



## Public opinion on immigration

### Summary

1. A paper that casts doubt on the strength of public opinion on immigration has been embraced by the immigration lobby<sup>1</sup>. However, the opinion survey on which it was based bore no relation to the policy measures actually proposed by the government.

### Detail

2. The Migration Observatory report "Thinking behind the Numbers – Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain"<sup>2</sup> purports to describe public opinion on particular groups of immigrants which, they suggest, has implications for the policy debate: *"Policies that respond to the overall public preference for reduced immigration without taking account of these differences (of preferences between different groups) may reduce immigration in ways that a majority of the public does not support"*.

3. However, the survey appears to have been conducted without reference to the policies now being proposed by the government:

- a) The policy approach envisaged by the government was not described to the respondents.
- b) No context was provided as regards the number or proportion of migrants in each category.
- c) Respondents were not asked about any of the policy measures actually proposed.

4. On the contrary, people were asked their opinion on a range of matters that are not connected with present policies. For example, they were asked about their views on whether the number of low skilled workers admitted to Britain should be reduced or not. In fact, as the report recognises elsewhere, the only low skilled migrants admitted are from the EU over which the government has no control.

5. Respondents were also asked whether asylum seekers should be reduced. Here again, there is no policy to reduce them as there is a legal obligation for their cases to be considered.

6. Respondents were then asked whether various categories of students should be increased, reduced or kept the same. In fact, the government policy is not to reduce or increase the number of students; it is to eliminate bogus students – a quite different matter.

7. The report goes on to say that *"members of the public and the government may be thinking about different things, even when both are talking about immigration. Categories such as temporary immigrants and students loom large in official statistics, but less than a third of the public has in mind either of these categories when thinking about immigrants"*. Indeed

1 IPRR Immigration Review 2011-12 <http://www.ippr.org/publications/55/1819/migration-review-20102011>

2 "Thinking behind the Numbers – Understanding Public Opinion on Immigration in Britain" <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/understanding-uk-public-opinion/executive-summary>

so, but neither of these categories form part of the governments efforts to reduce net immigration.

8. The paper accepts that "there is no question that a large majority of the public supports overall reductions to immigration levels". They found that 69% wanted the number of immigrants reduced. However, even this figure was lower than previous surveys, as they recognised in an Appendix, because:

- It included Scotland where opposition is lower than in Britain.
- It included 15 to 17 year olds who are the least likely age group to oppose immigration.
- It included the "Don't knows". Previous surveys reported in their own briefings showed 78% favouring reduced immigration if don't knows are excluded.

## **Conclusion**

9. The only valid conclusion to be drawn is that the public has a shaky knowledge of the details of immigration policy – a characteristic that appears to be shared with the authors of this report.

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