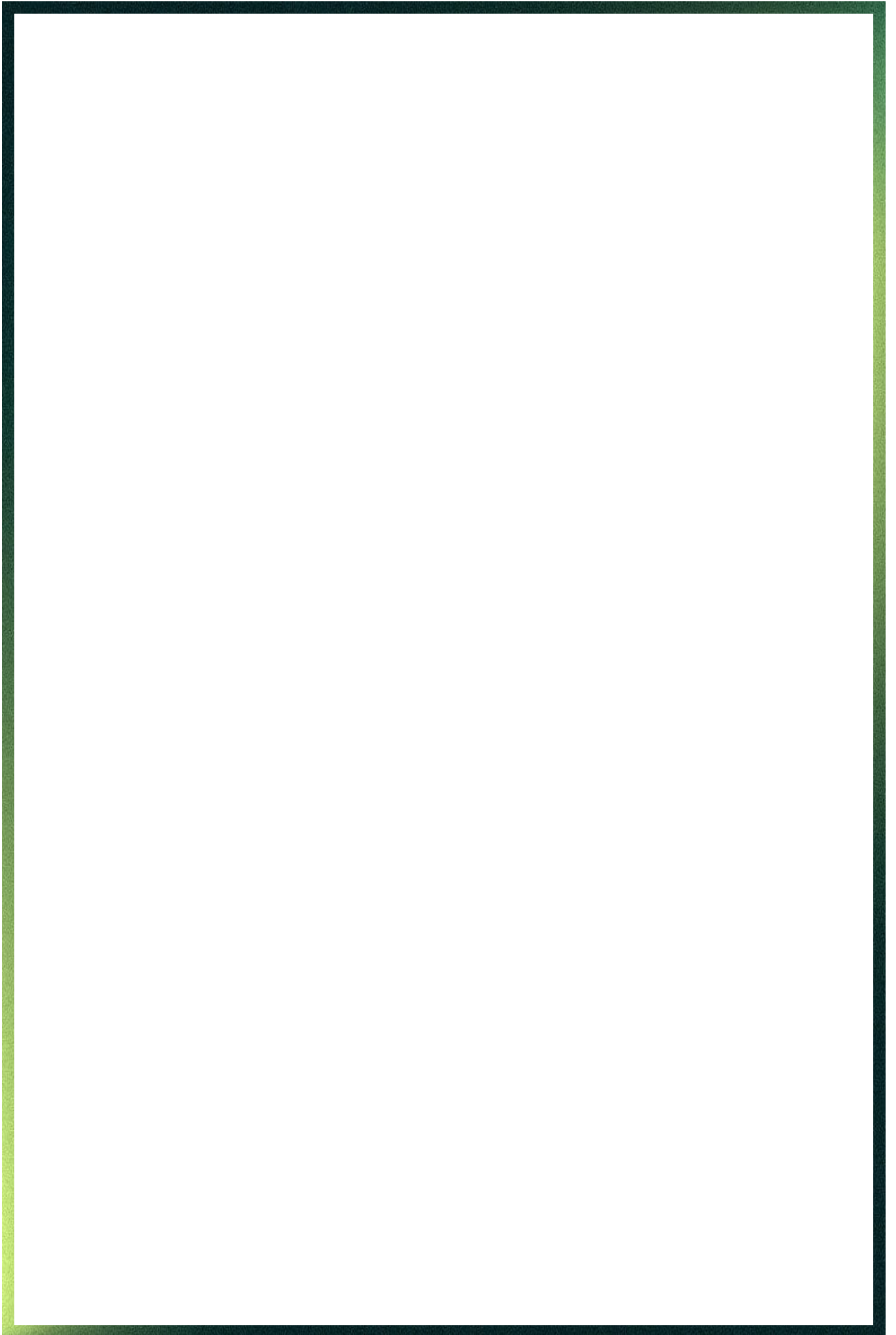


MIGRATION WATCH

'TAKING BACK CONTROL' ?

BREXIT AND MIGRATION TEN YEARS ON





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Introduction

The 2016 referendum result was, in substantial part, an immigration mandate. The official Leave campaign's central slogan, "Take Back Control," was understood by the electorate to mean control over immigration numbers: the total number of people entering the country, and the government's ability to determine who they were and on what terms they came. Net migration had stood above 300,000 per year throughout the preceding decade, and successive Conservative governments had failed to reduce it despite repeated manifesto commitments to bring it to the tens of thousands. The referendum result expressed a demand for numerical control over total immigration, not simply a technical objection to the legal basis on which it operated.

This report assesses whether that demand has been met. After ten years, five Prime Ministers, and cumulative net migration exceeding 3.7 million, the evidence is clear: it has not. The report proceeds in five sections:

Section One establishes the political context preceding the referendum, tracing immigration as an electoral concern from the 2004 EU enlargement through UKIP's electoral rise, the failed 2016 renegotiation, and analysis of the Leave vote's demographic composition and stated motivations.

Section Two examines the public statements made by seven key political figures—Farage, Johnson, Gove, Patel, Sunak, Starmer, and Blair—during and around the referendum campaign, assessing the specific commitments made regarding what Brexit would deliver on immigration and whether those commitments were internally consistent or structurally deliverable.

Section Three details Migration Watch's pre-referendum and immediate post-referendum analysis, including the prediction that a clean Brexit could reduce EU net migration by approximately 100,000 per year, and the proposed design of a post-Brexit immigration system built on caps and salary thresholds.

Section Four traces the evolution of immigration policy across four Prime Ministers—Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak, and Keir Starmer—examining the primary legislation, Immigration Rules changes, and white papers each administration produced.

Section Five assesses whether the post-Brexit immigration system has delivered on the mandate to take back control.

Formal sovereignty over immigration has been returned to the British State. This power has been exercised in ways that produced the opposite result: net migration reached 745,000 in 2022, nearly eight times the upper bound of the Conservative Party's tens of thousands pledge. No post-referendum government has imposed a binding numerical cap on total immigration. The one cap that existed - 20,700 Certificates of Sponsorship under Tier 2 - was abolished in 2021 as a deliberate design choice. Control over immigration numbers has been delegated to employers and educational institutions. The post-Brexit immigration system has delivered formal sovereignty without delivering the numerical reduction that the political justification for Brexit, in its immigration dimension, implied.

Section 1

Why did Britain Vote Leave?

How Did The Referendum Come To Pass?

The 2016 referendum was not an event that arrived without warning. Its roots lay in a decade of accumulating political pressure, in which immigration, Euroscepticism, and the structural constraints of coalition government combined to make a public vote on EU membership both strategically attractive and ultimately unavoidable for the Conservative Party.

The 2004 Enlargement

The immediate origins of the immigration dimension of the Brexit debate can be traced to May 2004, when ten new member states, eight of them from central and eastern Europe, joined the European Union. The UK, Ireland, and Sweden were the only existing member states not to impose transitional restrictions on workers from these A8 countries. A Home Office study commissioned before enlargement had projected average annual net inflows of between 5,000 and 13,000 A8 nationals up to 2010^[1]. The actual figure was more than five times higher: annual net immigration of A8 nationals ran at approximately 66,000 during 2005 and 2006, and between 2004 and 2009 net migration from A8 states totalled approximately 304,000. By the end of 2009, an estimated 478,000 A8 origin migrants were employed in the UK^[2].

The scale of this inflow, so substantially in excess of official projections, had two lasting political consequences. First, it established in public consciousness that EU free movement could produce migration flows that governments were unable to predict, plan for, or limit. Second, it made the Blair government's decision not to impose transitional restrictions a persistent reference point for critics of EU membership, credibly presented as an instance of the political class prioritising EU obligations over public concern about scale and pace of change. Both consequences would shape the political environment in which the referendum was eventually held.

1 *Measuring and Predicting Immigration from Eastern Europe*, Select Committee on Economic Affairs

publications.parliament.uk/pa/ld200708/ldselect/ldeconaf/82/8220.htm

2 *Seven Years after the Eastern European Enlargement*, Centre on Migration, Policy and Society

compas.ox.ac.uk/article/seven-years-after-the-eastern-european-enlargement

The Conservative Party, Coalition Government, and the Bloomberg Commitment

The Conservative Party had harboured significant internal Eurosceptic pressure since the Maastricht ratification debates of the early 1990s. During the 2010 to 2015 coalition government with the Liberal Democrats, this pressure intensified. The coalition's arithmetic made a referendum on EU membership politically impossible, since the Liberal Democrats were firmly pro-European, but it also prevented the Conservative leadership from taking the robust action on immigration that its backbenchers and a growing share of its electorate demanded. The Conservatives' net migration target of tens of thousands, announced in 2010, was demonstrably unachievable within the constraints of EU free movement, and the gap between the pledge and the outcome was visible in every quarterly statistics release^[3].

