



Did Labour conceal a change in immigration policy?

Introduction

1 Speaking in response to an emergency question in Parliament today, the Minister for Immigration claimed that:

- The Labour Government had inherited a pattern of immigration from their predecessors
- There was no evidence of a change in immigration policy by Labour in the period 1997-2001 and, therefore, no concealed political motive.

Both claims are misleading.

Past patterns

2 Until the mid 1980's there was a net outflow of people from the United Kingdom. From the mid 80's until the mid 90's there was a net inflow which averaged about 50,000 a year. Since 1997 there has been a clear upward trend during which net immigration, allowing for British emigration, increased by more than a factor of four. Net foreign immigration tripled from 107,000 in 1997 to 333,000 in 2007. Clearly, the pattern of migration under Labour was not remotely similar to the previous period.

A policy change by Labour?

3 The most obvious change was the massive increase in work permits which were quadrupled between 1997 and 2007. A key moment was a speech delivered by Mr Blunkett, as Home Secretary, to the Social Market Foundation on 26 June 2002. Having remarked that most asylum seekers were actually seeking economic migration, he continued:

"So why not facilitate that economic migration? Why not open up in greater degree the opportunity for people to come here, to work here, to develop their family here openly and legally. I have doubled the number of work permits this year to 150,000. We have opened up new immigration routes in terms of skilled workers and in terms of those who are coming for a short stay or for seasonal work. We need, in Government, to get agreement in service sector, low skill, no skill work, to be able to do the same.....

In other words, there is a massive social as well as economic agenda. But to sell it to the British people and to avoid the fear of change and flux which always creates tension and the danger of racists exploiting it, we need to do that effectively and legally. We need to have integration programmes that work."

4 It was also Mr Blunkett who said on the Newsnight programme on 12 November 2003 that there was "no obvious upper limit" to the number of immigrants who could settle in the UK. He said that Britain had always been "crowded" and that the (then) current net inflow of 172,000 was sustainable.

5 In his diaries, Mr Blunkett remarked in March 2002:

"Every time I want to do something, the Department argues with it. Everything I've done of any worth on immigration and nationality has been in spite of the Department rather than with their support. No wonder the Tories didn't sort it out, because they didn't use their Special Advisors effectively at all."

This remark has gained new significance in the light of the revelations from Mr Andrew Neather, a Political Adviser at the time, who revealed in the Evening Standard that there was a secret political motive behind the expansion of immigration so as to impose multiculturalism on Britain, although only economic arguments were advanced lest Labour's traditional working class supporters should strongly object.

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