brexit. This dynamic probably also explains why even among Conservative voters, concerns about immigration never reached their mid-2010s peak even though immigration was skyrocketing: In post-Brexit Britain, expressing concerns about immigration is more controversial than it was in pre-Brexit Britain. This explains why the immigration debate in Britain has become so bitter: A minority of people in Britain—mostly conservatives and those immediately impacted by immigration—are getting extremely angry about immigration levels, but this anger is having a hard time finding a political outlet because of the post-Brexit media and political environment. This likely explains why riots broke out last year and the Starmer government’s increasingly “police state”-style tactics when it comes to the immigration question.

STRUCTURAL CAUSES

Another misunderstood aspect of the migration debate is the underlying drivers of the migration. Once again, this misunderstanding has to do with the heavy politicization of the issue. Supporters of immigration tend to view the issue in moral terms. That is, they argue that immigration increases “cultural diversity” and is therefore a positive. Those who are critical of immigration tend to buy into this framing and see it as their job to point out the negative aspects of immigration. The reality, however, is that mass migration in Britain is a political-economic problem. In fact, it is part and parcel not just of the British state’s economic program but also of its plans to fiscally sustain the British state itself.

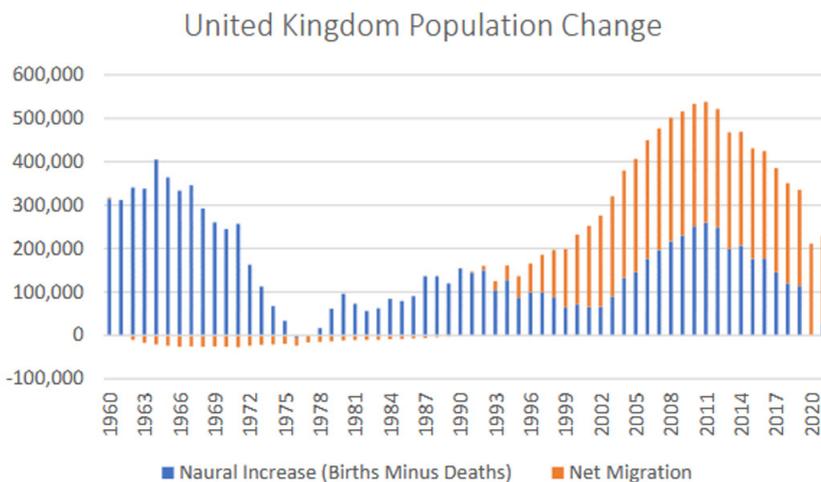


Figure 4. Population Change in the UK. Source: Office for National Statistics.

Figure 4 shows the growth of the British population. The “natural increase” shown in blue refers to the number of people born in the country minus the number of people who died. As we can see, the natural increase is now effectively zero. Starting in the late 1990s, Britain began increasing net migration to make up for the falling natural increase, and this is the population growth strategy that the country has been pursuing ever since.

The reason that this strategy is required is because British birth rates have been below the replacement rate for half a century—the last time that Britain had birth rates above replacement rate was in 1972. As we can see in Figure 4, the impact of these low birth rates is now making itself felt. The two key determinates of economic growth are productivity growth and population growth, and since Britain has had close to [zero productivity growth](#) for over 15 years, it needs to increase its population to continue growing its economy.

The British government understands these dynamics. The Office for Budget Responsibility (OBR), which is the forecasting body tied to the British Treasury, factors the need for immigration into their fiscal projections. As we can see in Figure 5, the OBR only considers the British public debt to be sustainable in the case of either high or medium levels of immigration. In a situation of low migration, the OBR forecasts show the public debt burden growing and presumably becoming unsustainable over the long run.

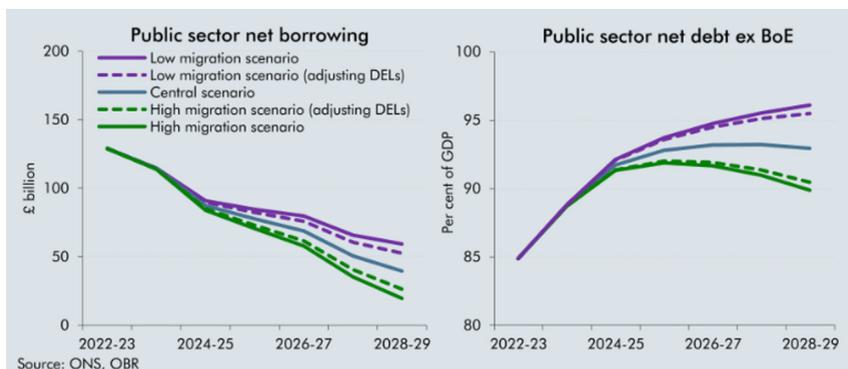


Figure 5. Public Sector Net Borrowing and Public Sector Net Debt in the UK. Source: Home Office and Office for Budget Responsibility.

The OBR recently published the amount of net immigration that their forecasts assume. Figure 6 shows the “central scenario” in the public debt projections: around 300,000 net migrants to Britain every year. Although this chart only runs until 2028, what the OBR is effectively arguing is that unless the country increases its fertility rate, Britain will have to allow 300,000 net migrants into the country every year for the

foreseeable future. If the British fertility rate falls any lower—and there is already evidence that this is happening—even higher numbers of migrants will be required for the OBR to meet its debt projections. At a minimum, unless there is an increase in the British fertility rate, the country will have to accept three million net migrants every decade. This represents around 4.5 percent of the population. Around [16 percent](#) of the British population is already foreign born, meaning that within two decades roughly a third of the country’s population will have been born outside of Britain.

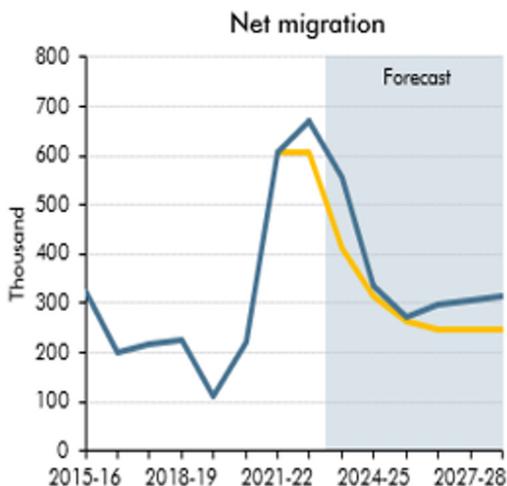


Figure 6. Net migration to the UK. Source: Office for Budget Responsibility.

CONCLUSION

Examining Britain’s migration crisis does not paint a nice picture of the country’s future. Half a century of low birth rates together with bloated social spending and stagnant productivity growth has led the government to make its official economic policy the importation of labor from abroad. Meanwhile, the population appears to be increasingly unable to express their concerns about these large waves of migration due to domestic political dynamics. Some people appear to be purposely ignoring the problem in case they are “coded” in a way that they find embarrass-

ing, while others are concerned but are increasingly made to feel that their concerns are “fringe” or even dangerous. Unless something drastic changes in Britain in the coming years, this looks like a recipe for civil and social unrest.



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