3 Net Migration to the UK, The Migration Observatory

migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/

4 EU Speech at Bloomberg, Prime Minister David Cameron

gov.uk/government/speeches/eu-speech-at-bloomberg

In January 2013, faced with rising Eurosceptic pressure from within his own party and the growing electoral threat from UKIP, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron delivered his Bloomberg speech, committing a future Conservative government to renegotiating the terms of UK membership and then holding an in-out referendum. Cameron did not identify immigration as a primary driver in the speech itself; his framing was of democratic legitimacy and institutional reform^[4]. However, the political context in which the commitment was made was inseparable from immigration. The surge from the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) had been built on precisely the argument that EU membership made meaningful immigration control impossible, and Cameron's renegotiation demands would eventually include an emergency brake on in-work benefits for EU migrants, a direct, if limited, response to that argument.

The Rise of UKIP

UKIP's transformation from a fringe Eurosceptic party into a significant electoral force was substantially driven by immigration. From 2010 onwards, the party broadened its anti-EU message to place opposition to immigration at its centre, targeting voters who felt that neither major party was willing to address the question seriously^[5]. At the 2013 English local elections, UKIP averaged

5 Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World, Fieldhouse et al

academic.oup.com/book/41032/chapter/349323065

nearly a quarter of the vote in the wards it contested, winning more than 130 council seats and pushing the Liberal Democrats into fourth place. At the 2014 European Parliament elections, it won 27 per cent of the national vote and came first, the first time in modern British history that a party other than Labour or the Conservatives had won a national election. UKIP received nearly four million votes at the 2015 general election, and while the first-past-the-post system translated this into only one seat, the party's vote share represented a direct threat to Conservative support in marginal constituencies.

The government responded to UKIP's rise with the Immigration Act 2014, which made provisions to prevent private landlords from renting to people without legal immigration status, stop illegal immigrants from obtaining driving licences and bank accounts, and allow for investigation of sham marriages. This was a legislative signal of intent, but it failed to arrest UKIP's momentum^[6]. UKIP's influence on the referendum debate extended well beyond its formal electoral weight. By consistently framing EU membership as the structural obstacle to immigration control, the party set the terms within which the referendum campaign would eventually be conducted. When the official Leave campaign adopted Take Back Control as its central slogan, it was codifying an argument that UKIP had been making for a decade.

6 *Assessing the Political Impact of Immigration as the United Kingdom Heads to the Polls*, Migration Policy Institute

migrationpolicy.org/article/assessing-political-impact-immigration-united-kingdom-heads-polls

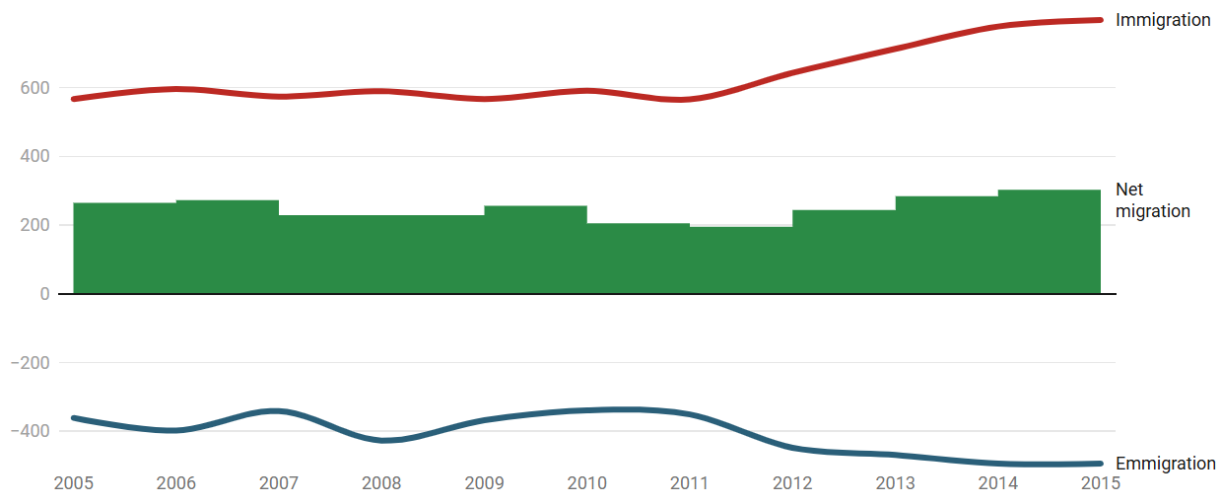
The Renegotiation and its Failure

Following the Conservative majority victory at the 2015 general election, Cameron proceeded with his renegotiation strategy. The February 2016 settlement secured an emergency brake on in-work benefits for EU migrants, restrictions on child benefit payments for children living abroad, and an opt-out from the commitment to ever-closer union. It did not secure any cap or limit on EU free movement itself. The renegotiation was widely judged, by supporters and opponents of EU membership alike, as insufficient.

The failure of the renegotiation to produce any structural change to free movement rules that had come to define the EU's impact on immigration figures in the public mindset, is the immediate political backdrop to the referendum campaign. It confirmed the Leave campaign's central argument: that so long as

the UK remained in the EU, elected governments could not control the numbers of people arriving from member states. That argument was not, in narrow constitutional terms, incorrect. Its persuasiveness in the referendum was built on more than a decade of policy failure, political miscalculation, and a migration debate that successive governments had been unable to resolve.

Migration in the United Kingdom, 2005-2015



Who Voted Leave and Why?

Immigration as a Factor

Post-referendum polling identified a range of motivations among Leave voters, with no single issue dominant across the entire coalition. Lord Ashcroft's survey found that the most commonly cited reason was the principle that decisions about the UK should be made in the UK, cited by 49 per cent of Leave voters as a primary motivation. Control of borders, laws, and money followed. YouGov analysis framed the fundamental campaign dynamic as the economy versus immigration: Leave needed immigration concerns to outweigh economic risk calculations, and Remain needed the reverse^[7]. That Leave won on this framing was a significant strategic achievement.

Ipsos polling identified immigration as one of the biggest issues among wavering voters, the segment most likely to determine the outcome. Its salience among undecided voters gave Leave campaigners particular strategic incentive to elevate

7 Campaign Memo: *It's the Economy versus Migration*, YouGov

yougov.com/en-gb/articles/15266-campaign-memo-its-economy-versus-immigration

it beyond its overall ranking in stated motivations. A Migration Policy Institute study on engaging the anxious middle in the UK immigration debate found that voters in this group were not viscerally opposed to immigration but were concerned about pace, scale, and the perceived inadequacy of government management^[8]. They were amenable to messaging which framed Brexit as restoring control rather than ending immigration altogether.

The Whiteley study identified five broad drivers operating in combination: dissatisfaction with the EU on multiple policy grounds; the legacy of the 2008 recession; the impact of the Arab Spring and consequent migration into Europe; the perceived failures of EU-wide austerity; and the Leave campaign's ability to simultaneously mobilise conservative sovereignty voters and economically left-behind populist voters. That multi-causal framework matters for assessing what post-Brexit policy could realistically deliver. A Leave vote driven by overlapping but distinct grievances was not straightforwardly redeemable through any single policy instrument, including immigration control.

Migration as a Voter Concern

Immigration ranked consistently as one of the most important issues for the British public in the years preceding the referendum. Ipsos MORI's Issues Index recorded immigration as a top-two concern throughout 2015 and 2016, cited by 40 to 50 per cent of respondents as among the most important issues facing the country, a marked increase from earlier in the decade^[9].

The relationship between immigration concern and Leave voting was, however, not straightforward. Many voters who ranked immigration as an important issue did not vote Leave, and many Leave voters ranked sovereignty ahead of immigration in their stated motivations. The prevalence of immigration as a concern should therefore be read not as a direct translation into votes but as a condition of political possibility. It created the environment in which Leave's border control messaging could land effectively, particularly among undecided voters.

