



A Liberal Democrat Recipe for the Abandonment of Immigration Control

1. A Centre Forum paper published on 23 December contains 21 recommendations. Eighteen are relatively trivial. The other three seem designed to destroy the coalition government's efforts to control immigration.

2. This intention is camouflaged by the claim that immigration policy should be structured to promote economic growth – a case which the authors believe is easier to sell to a sceptical public than purely economic arguments which, even if understood, are not believed. However, the paper produces no evidence whatsoever that immigration policy is a serious constraint on growth. A glaring omission is any reference to the nearly 500 million EU citizens who are entirely free to come and work in the UK. Nor is there any attempt at balancing the advantages of controlling immigration against the costs that stem from very high levels of immigration. Indeed, the paper even claims that numbers are irrelevant to a managed immigration policy; not many would agree with that.

3. The three recommendations that would undermine all that the coalition government has achieved are the following:

- a) That student and intra-company transfers should be removed from the immigration statistics (Recommendation 1)

This ignores the central point that genuine students and intra-company transfers (ICTs) are recorded as they leave as well as on arrival. Thus, genuine people in these categories do not affect net migration. This suggestion also completely ignores the growing body of evidence that students overstaying their visas are a major part of net non-EU migration; the latest statistics suggest that their rate of departure is only about one third of their rate of arrival. As for ICTs, the paper admits that "the system is generally felt to work well; the government should avoid tinkering with it" (page 61).

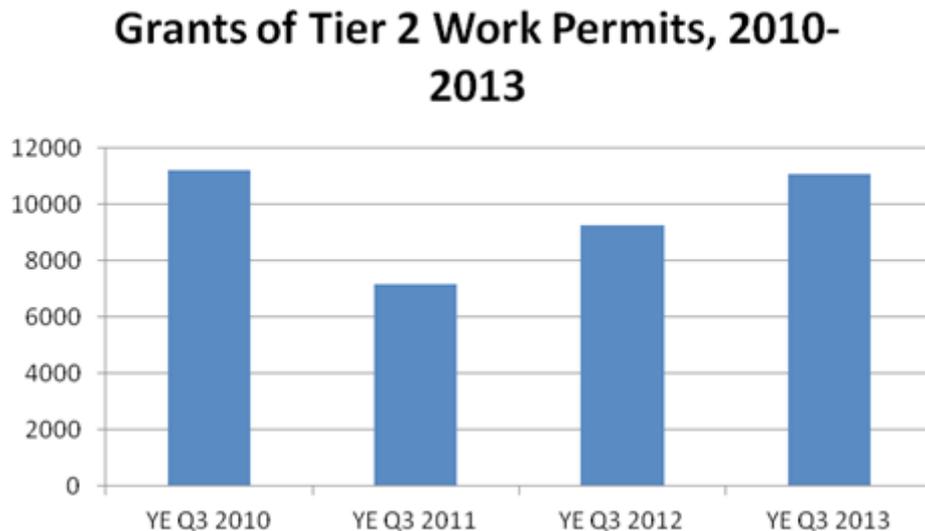
- b) All caps should be abandoned (Recommendation 5).

The paper misleadingly refers to "an overall cap". There is, of course, no such thing. There is a broad policy objective described as "tens of thousands". This is not a cap.

In fact the only numerical cap of any significance is the annual limit of 20,700 on Tier 2 Work Permits. The paper admits (page 22) that "applications are so far well within the cap". Indeed so. In fact, since the cap was introduced only about half have ever been taken up. The latest statistics show that only 11,000 Tier 2 General work permits were granted in the year ending September 2013. The Home Office website states that for December 2013 there were 6,725 Tier 2 permits available. This limit, therefore, can hardly be a significant impediment on growth.

Instead, the paper misleadingly quotes a hostile CBI statement of December 2010 which referred to the initial *temporary* cap imposed while more permanent arrangements were worked out, not the present arrangements (page 47).

Figure 1. Grants of Tier 2 Work Permits, 2010-2013 (Home Office Visa Statistics)



c) Re-introduction of the post study work route (Recommendation 17). This was originally introduced for STEM subjects but was later expanded at various times by the Labour government to cover all graduates at all levels and became, as described by the Migration Advisory Committee, one of the most generous schemes of its kind in the world. The Home Office found however that graduates were staying on for two years often to work in menial jobs and consequently scrapped the visa. There is, in any case, no need to reintroduce this visa since graduates already have four months at the end of their course in which to find graduate level work in any field so long as it pays at least £20,600 a year.

4. The remaining recommendations flow from a collection of complaints from business which are mainly about process rather than policy. Some of them, described as “a few simple improvements” (page 64) require attention.

5. The paper admits that Liberal Democrat immigration policy at the last election was a disaster. It recognises that “the damage done to the Lib Dems by the attention paid to the earned route to citizenship has effectively placed the Liberal Democrats at the margins of debates over immigration over the past three years”. It also accepts that their earlier proposal for a regional Points Based System that nobody in the business community wanted would have been “massively impractical” (page 42). Apparently, there is to be a strategic review of immigration policy. It is to be hoped that it will be a great improvement on this document.

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