



Immigration at the party conferences, 2014

Summary

1. Labour camouflaged their record on immigration and their lack of any commitment, let alone policies to reduce it by focusing on relatively trivial labour market measures. The Liberal Democrats had nothing significant to say. UKIP repeated their intention to adopt a Point Base System – the very policy that led to chaos under Labour. They also mentioned a target of 50,000 but it was so vaguely defined as to have little meaning. The Conservatives minimised references to immigration but the Prime Minister made a clear reaffirmation of his commitment to limiting immigration and he also made an important commitment to put EU Freedom of Movement “at the heart of his renegotiation of British EU membership”. He was deliberately vague as to what his actual demands would be but this could yet turn out to be a historic decision.

The Labour Conference

2. The text of Mr Miliband’s speech contained but two vacuous statements on immigration. His failure, in the event, even to mention the subject was emblematic of Labour’s desire to duck the issue as best they could.

3. The Shadow Home Secretary’s speech (key points at Annex A) was notable for its silence on non-EU migration which accounts for two thirds of the 3.7 million net foreign migration under Labour.

4. A pledge to scrap the government’s immigration target left no indication of what level of immigration Labour wish to see, still less any commitment to reduce current levels, and certainly no measures that might have any significant effect on the inflow.

5. The removal of students from net migration removes at least half the overall inflow from consideration.

6. The focus on labour market measures was intended to give the impression that the impact of East European migration on British workers would be addressed without, of course, admitting that it had been harmful to them.

7. Overall, the purpose seems to have been to camouflage the fact that Labour has no policy, and perhaps no intention, to reduce the scale of immigration.

The Conservative Conference

8. In a wide ranging speech, the Prime Minister spoke briefly but decisively on immigration. He reaffirmed his commitment to controlling it and pledged that he would put Freedom of Movement at the heart of his renegotiation of British EU membership. He was carefully vague as to what his precise demands would be.

9. The Prime Minister also foreshadowed a Modern Slavery Bill, measures to build affordable houses that could not be “snapped up” by foreign buyers and a pledge to scrap the Human Rights Act and introduce a British Bill of Rights within the next Parliament.

10. Finally, he pledged three million apprenticeships in order to make cheap foreign labour less desirable.

11. In her speech, the Home Secretary focused on the terrorist threat. She said that net migration remained too high and that this was a result of EU Freedom of Movement. She added that *“where the government control immigration, it has brought it down to the levels of the 1990’s”*.

The Liberal Democrat Conference

12. The Liberal Democrats made no policy commitments on immigration. The deputy Prime Minister criticized Labour for having “obliterated trust in our immigration system” and accused the Conservatives of “quietly ditching their commitment to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands”.

13. Vince Cable, the Business Secretary, made a pro-immigration speech in which he claimed that the Liberal Democrats were “the voice of sanity”. (Annex B).

UKIP Conference

14. Nigel Farage claimed that immigration would dominate next year’s general election and described Britain as “borderless” but had little to say about a policy to tackle it.

15. Policy was left to Steven Woolfe, their new immigration spokesman. In his proposal (Annex C) he pledged to introduce an Australian style Points Based System and pledged to bring net migration for employment down to 50,000 a year.

16. He seemed to be unaware that the Australian system is designed to increase high skilled legal immigration. His target of 50,000 is so vague as to have little meaning. There was no mention of dependants, nor of family or student migration. Nor was there any indication of how such a scheme would be implemented.

Conclusion

17. Immigration received a great deal more attention than in previous years but there was very little constructive discussion. Both Labour and the Lib Dems would clearly prefer to avoid serious discussion and UKIP had no significant policies to offer. The main development, therefore, was the Prime Minister’s declaration that he would put EU freedom of movement at the heart of his renegotiation of EU membership. This may yet prove to be a historic decision.

17 October 2014

Annex A

- The Shadow Home Secretary said that not just right wing people were worried about immigration, but promised Labour would never engage in an 'arms rhetoric' on immigration.
- In a repeat of her 2013 speech she admitted that Labour 'got things wrong on immigration' when in office, once again pointing specifically to the lifting of transitional controls in 2004 and saying nothing about the massive increase in non-EU immigration under Labour.
- Promised that Labour would implement stronger border controls to tackle illegal immigration if it won power and promised proper entry and exit checks so that visas 'can be enforced and criminals stopped.'

Annex B

- The Business Secretary, Vince Cable, criticised the net migration target as 'plucked out of the air and totally unenforceable' and said that the government had tried to 'close the borders to skills and talent.'
- He also said that foreign students were being discouraged and were instead choosing to go to Australia and the US. He criticised the closing of the post study work route.
- He said that it was up to the Lib Dems to tell the public an uncomfortable truth - that immigration made an overwhelmingly positive contribution.

Annex C

- UKIP's immigration spokesman Steven Woolfe outlined a series of measures. He said that UKIP would strengthen the border by increasing the number of frontline border staff by 2,500.
- He also pledged to increase by another notch the language skills test for permanent residence.
- UKIP would support measures to abolish certain parts of the Dublin Treaty on asylum to do with identifying the nationality of illegal immigrants who had no identity documents.
- Europeans would be treated the same as non-Europeans in all immigration matters. (The inference obviously being the UKIP would pull the UK out of the EU, hence no freedom of movement).