8 *Engaging the Anxious Middle on Immigration Reform: Evidence from the UK Debate*, Migration Policy Institute

migrationpolicy.org/research/engaging-anxious-middle-immigration-reform-evidence-uk-debate

9 *Immigration a Big Issue in Brexit Referendum*, Ipsos

ipsos.com/en/immigration-big-issue-brexit-referendum

Polling Evidence on Issue Salience

10 Control on Movement of EU Citizens Key Issue for Majority of Britons, Ipsos

[ipsos.com/en-uk/eu-referendum-controls-movement-eu-citizens-key-issue-majority-britons](https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/eu-referendum-controls-movement-eu-citizens-key-issue-majority-britons)

Polling by Ipsos conducted in June 2015, before the referendum campaign began in earnest^[10] found that freedom of movement was the most contentious single aspect of EU membership in public attitudes, with larger proportions opposed to it than to any other element of membership. YouGov's state of public opinion analysis showed that immigration was the issue on which Remain was most vulnerable, as it was one where EU structural constraints on UK policy were most visible and most difficult to rebut.

Ipsos polling specifically on wavering voters found that immigration was more likely than any other issue to tip undecided voters towards Leave, giving it disproportionate strategic importance beyond its overall ranking in stated motivations.

BBC analysis found that public perception of immigration levels was frequently in excess of actual figures, and that concerns about loss of control were as important as concerns about volume per se^[11]. This gap between perception and reality is analytically significant. It suggests that the political potency of immigration in the campaign was substantially constructed through messaging and media amplification, and that reducing actual immigration numbers, even substantially, might not have neutralised the concern if the underlying sense of lost control persisted.

11 Reality Check: Is immigration hopelessly out of control?, BBC

[bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36392341](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36392341)

Prominence of Migration in Media Coverage and the Referendum Debate

Immigration was among the most covered issues in referendum media reporting, alongside sovereignty and the economy. Vote Leave's principal slogan, Take Back Control, functioned as a broad message encompassing immigration alongside sovereignty and fiscal policy. Leave.EU, the unofficial campaign associated with Nigel Farage, then leader of UKIP, made immigration its primary organising issue.

12 'Breaking Point' Poster Polling, What UK Thinks

[whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/do-you-think-that-the-breaking-point-poster-launched-by-nigel-farage-was-a-fair-way-to-make-a-campaign-point-strongly-or-that-it-goes-too-far-and-risks-stirring-up-prejudice/](https://www.whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/do-you-think-that-the-breaking-point-poster-launched-by-nigel-farage-was-a-fair-way-to-make-a-campaign-point-strongly-or-that-it-goes-too-far-and-risks-stirring-up-prejudice/)

The most controversial single episode was the unveiling of Farage's Breaking Point poster^[12], which showed a photograph of migrants crossing into Slovenia in 2015 with the caption "The EU

Has Failed Us All". The poster was condemned by Vote Leave's official leadership, including Johnson and Gove, as well as by Remain campaigners. The intervention came on the same day as the murder of Helen Joanne "Jo" Cox MP, which temporarily suspended campaigning. The poster is significant not only for its content but for what the response to it revealed: the official Leave campaign's condemnation demonstrated an awareness that explicit nativist imagery carried political risks, even as the campaign's broader messaging relied heavily on immigration anxiety.

The European migration crisis of 2015 and 2016, driven by large-scale population movements from Syria, Afghanistan, and other conflict zones, provided the backdrop against which the campaign was conducted. Although the UK had opted out of the EU's relocation scheme, Leave campaigners linked EU membership to potential future exposure, particularly through repeated claims about Turkish accession^[13]. Leave campaigners suggested that Turkey's prospective EU membership would add tens of millions of potential migrants to the movement-free zone, a claim widely criticised as misleading.

Assessment of the Relative Importance of Migration

The academic and polling evidence supports a nuanced assessment. Immigration was not the sole driver of the Leave vote but it certainly was not a marginal one either. It was highly salient among undecided voters, structurally connected to EU membership in a way that was politically difficult for Remain to rebut, and effectively linked by the Leave campaign to the broader concern about democratic control. However, sovereignty and democratic principle ranked above immigration in stated Leave voter motivations, and the geographic paradox of high Leave votes in low-immigration areas suggests the issue operated as a proxy for broader concerns about cultural change and community identity rather than as a direct response to personal experience.

Many Remainers argued that excessive immigration was insufficient justification for leaving the EU on economic grounds, noting the broadly positive fiscal and economic contribution of EU migrants^[12]. This argument gained little traction, not because

13 *Did the unfounded claim that Turkey was about to join the EU swing the Brexit referendum?*, LSE British Politics

blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/unfounded-claim-turkey-swing-brexit-referendum/

14 *Brexit and the Impact of Immigration on the UK*, Centre for Economic Performance

cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/brexit05.pdf

voters were unaware of it, but because the debate had shifted to a terrain where economic arguments carried less weight than arguments about sovereignty and identity. That shift was itself partly the product of a decade of political messaging, media coverage, and the cumulative failure of governments to meet their own migration targets. By 2016, immigration had become not just a policy issue but a symbol of the state's competence and the political class's responsiveness to public concern.

Section 2

Politicians on Brexit and Immigration

This section analyses the public statements made by key political figures preceding and during the 2016 referendum campaign. The focus is on whether each figure argued that Brexit would reduce, control, or restructure immigration; what policy prescriptions they advanced; and the extent to which those statements held up against what was already knowable at the time. The figures selected are those who subsequently held, or are likely to hold, direct influence over immigration policy in the years following the vote, making the gap between their 2016 positions and subsequent outcomes historically significant. We have included the titles and positions of the individuals from the time of vote (23rd June 2016).

Nigel Farage – Leader of UKIP

Nigel Farage was the most prominent voice arguing that Brexit would directly and substantially reduce immigration. His position rested on a foundational claim: that EU membership and uncontrolled immigration were synonymous. Speaking in April 2016, he stated^[15]:

“Since the Treaty of Maastricht, we have been citizens of the European Union... [W]e have to, in this campaign, make people understand that EU membership and uncontrolled immigration are synonymous with each other.”

In February 2016, Mr Farage said that net migration should be capped at approximately 30,000 a year, roughly a tenth of the prevailing level. When pressed by Andrew Neil in a June 2016 interview^[16] on how he would actually achieve this, his answer was revealing:

“The real point about this referendum is who makes the decisions, do we have the ability to control the numbers that come to Britain or not, that’s the first and most important point to make.”

15 EU referendum: Nigel Farage tells Leave campaigners to focus on migration, BBC News

bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36167329

16 Transcript: Nigel Farage Grilled by Andrew Neil on Brexit, the Spectator

spectator.com/article/transcript-nigel-farage-grilled-by-andrew-neil-on-brexit/

This was, in effect, an acknowledgement that the referendum was about the principle of control rather than a concrete mechanism for reducing numbers. Farage had conceded in the same interview that non-EU migration alone already accounted for nearly 200,000 net arrivals annually, a figure entirely within the government's existing power to reduce and which governments had repeatedly declined to cut. The logical implication was that even a complete end to EU free movement would leave more than half of net migration untouched. This was not a point Mr Farage dwelt on. He also told Leave campaigners directly that immigration focus was the turning point in the campaign, a tactical instruction as much as a policy argument.

His stated policy preference during the campaign was for an Australian-style points-based system. This was significant not as a commitment to lower numbers but as a reframing: points-based systems are designed to select migrants, not exclude them. Australia's own migration intake has historically been higher per capita than the UK's^[17]. The promise of a points-based system was, in substance, a promise of a different kind of immigration rather than less of it, though it was widely understood by the public as a promise of the latter. That gap between what the policy would actually deliver and what audiences took it to mean would define the post-Brexit immigration debate.

Boris Johnson – former Mayor of London

Boris Johnson's public position was calibrated to neutralise the charge of anti-immigrant sentiment while still making immigration central to the Leave case. In a major campaign speech in May 2016, he stated^[18]:

"I am in favour of immigration; but I am also in favour of control, and of politicians taking responsibility for what is happening; and I think it bewilders people to be told that this basic power has been ceded."

He promised a points-based system and declared that the only way to take back control of immigration was to vote Leave. He also called for an amnesty for long-term undocumented migrants, a position that sat in evident tension with the broader Leave campaign's rhetoric about borders and control.

17 Net Migration to the UK, Migration Observatory

migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/long-term-international-migration-flows-to-and-from-the-uk/

18 Boris Johnson's Speech on the EU Referendum, Conservative Home

conservativehome.com/2016/05/09/boris-johnsons-speech-on-the-eu-referendum-full-text/

Mr Johnson's record and public statements before the referendum made clear that he was not, in any consistent sense, anti-immigration. His tenure as Mayor of London (3rd May 2008 – 9th May 2016) had been notably pro-immigration in tone. His stated case for Leave rested on sovereignty and democratic accountability rather than on any desire to reduce numbers. Yet the campaign he co-led consistently activated immigration anxiety, relied on polling showing immigration concern to be the key swing issue, and made "Take Back Control" its central message. The pledge of a points-based system allowed Mr Johnson to claim a pro-immigration position while allowing voters who wanted fewer migrants to hear a promise of reduction. Whether this was a deliberate ambiguity or a genuine position that events would have clarified is a question the subsequent record illuminates.

Michael Gove – Secretary of State for Justice & Lord Chancellor

Michael Gove framed his immigration arguments in terms of democratic principle, seeking to maintain a distinction between Vote Leave's position and Farage's more explicit nativism. On the BBC's Andrew Marr programme during the campaign, he stated^[19]:

"I am pro-migration but I believe that the way in which we secure public support for the continued benefits that migration brings... is if people feel that the numbers can be controlled."

He also advocated for the points-based system as the mechanism by which accountability would be restored. His most operationally specific immigration claim concerned NHS capacity, arguing that continued free movement would place unsustainable pressure on health services and warning about the consequences of an additional patient population equivalent to four Birminghams (the UK's second largest city with a population of approximately 1,131,000 at the time of the vote). He also advanced claims about Turkish accession to the EU, warning of large-scale migration flows that would result if Turkey joined.

Post-referendum, Mr Gove acknowledged that some of the campaign's immigration arguments had not been fully accurate, stating that the Leave campaign had not got everything absolutely

19 EU Referendum: Campaigns Resume With New Warning, BBC

[bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36569338](https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36569338)

right and suggesting he would have preferred it to have had a slightly different feel. This retrospective admission is significant. It suggests Mr Gove understood during the campaign that certain claims, particularly around Turkey and NHS pressure, were overstated. That he made them regardless reflects the wider pattern: Vote Leave's leadership was sufficiently aware of the analytical weaknesses in its immigration case to distance itself from the most extreme expressions of it, while continuing to benefit politically from the anxiety those claims generated.

Priti Patel – Minister of State for Employment

Ms Patel's campaign contribution was intellectually distinctive and, in hindsight, more predictive of post-Brexit outcomes than any other figure in the broader Leave campaign. Her central argument was Brexit would restructure migration, rather than necessarily reducing it^[20]:

"There's another great bonus of leaving the EU: we'll be able to design a new immigration system that brings the chaos under control and helps the economy."

She argued that it was not racist to worry about immigration and argued that EU free movement operated an implicit hierarchy, privileging lower-skilled EU workers over higher-skilled non-EU migrants. Brexit, she asserted, would allow for a globally competitive points-based system in which Commonwealth and South Asian workers competed on equal terms with Europeans. She explicitly targeted British Asian communities, making the case that leaving the EU would enable more skilled South Asian workers to enter the UK, supporting sectors such as the restaurant trade^[21].

A points-based system open to the world, as she envisaged it, would by its nature draw from a broader pool of source countries. Net migration figures would depend not on the architecture of the system but on the salary thresholds, visa numbers, and economic conditions that governments chose to set. Ms Patel did not argue for lower overall numbers; she argued for different numbers from different places. This was an accurate description of what a post-Brexit system might produce. More importantly, it was not what the majority of Leave voters, or the wider public, understood themselves to be voting for.

20 Priti Patel Interview, Daily Telegraph

[telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/15/priti-patel-interview-its-not-racist-to-worry-about-immigration/](https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/04/15/priti-patel-interview-its-not-racist-to-worry-about-immigration/)

21 Priti Patel: Quit EU to Save Our Curry Houses

[standard.co.uk/news/politics/minister-priti-patel-quit-eu-to-save-our-curry-houses-a3251071.html](https://www.standard.co.uk/news/politics/minister-priti-patel-quit-eu-to-save-our-curry-houses-a3251071.html)

Rishi Sunak – Conservative Party backbench MP

Rishi Sunak was a newly elected backbench MP in 2016 with no significant national profile. He set out his reasoning for backing Leave in a February 2016 article, writing on immigration^[22]:

“I believe that appropriate immigration can benefit our country. But we must have control of our borders and we can only do that outside of the EU. As an EU member, every one of Europe’s 500 million citizens has a legal right to move here and there is nothing the UK government can do to limit those numbers. It can’t be right that unelected officials in Brussels have more say over who can come into our country than you.”

In a 2017 co-authored article, he wrote that Brexit offered the opportunity for a humane, controlled immigration regime that recognises talent, and argued that the EU’s refusal to allow member states a say on low-skill immigration had caused faith in the system to collapse^[23].

Mr Sunak’s 2016 position sat within the mainstream Vote Leave register: sovereignty-focused, rhetorically pro-immigration in principle, and specific about the structural constraint of free movement. What is notable in retrospect is not the consistency of his principles but the distance between the system he described, controlled, talent-focused, legitimate in public eyes, and the immigration outcomes that occurred under his own premiership. Mr Sunak’s argument in 2016 that recovering democratic control over immigration would restore public faith in the system was tested under his own government – and found wanting.

Keir Starmer – Shadow Minister for Immigration

Keir Starmer joined the shadow cabinet in 2016 in the immigration portfolio and in the lead-up to the referendum prepared a report titled Reshaping the Debate: Towards a New Deal on Immigration, recommending changes to free movement rules and improvements to the asylum system. The report was never published^[24].

22 *Why I Will Vote for Britain to Leave the EU*, Rishi Sunak

rishisunak.com/news/why-i-will-vote-britain-leave-eu-0

23 *Brexit: An Opportunity to be Seized*, Rishi Sunak

rishisunak.com/news/brexit-opportunity-be-seized

24 *Keir Starmer: The Biography*, p217–218, Tom Baldwin

25 Keir Starmer:
*Intelligence From EU
Helps Keep Us Safe*
24/7, Labour List

labourlist.org/2016/02/keir-starmer-intelligence-from-eu-helps-keep-us-safe-247/

26 Brexit Talks Should
Include Free
Movement, Says Keir
Starmer, BBC

bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-37936401

During the referendum campaign, his public interventions focused almost entirely on security and intelligence cooperation as the case for Remain^[25] rather than on immigration. This was a telling choice: the one senior Labour figure with direct responsibility for immigration in the shadow cabinet declined to engage with immigration as the central referendum issue.

Post-referendum, his position shifted rapidly. In November 2016, he stated^[26]:

"I accept that immigration was a large part of the discussion leading up to the referendum and therefore Labour accepts that changes to the way freedom of movement rules operate have to be part of the opening negotiating position."

He subsequently warned that the government must not trade off the economy for immigration and expressed concern that excessive focus on immigration would lead to sacrificing single market access. The framing was reasonable as a negotiating position, but it also illustrated a characteristic approach: accepting the public's verdict on immigration while seeking to limit the consequences of acting on it.

The contrast between Mr Starmer's pre- and post-referendum acknowledgement of migration's centrality to the result is significant. A shadow immigration minister who did not engage with immigration during the referendum was not in a strong position to shape what post-Brexit immigration policy looked like. The unreleased report suggests the analytical work had been done. The political decision not to use it reflected the same failure of nerve that characterised Labour's handling of immigration throughout the campaign.

Tony Blair – former Prime Minister

27 Defiant Blair Says
*Britain has Benefited
From European
Immigration*, Labour List

labourlist.org/2016/05/blair-britain-has-benefited-from-european-immigration/

Tony Blair's intervention in the referendum debate^[27] was shaped by an acute and largely unacknowledged irony. It was his government's decision in 2004 not to impose transitional restrictions on A8 workers that had produced the large-scale inflows whose political consequences he was now trying to manage. He defended that decision in May 2016:

“Personally, I do not feel that the immigration from eastern Europe was a problem for Britain. I think those people contribute far more in taxes than they ever take in benefits. They’re hard-working people, they’re good members of our community. And the benefit of having eastern Europe in the EU is enormous.”

He argued that Brexit would not meaningfully reduce overall immigration since non-EU migration, already within domestic control, constituted more than half of net arrivals, and that Brexit was a distraction, not a solution, to the problems this country is facing.

Both of these arguments were well-grounded. The evidence supported them during the campaign and the post-Brexit record has confirmed them. Yet Mr Blair was among the least credible messengers available to the Remain campaign. His government’s 2004 decision to open the labour market to A8 workers without transitional restrictions, against the advice of most other member states and substantially in excess of what official projections had anticipated, was the single most consequential act by any British government in shaping the migration landscape that produced the referendum. The argument that Brexit would not reduce immigration was correct. It was also made by a man whose own decisions had directly produced the levels of immigration that made the argument politically necessary.

What the Discourse Reveals

Taken together, the statements of these figures reveal a pattern that is more significant than any individual position. Virtually every key Leave figure made promises or implied commitments about immigration that were either internally inconsistent, structurally undeliverable, or dependent on political choices about non-EU migration that none of them were making.

Mr Farage promised a cap of 30,000 but built his case on ending EU free movement, which addressed only half of net migration. Mr Johnson and Mr Gove promised democratic control through a points-based system without acknowledging that such a system does not determine numbers, only the criteria for entry. Ms Patel, the most precise of the group, explicitly argued for restructuring rather than reduction, but her message was

communicated in a context where the public heard reduction. Mr Sunak adopted the same sovereign control framing but went on to preside over net migration figures that dwarfed anything recorded under EU free movement.

The Remain figures, meanwhile, were unable or unwilling to make the immigration case. Mr Blair was too discredited by his own decisions. Mr Starmer displayed ambivalence rather than engage with the central issue. The result was a referendum campaign in which Leave made specific, largely undeliverable promises about immigration and Remain declined to contest the premise. The political consequences of that asymmetry extended well beyond 2016.

Section 3

Migration Watch's Predictions on the Potential Impact of Brexit

Between the run-up to the 2016 referendum and the design and early operation of the post-Brexit immigration system, Migration Watch UK produced a substantial body of analysis on what leaving the European Union would mean for immigration. Brexit was identified as the single most important opportunity in a generation to regain control of immigration numbers.

Free Movement as the Central Obstacle

Our foremost Brexit argument was that the EU's free movement regime was fundamentally incompatible with controlled immigration. At the time of the referendum, EU net migration was running at around 180,000 a year, a figure the organisation regarded as both unsustainable and impossible to address while the UK remained subject to free movement rules^[28].

Therefore, any arrangement that preserved free movement under another name would be unacceptable. Membership of the Single Market was a recipe for mass immigration, because the four freedoms were indivisible and the UK could not expect to enjoy market access while restricting the movement of people^[29].

Proposed compromise mechanisms were dismissed on the same grounds. We warned that an "emergency brake" on EU migration under EEA rules was a non-starter, since such brakes were temporary, narrowly conditioned, subject to the approval of other member states, and would not deliver the lasting reductions the organisation sought^[30].

The Headline Claim: A Reduction of 100,000 a Year

We predicted that a clean Brexit could cut EU net migration by approximately 100,000 a year. This claim rested on an analysis of the skill composition of EU migrants: only around 20% of those

28 *British Exit From The EU Could Reduce Net Migration By 100,000*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/british-exit-from-the-eu-could-reduce-net-migration-by-100000/

29 *Membership Of The EU's Single Market Is A Recipe For Mass Immigration*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/membership-of-the-eus-single-market-is-a-recipe-for-mass-immigration-migration-watch-uk/

30 *EU Migration – An Emergency Brake is a Non-Starter*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/eu-migration-an-emergency-brake-is-a-non-starter-migration-watch-uk/

31 *Dispelling Misperceptions About Our Proposal For A Possible Post-exit Immigration Policy*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/dispelling-misperceptions-about-our-proposal-for-a-possible-post-exit-immigration-policy/

32 *In The Event Of Leaving The EU, What Would A Revised Immigration Policy Look Like*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/in-the-event-of-leaving-the-eu-what-would-a-revised-immigration-policy-look-like-comment-on-our-paper/

33 *A Halfway-House Brexit Would Let EU Immigration Continue Unchecked*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/a-halfway-house-brexit-would-let-eu-immigration-continue-unchecked-migration-watch-uk/

34 *What Does A “Soft” Brexit Mean For Immigration From The EU?*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/what-does-a-soft-brexit-mean-for-immigration-from-the-eu/

35 *‘Soft’ Brexit Would Mean Continued Massive Levels Of Immigration*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/soft-brexit-would-mean-continued-massive-levels-of-immigration/

who had arrived since 2004 were in higher-skilled work, with the remaining 80% in lower-skilled, lower-paid roles that would not qualify under a selective work permit system, such as those presented as a “points-based system” (see previous section)^[31].

By restricting work-related migration to skilled roles, we argued the bulk of the lower-skilled inflow could be removed while still allowing employers to recruit the high-value workers they genuinely needed. This was a moderate and evidence-based proposal rather than a blanket clampdown, and we intentionally invited public comment on its design^[32].

Opposition to a “Soft” Brexit

Moreover, we warned that a “soft” Brexit would amount to a failure to deliver on the referendum result. Migration Watch repeatedly warned that a halfway-house settlement would let EU immigration continue unchecked, retaining the substance of free movement while removing the UK's formal voice in setting rules^[33].

We modelled detailed assessments of what a soft Brexit would mean in practice, concluding that continued Single Market participation would keep EU net migration at well over 100,000 a year – likely around 125,000 – for at least a decade. Strong push and pull factors, including persistent wage gaps with Eastern Europe and high youth unemployment in Southern Europe, would sustain the flow regardless of Brexit-related uncertainty^[34].

Soft Brexit would therefore mean continued massive levels of immigration and total net migration remaining at around a quarter of a million a year – scarcely distinguishable from the position the country would have occupied had it voted to remain^[35].

Even transitional arrangements were considered unacceptable. A temporary Norway-style arrangement, for example, risked becoming permanent, with the UK trapped in an EEA framework that delivered neither full control nor a clear exit route^[36].

36 *A Temporary Norway-style Brexit Risks Permanent Loss Of Control Of Our Borders*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/a-temporary-norway-style-brexit-risks-permanent-loss-of-control-of-our-borders/

The Fiscal Argument

In particular, we heavily contested the claim that reducing EU migration would damage the public finances. When the Office for Budget Responsibility suggested that lower post-Brexit migration would cost around £5.9bn – implying each migrant forgone would have contributed roughly £14,750 a year – we called that figure implausibly high, arguing it ignored the reality that most EU migrants were in low-paid work and paid only about half the tax of the average UK employee^[37].

Going further, we argued that sensible controls on free movement could well represent a fiscal benefit rather than a cost, because unrestricted movement allowed admission of workers who made no net positive contribution to the Exchequer^[38].

This was connected to a broader economic critique: that ready access to cheap EU labour had removed the incentive for employers to train domestic workers, raise productivity or improve pay and conditions. Reducing the supply of low-skilled migrant labour was, therefore, considered to be an economic sacrifice but as a spur to investment in the resident workforce^[39].

Population and Public Services

We consistently translated abstract migration figures into tangible consequences for population and infrastructure. Specifically, we predicted that continued high migration under EU conditions would drive population growth of well over ten million across two decades, increasing the population from 65 million to 75 million, requiring a new home to be built every few minutes and adding the equivalent of a city the size of Birmingham every couple of years (see previous section)^[40].

The triggering of Article 50 meant that there were no longer any excuses for failing to reduce migration: acute pressure on primary school places and the fact that the overwhelming majority of new household formation was accounted for by those born outside the UK was proof of this^[41].

37 OBR Migration ‘Black Hole’ Is Highly Questionable, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/obr-migration-black-hole-is-highly-questionable-migration-watch-uk/

38 Sensible Controls On EU Free Movement Could Well Be A Fiscal Benefit For The UK, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/sensible-controls-on-eu-free-movement-could-well-be-a-fiscal-benefit-for-the-uk/

39 We Must Reduce EU Migration, Not Just Control It, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/we-must-reduce-eu-migration-not-just-control-it-migration-watch-uk/

40 Membership Of The EU’s Single Market Is A Recipe For Mass Immigration, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/membership-of-the-eus-single-market-is-a-recipe-for-mass-immigration-migration-watch-uk/

41 There Are No Excuses Now For A Failure To Reduce Migration, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/there-are-no-excuses-now-for-a-failure-to-reduce-migration/

Wider Risks: Onward Movement, Family Reunion and the Irish Border

42 *The Refugee and Migrant Crisis In The EU – The Potential Implications For The UK*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/the-refugee-and-migrant-crisis-in-the-eu-the-potential-implications-for-the-uk/

43 *Rights Of European Union Citizens To Have Family Members Join Them After Brexit*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/rights-of-european-union-citizens-to-have-family-members-join-them-after-brexit/

44 *How Do We Handle Future Migration From The EU?*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/how-do-we-handle-future-migration-from-the-eu-migration-watch-uk/

45 *The Post-Brexit Immigration System*, Migration Watch UK

migrationwatchuk.org/the-post-brexit-immigration-system/

Beyond the headline numbers, we flagged several secondary risks. For instance, the migrant and refugee crisis in continental Europe could have had significant implications for the UK if large numbers of those granted protection elsewhere later acquired EU citizenship and exercised free movement rights to come to Britain – a risk that was contingent on continued EU or EEA membership^[42].

When the Withdrawal Agreement was published, we scrutinised the terms closely, noting that EU citizens resident in the UK would retain family reunion rights more generous than those available to British nationals, who faced a minimum income threshold and language requirements when sponsoring relatives^[43].

Designing the Post-Brexit System

As attention turned from whether to leave to how to manage the new system, we set out our preferred design, arguing for handling future EU migration through a controlled framework – including a time-limited youth mobility or “barista” route to preserve cultural exchange – while subjecting longer-term work migration to selective conditions^[44].

Our blueprint, published in 2020, advocated a salary threshold of around £30,000 for skilled work visas applied to EEA and non-EEA workers alike, an Australian-style cap and labour market testing, warning that “control” without genuine reduction would be meaningless and that an uncapped system risked allowing numbers to spiral. Crucially, we noted that removing the cap and lowering thresholds would itself increase inflows of non-EEA nationals – a direct echo of our earlier warning from 2019^[45].

Section 4

Post-Brexit Immigration Policy and the Assertion of “Taking Back Control”

As explored previously, the result of the Brexit referendum was, in substantial part, an immigration mandate. The most prominent slogan of the official Leave campaign, “Take Back Control”, was understood by much of the electorate to mean control over immigration as a whole: the total number of people entering the country, and the government’s ability to determine who they were and on what terms they came.

Net migration had stood above 300,000 for most of the preceding decade, and successive governments had failed to reduce it despite repeated manifesto commitments. The referendum result expressed a demand for numerical control over total immigration, not simply a technical objection to the legal basis on which it operated.

This section assesses the extent to which that demand has been met. It does so by examining the official outputs of each post-referendum parliament, covering primary legislation, Immigration Rules changes, and white papers, under each of the four main Prime Ministers who have held office since the referendum: Theresa May, Boris Johnson, Rishi Sunak, and Sir Keir Starmer^[46]. The section proceeds chronologically, examining the inherited system at the time of the referendum before turning to each administration in turn. It concludes with a cross-cutting assessment of whether the post-Brexit immigration system, taken as a whole, can be said to have delivered meaningful control.

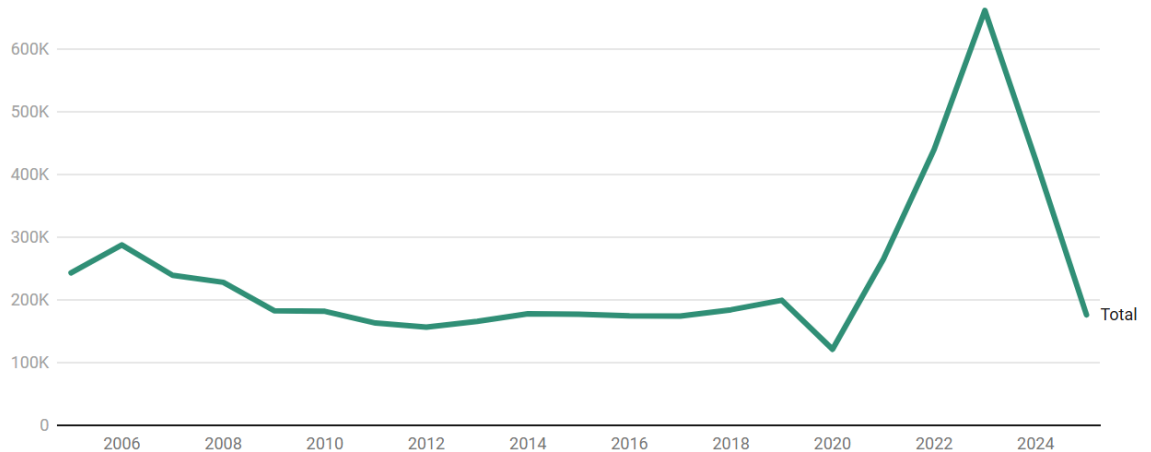
46 Liz Truss is excluded due to the brevity of her time in office.

The System at the Time of the Referendum (2016)

At the time of the 2016 referendum, UK immigration operated under a dual architecture. For citizens of the European Economic Area (EEA), free movement applied without restriction: EU nationals could enter, reside, and work in the United Kingdom without a visa, without a sponsor, and without any numerical limit. The Home Office had no effective mechanism to manage this flow.

For nationals of countries outside the EU, the Points-Based System (PBS), introduced in 2008, governed entry. The PBS's principal work route, Tier 2 (General), required a graduate-level job offer, a resident labour market test (RLMT) where employers had to advertise vacancies to the domestic workforce before recruiting overseas, and a salary floor of £30,000. It was subject to an annual cap of 20,700 Certificates of Sponsorship.

Work visas issued to the UK, 2005-2025



The family route was governed by the Minimum Income Requirement (MIR) of £18,600, introduced in July 2012 under Theresa May as Home Secretary, requiring British citizens and settled persons to demonstrate a minimum earnings threshold before sponsoring a non-EEA spouse or partner. Student visas, issued under Tier 4, were subject to sponsorship by licensed educational institutions, though the system had a well-documented history of compliance failures, including large-scale fraud at English language test centres assessed by the National Audit Office in 2019^[47].

Net migration at the time of the referendum stood at approximately 330,000 per year. Non-EU migration accounted for the greater part of this, with EU free movement contributing approximately 130,000 per year (39% of totals) in the years immediately preceding the vote. The Conservative Party had fought the general elections of 2010, 2015, and 2017 on a manifesto pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands. That pledge had not been met.

47 *Investigation Into The Response To Cheating In English Language Tests*, National Audit Office

nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/Investigation-into-the-response-to-cheating-in-English-language-tests.pdf

The non-EU system, though subject to formal controls, was generating substantial numbers through work, study, and family routes combined. The pledge's failure was therefore not solely a consequence of EU free movement: it reflected the scale of non-EU migration as well. What Brexit offered, in immigration terms, was formal legal authority over all inward flows. What it did not, in itself, resolve was how that authority would be exercised.

Theresa May (July 2016 – July 2019)

Theresa May's premiership was dominated by the constitutional and parliamentary crisis of implementing Brexit. May had served as Home Secretary from 2010 to 2016 and was the architect of the hostile environment policy programme, enacted principally through the Immigration Acts of 2014 and 2016, which extended immigration enforcement obligations to landlords, employers, banks, and the NHS. She entered Downing Street with substantial personal background in immigration policy. Her administration nonetheless produced little substantive immigration legislation beyond the EU withdrawal framework, as the repeated failure to pass the Withdrawal Agreement consumed the parliamentary timetable.

The most consequential official output of the May government was the EU Settlement Scheme (EUSS), the legal architecture for which was developed through the Withdrawal Agreement negotiations. The EUSS, given domestic effect through the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Act 2020 passed under her successor, guaranteed the rights of all EU and EEA nationals lawfully resident in the UK before the end of the transition period. Approximately 5.6 million applications were subsequently made to the scheme. The EUSS represented a significant pre-commitment: before any replacement system had been designed, the government had guaranteed that the entire existing stock of EU residents would have settled or pre-settled status, and would in due course be joined by their future family members^[48]. The EUSS therefore defined the baseline population from which the post-Brexit immigration system would operate.

48 Apply to the EU Settlement Scheme, gov.uk

The central policy document of the May era was the Immigration White Paper of December 2018, "The UK's Future Skills-Based Immigration System." The White Paper proposed a post-

[gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/eligibility](https://www.gov.uk/settled-status-eu-citizens-families/eligibility)

Brexit framework built on skills and salary thresholds, drawn broadly from the existing PBS model. It proposed extending Tier 2 (General), retitled Skilled Worker, to EU nationals, with a salary threshold in the range of £25,000 to £30,000. It also proposed a new temporary worker route for lower-skilled labour, valid for twelve months at a time, without a path to settlement. Critically, the White Paper proposed no numerical cap on the skilled worker route, despite the existing 20,700 cap on Tier 2. Nor did it propose any changes to the family migration framework.

In 2018, it emerged that a significant number of Commonwealth citizens who had arrived in the UK lawfully in the 1950s and 1960s had been caught by the hostile environment checks and, in some cases, detained or removed. This became known as the Windrush scandal. The political consequence was the resignation of Home Secretary Amber Rudd in April 2018 and the introduction of the Windrush Compensation Scheme in 2019. More relevantly for the trajectory of immigration enforcement, the scandal had a constraining effect on the operational capacity and political willingness of the Home Office to pursue removals more broadly. The number of enforced returns, already declining, fell further in the years that followed.

Notably, during Theresa May's tenure as Prime Minister, the small boat channel crossing crisis began. The first year of this recorded crisis, 2018, saw only 299 illegal crossings, but this rose to 1,843 before the end of 2019, and has continued unabated since.

In sum, May's tenure as Prime Minister produced the legal framework for ending free movement but did not design the system to replace it. The 2018 White Paper was a proposal, not enacted policy, and it was left to her successor to legislate. The Brexit Withdrawal Agreement was rejected by Parliament three times, and the central question of how the new immigration system would control total numbers was deferred.

Boris Johnson (July 2019 – September 2022)

Boris Johnson's government enacted the most significant immigration reforms of the post-referendum period. The passage of the Withdrawal Agreement Act in January 2020 and the end of EU free movement on 31 December 2020 delivered the formal mechanism of border control that the referendum had promised. The question was what that control would be used to do. The answer, as revealed by the Points-Based System introduced in December 2020, was to construct a substantially more open non-EU immigration system than the one it replaced. The combined effect of the design choices made in 2020 and 2021 produced what has since been described as the "Boriswave": a surge in net migration that reached 745,000 in the year ending June 2022, a figure subsequently revised upwards to 764,000 by the Office for National Statistics.

The key design choices of the 2020 PBS, implemented through Immigration Rules changes effective from 1 January 2021, are worth setting out because of their direct and foreseeable effect on visa volumes:

- First, the skill threshold was lowered from RQF Level 6 (degree-level equivalent) to RQF Level 3 (A-level equivalent), meaning that a significantly broader range of occupations became eligible for sponsored work visas.
- Second, the Resident Labour Market Test was abolished entirely, removing the requirement for employers to demonstrate that no suitable domestic worker was available before recruiting overseas.
- Third, the salary threshold for the Skilled Worker route was set at £25,600, below the £30,000 floor that had applied under Tier 2.
- Fourth, and most consequentially, the annual cap of 20,700 Certificates of Sponsorship was removed. There was henceforth no numerical limit on Skilled Worker visas. Total worker visas rose from approximately 120,000 in 2019 to 2020 to 498,204 in the year ending December 2023 - more than double the pre-Brexit average.

The Health and Care Worker visa, created as a pandemic response measure, was the single largest driver of the subsequent work visa surge. It allowed NHS and social care employers to sponsor overseas workers at accelerated rates and reduced fees, with no sunset clause and no cap. Dependants of Health and Care Workers were permitted to accompany or join them, and the care sector, previously excluded from Tier 2, was brought fully within the sponsored worker system. By 2023, Health and Care visas accounted for the largest share of all work visas issued. The number of dependants accompanying or joining main work applicants rose from an average of approximately 36 per cent of main applicants during the 2010s to 48 per cent in the first half of 2023. In absolute terms, dependant volumes contributed substantially to overall net migration in a way that headline visa numbers for main applicants did not capture. When dependants of workers and students are included, the true scale of migration associated with a given year's visa grants was considerably higher than the main applicant figures suggested.

The Graduate visa, introduced in July 2021, provided a two-year unsponsored right to remain and work in the UK for graduates of licensed British universities, without any requirement to have secured a job offer. This route had been abolished by Theresa May as Home Secretary in 2012. Its reinstatement created a structural link between the student visa route and long-term residence: a student admitted on a Tier 4 visa could, on completion of their degree, move onto the Graduate visa and from there seek sponsored employment under the Skilled Worker route. The retention rate for international students rose sharply following this change. By the government's own figures, over half of students completing their studies in 2022, 2023, and 2024 had moved onto another visa route, compared to fewer than 20 per cent in 2019 and 2020. The Graduate visa effectively converted what had been a temporary, study-specific route into a significant pathway to longer-term settlement^[49].

On asylum and illegal migration, the Johnson government's principal legislative output was the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. The Act introduced a two-tier asylum system distinguishing between those who arrived by a safe and legal route and those who arrived illegally, and created inadmissibility provisions for those with a connection to a safe third country. It was the legislative

49 *The Future Of Student Visas,* Migration Watch

migrationwatchuk.org/the-future-of-student-visas/

basis for the Rwanda partnership, a proposed scheme under which asylum seekers arriving by illegal means would be removed to Rwanda for processing. The Act also increased the maximum sentence for illegal entry from six months to four years. Channel crossings reached a record 45,755 in 2022, more than double the 2021 figure, indicating that the deterrent effect of the legislation was limited in the short term.

The overall assessment of the Johnson government's immigration record is one of deliberate liberalisation of the legal migration system while claiming to deliver the control the referendum had promised. The system introduced in 2021 was more permissive than the Tier 2 framework it replaced in every material respect: lower skill threshold, lower salary floor, no resident labour market test, and no cap. The removal of the Resident Labour Market Test (RLMT) represented a fundamental shift in the philosophy of the PBS, from a system designed in part to protect the domestic labour market, to one designed to serve the immediate hiring preferences of employers without restriction. The Boriswave was not, therefore, an unintended consequence of reform. It was the predictable result of the choices made.

Rishi Sunak (October 2022 – July 2024)

Rishi Sunak inherited the consequences of the Johnson-era system at a moment when the full scale of those consequences had become statistically visible. The ONS revised net migration figure for the year ending June 2023, released in November 2023, was 764,000, up from an earlier estimate of 606,000 for 2022. These numbers prompted a concerted series of tightening measures. Unlike the Johnson reforms, which primarily operated through Immigration Rules changes, several of the Sunak government's interventions required primary legislation.

On asylum, the Illegal Migration Act 2023 was the central piece of legislation. The Act created a statutory duty on the Home Secretary to remove anyone arriving in the UK by illegal means, without first considering their asylum claim in the UK. Those subject to removal were to be taken to their country of origin or to a designated safe third country (most prominently Rwanda). The Act also removed the ability to claim asylum for those who had

entered illegally and created new detention powers.

Its practical implementation was substantially impeded by litigation. In November 2023, the Supreme Court ruled in *AAA (Syria) and Others v Secretary of State for the Home Department* [2023] UKSC 42 that Rwanda was not a safe third country, as there was a real risk that asylum seekers sent there would be removed onward to countries where they faced persecution. The government responded with the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024, sought to legislatively disapply the Supreme Court's factual findings and deem Rwanda a safe country as a matter of statute. That said, many felt that the Act did not go far enough to prevent judicial intervention, such as Robert Jenrick, Immigration Minister at the time, who resigned in protest. No asylum seekers were removed to Rwanda before the scheme was abandoned by the subsequent government.

On legal migration, the Sunak government announced a package of measures framed as a five-point plan by Home Secretary, James Cleverly:

- The most substantial changes were to salary thresholds. The minimum salary for the Skilled Worker route was raised from £26,200 to £38,700, effective April 2024, an increase of nearly 48 per cent.
- The Shortage Occupation List, which had allowed employers to pay workers in shortage roles at a 20 per cent discount to the going rate, was abolished and replaced with a narrower Immigration Salary List carrying no discount.
- The Minimum Income Requirement for family visas was raised from £18,600, the level set in 2012, to £29,000 in April 2024, with the stated intention of reaching £38,700 in early 2025, though the government lost the general election before that further increase was implemented.

Restrictions on student visa dependants, initially announced in May 2023 under Home Secretary Suella Braverman, took effect from January 2024. The right to bring dependant family members was removed from all international students except those on postgraduate research programmes, and students were also prohibited from switching into work routes before completion of their course^[50]. From March 2024, workers sponsored under the

Health and Care Worker visa were no longer permitted to bring dependents. These two measures had a rapid and measurable effect on dependent visa volumes, contributing significantly to the fall in overall visa numbers in 2024.

The Sunak government's measures succeeded in reducing the volume of new visas issued. Total sponsored study visas fell from 604,253 in 2023 to 419,312 in 2024; total work visas fell from 613,627 to 369,419 over the same period. Headline net migration remained elevated partly because the effects of the high-volume admissions years of 2020 to 2023 continued to feed through into extensions, settlement applications, and family reunification. A large pipeline of settlement claims had been embedded by those cohorts, meaning that the reduction in new visa issuances did not immediately translate into a proportionate fall in net migration. Net migration for the year ending December 2024 was 431,000, a significant fall from the 2022 peak but still more than four times the tens of thousands target of the 2010 to 2019 Conservative manifesto cycles.

Keir Starmer (July 2024 – Present)

The Labour government elected in July 2024 inherited a legal migration system that had been partially tightened by its predecessor but retained the fundamental architecture of the 2021 PBS, and an asylum system whose principal deterrence mechanism, the Rwanda scheme, had never been operationalised. One of Starmer's first decisions was to scrap the Rwanda scheme entirely, repealing the Safety of Rwanda Act through the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025. The abandonment of Rwanda removed the principal coercive deterrence architecture without replacing it with an equivalent mechanism. The government stated that its approach to small boat crossings would instead focus on disrupting people-smuggling networks through enhanced law enforcement cooperation, backed by a Border Security Command and £75 million in counter-terrorism-style powers.

The Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025, which established the Border Security Command, gave intelligence agencies new powers to disrupt people-smuggling networks, and introduced a bilateral returns pilot arrangement

with France under which the UK could return a number of small boat arrivals to France in exchange for accepting an equivalent number via a formal safe route. Approximately 300 people were returned in the initial months of the scheme's operation. Channel crossings continued throughout 2025, reaching an annual total of 41,472, exceeding the 2024 figure, and suggesting that the enforcement-focused approach had not yet produced a deterrent effect at the scale required.

The central document of the Starmer government's immigration policy was the Immigration White Paper, "Restoring Control over the Immigration System," published in May 2025. The White Paper acknowledged explicitly that the student visa and graduate visa routes had been subject to widespread misuse, noting that over half of students completing their studies in 2022, 2023, and 2024 had moved onto another visa route compared to fewer than 20 per cent in 2019 and 2020, and that approximately 30 per cent of asylum claims were from visa holders, of which students accounted for 47 per cent.

On work migration, the White Paper proposed raising the minimum skill threshold for the Skilled Worker route and introducing a Temporary Shortage List for occupations below that threshold. On settlement, the qualifying period for Indefinite Leave to Remain was proposed to increase from five years to ten for most routes, with exceptions for those making a significant contribution. On the Graduate visa, the White Paper proposed a reduction from two years to eighteen months. On family migration, it stated only that a new policy framework would be developed, without specifying a threshold.

Critically, the White Paper contained no commitment to a numerical target or cap on net migration. The salary thresholds inherited from the Sunak government were broadly maintained. The Minimum Income Requirement for family visas was held at £29,000 pending the outcome of a Migration Advisory Committee review, which concluded in June 2025 with no changes subsequently announced. The overall character of the White Paper's legal migration proposals was incremental adjustment of the existing system rather than structural redesign.

Section 5

Did We Take Back Control?

After ten years, five Prime Ministers, and net migration over 3,718,000, it is evident that the mandate to use Brexit as a method to take control back over migration numbers has not been met. As for why, this is a complex answer that requires nuanced understanding.

Institutionally, the capacity to restore control over migration numbers has been returned to the British State; the existence and content of the Nationality and Borders Act (2022), the Illegal Migration Act (2023), Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act (2024) and Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act (2025) shows that there is the political ability to assert the British State as the sovereign power over immigration.

However, on a policy level, the post-Brexit era has been an unmitigated failure. None of the aforementioned policies were able to deliver any meaningful reduction in numbers and, as discussed below, the opposite was achieved. A cap on migration numbers, that could have been introduced at any time in the last ten years, has been abandoned and the institutional power over migration numbers that was returned to the British State has been handed back out, primarily to businesses and quangos.

Political Failure

Across the four administrations considered in this report, a number of structural observations can be made about the trajectory of UK immigration policy since the referendum.

First, **the formal mechanism of control was delivered**. Free movement of EU nationals ended on 31 December 2020, and all subsequent immigration, whether from EU or non-EU countries, has been subject to domestic law. In that narrow technical sense, the referendum mandate was implemented. Parliament legislates the rules and the Home Office issues or refuses visas accordingly. However, as noted above, the public demand expressed through

the referendum was not limited to the legal basis of EU migration. It encompassed total immigration numbers. Measured against that standard, formal control has not translated into numerical control.

Second, **the exercise of that control has not reduced immigration** to the levels that the political context of the referendum implied, nor to the levels repeatedly promised by the Conservative governments that implemented Brexit. The Conservative Party's manifesto commitment to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands was made in 2010, 2015, 2017, and in attenuated form in 2019. Net migration reached 745,000 in 2022, a figure nearly eight times the upper bound of that pledge. The post-Brexit system was designed in 2021 without a cap, without a resident labour market test, and with a reduced skill threshold. These were sovereign choices, made by the government that most enthusiastically championed the Brexit mandate.

Third, **the relationship between the legal and irregular migration systems has become more entangled over the post-referendum period.** The student-to-graduate-to-worker pipeline, facilitated by the 2021 reintroduction of the Graduate visa and the absence of any restriction on post-study switching, has produced high retention rates not fully captured in headline visa statistics. The use of the student visa route as a pathway to asylum, explicitly acknowledged in the 2025 White Paper, represents a systemic vulnerability. The collapse of asylum removals from approximately 18,000 per year in 2005 to just over 1,100 in 2021 means that the enforcement side of the system has been broadly non-functional, regardless of what legislation has said on paper.

Fourth, and perhaps most fundamentally, **no post-referendum government has imposed a binding numerical cap on total immigration.** The one period during which such a cap existed, the 20,700 limit on Tier 2 Certificates of Sponsorship under the Coalition and May governments, was abolished by the Johnson government as a deliberate design choice of the new PBS. The Starmer government's 2025 White Paper did not propose its reinstatement. In the absence of a cap, control over immigration in any meaningful numerical sense has been delegated to employers and educational institutions who determine demand for sponsored visas, and to the demographic and economic conditions of source countries that shape the propensity to apply.

The result is a post-Brexit immigration system that has delivered formal sovereignty over immigration rules without delivering the reduction in total immigration numbers that the political justification for Brexit, in its immigration dimension, implied.

How did Migration Watch respond?

Since the Brexit vote, we have continued to make the argument for reduced migration, the public demand for such reduction, and Brexit as the opportunity to deliver that. We argued that the post-Brexit system “must bear the bulk of the blame” for net migration running out of control, reaching 745,000 in calendar 2022, far above anything seen under free movement. Free movement had ended, exactly as we had pushed for, but the absence of our recommended cap meant that legal, largely non-EU routes had driven numbers to record highs^[51].

Furthermore, we pointed to historic policies as proof of concept of the need for a cap on numbers: the 2011 cap on non-EU skilled visas of 20,700 a year had worked, was never breached, and helped push non-EU migration to its lowest level since the 1990s. The lesson, we concluded, was that the post-Brexit regime should have carried that cap across to the new unified system rather than delegating control to employers and universities^[52].

There are now three primary routes of legal migration via visa to the United Kingdom: work; family; and study. Last year, we made the point that international students, of which the majority were overwhelmingly non-EU, had become the single largest source of immigration, and we recommended a cap via a fixed allocation of certificates of sponsorship, restrictions on dependants, and an end to term-time work rights^[53]. We will shortly be publishing two further papers examining the same subject with regards to work and family visas, along with a revised and more urgent call for a cap on migration numbers.

The non-EU migration that had, prior to the Brexit vote, been relatively settled, has become the principal driver of the very numbers Brexit was meant to bring under control.

51 *Immigration: No Cap, No Control, Migration Watch*

migrationwatchuk.org/immigration-no-cap-no-control/

52 *Immigration: No Cap, No Control, Migration Watch*

migrationwatchuk.org/immigration-no-cap-no-control/

53 *The Future Of Student Visas, Migration Watch*

migrationwatchuk.org/the-future-of-student-visas/

Conclusion

The reaction of the British State to being empowered once more to take over its own migration policies, only to then panic and devolve that power back out to non-democratic methods and entities, is the primary reason migration numbers continue to be as high as they are.

As we have argued for some time, it is absolutely necessary for an overall cap to be placed on migration numbers. This cap can be arrived at in consultation with key industrial representatives and stakeholders, but – if this report has proven anything – it is that the cap must be imposed by the British government, and only the British government. It may be that, at each election, the British public decide that the current cap is not working, and should be lowered or raised, but it is the only way that the democratic principle of sovereignty that defined the Leave vote, and Brexit was an opportunity to revive, can be respected.

