

The Immigration debate in the UK

1. UK Public opinion about immigration

- a) Overall views are divided in Britain. In April 2023, 52% thought that immigration numbers should be reduced. The level of opposition varies by the type of question, and fewer people (32%) said that immigration was a bad or very bad thing.
- b) There is evidence from multiple sources that attitudes have softened over recent years. However, the most recent data point suggests that opposition may have increased since 2022.
- c) Concern about immigration declined after the 2016 Brexit Referendum, but it may be on the rise again.
- d) Attitudes in the UK are among the more positive compared to our European neighbours.
- e) British people make clear distinctions between types of migrant, with the highly skilled preferred to unskilled overall, and the majority in favour of making immigration easier for health care workers.
- f) Younger people and people with university degrees tend to express more positive attitudes to immigration, and Labour voters tend to express more positive attitudes than Conservative voters.

2. Facts

a) Who comes to the UK and why ?

The composition of net migration – the number of people arriving to live permanently minus the number leaving – **has changed drastically since the Brexit referendum**. Shortly before the 2016 referendum, **EU citizens** made up a majority of all net migration to the UK. From then, however, it began to fall, even though the UK remained part of the EU and policy towards EU citizens didn't actually change until the start of 2020.

This change accelerated after the pandemic. In 2021, EU net migration fell into negative territory: that is, there were more EU citizens leaving the UK than arriving. By contrast, non-EU net migration rose sharply, reaching 892,000 in 2022.

Part of the shift in the profile of migrants owes to the post-Brexit immigration system, introduced in 2021. Compared to its predecessor, the new system was considerably more restrictive towards EU citizens and more liberal towards non-EU citizens.

Non-EU citizens now face a lower skill and salary threshold to acquire a work visa than they did before Brexit. But for EU citizens, who previously enjoyed free movement, the new system of visas and employment and salary requirements is a **tightening of the rules**.

But this is not the whole story. The largest groups explaining the 611,000 increase in non-EU immigration in 2023 compared to 2019 are migrant workers (53% of the increase) and international students (38%). This is not simply a result of the change in immigration rules.

The rise in international student numbers owes in part to the reintroduction of a post-study work visa, known as the graduate visa. But it is also due to the UK's explicit strategy to increase and diversify student recruitment.

Early data from recent months suggests that net migration could be substantially lower in 2024, although we will not have a clear picture of the changes until much later in the year.

b) Asylum : dinghies and the backlog

Small boat arrivals have come to dominate the UK's migration debate, although they make up a tiny fraction of all immigration. Such arrivals have increased sharply since 2018. After around 250 people arrived at the end of that year, the home secretary declared Channel crossings a "major

incident”.

Small boat arrivals peaked at around 46,000 in 2022. Almost three-quarters of the increase compared with 2021 was due to arrivals from Albania during the summer. It remains unclear why Albanian arrivals spiked in 2022, or why they declined so rapidly in October and November of that year. While the government credits this decline to a new returns agreement with Albania, this was only announced in December.

The future of small boat arrivals remains extremely uncertain. **Crossings have persisted despite numerous government policies over the past three years to prevent or deter departures**, including the plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda. Rishi Sunak said that flights to Rwanda would take off if the Conservatives won the election, while Labour leader Keir Starmer vowed to scrap the policy.

The UK’s backlog (= unprocessed items) of unprocessed asylum applications has been another focus of debate, and statistical dispute.

In December 2022, Sunak said that the asylum backlog was half the size that it was when Labour was in office. A week later, the immigration minister, Robert Jenrick, said that the Conservative government inherited a backlog of 450,000 unresolved cases from the last Labour government. In fact, the government’s official statistics show that the asylum backlog stood at around 6,000 at the end of 2010, not 450,000. The backlog increased consistently until the end of 2022 when it reached a peak of 132,000 applications – 22 times higher than at the end of 2010.

The UK’s asylum backlog increased 22-fold from 2010 to 2022 – but is now falling.

In response to this debate, the UK’s official statistics watchdog criticised the government’s use of asylum backlog data.

In December 2022, Sunak pledged to clear the asylum backlog by the end of the following year. This was later clarified to refer not to the entire backlog but just the “legacy” backlog – roughly 92,000 applications lodged before the *Nationality and Borders Act*, a new immigration law, came into effect in June 2022.

At the beginning of 2024, the government announced that the commitment to clear the backlog had been delivered. However, official statistics showed there were around 3,900 unresolved cases left in the “legacy” backlog. Again, the watchdog intervened to say the government’s claims were misleading.

c) **Enforced removals and voluntary departures from 2004 to 2023**

Despite implementing a “hostile environment” policy toward people with no right to be in the UK, the Conservative government has struggled to make them leave the country, either voluntarily or forcibly. Significantly **fewer people were returned to other countries in the last decade compared to when Labour were last in power.**

Between 2010 and 2020, the overall number of returns collapsed by 82% – a trend accelerated by the pandemic but long predating it. While numbers have somewhat recovered since, they remain well below those seen in the late 2000s and early 2010s. Enforced removals were particularly affected by the decline – in 2023, they remained at less than half the level recorded in 2010.

The reasons for the decline are not fully understood, and do not necessarily result exclusively from policy or the resources available for enforcement. Other factors, such as changes in the composition of the irregular migrant population and the ease with which they can be removed, may have played a role.

(Source : *The Conversation* - Nov 6, 2024)

See charts in article : <https://theconversation.com/election-2024-the-uks-migration-situation-in-five-charts-232190>

3. Policies

a) *Nationality and Borders Act, 2022*

The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 (c. 36) is an act of the Parliament of the United Kingdom proposed in July 2021 relating to immigration, asylum and the UK's modern slavery response. The Act also deals with British overseas territories citizenship and registration of stateless citizens. Amongst other elements, **it proposes to introduce "designated places" or "offshore" asylum hubs for application of refugee and migrant asylum claims, potentially in another European country or an African country. Part 5 of the Act grants the Government new powers to limit who is considered a victim of modern slavery**, with clauses limiting support in cases where survivors have not complied with State-set deadlines to disclose their abuse. Under Part 5, decision makers would also be asked to consider the survivors' criminal history before deeming them eligible for support. (Source : Wikipedia - Nov 6, 2024)

b) **The Rwanda Plan**

The UK and Rwanda Migration and Economic Development Partnership was an immigration policy proposed by the governments of Boris Johnson, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak **whereby people whom the United Kingdom identified as illegal immigrants or asylum seekers would have been relocated to Rwanda for processing, asylum and resettlement**. Those who were successful in claiming asylum would have remained in Rwanda, and they would not have been permitted to return to the United Kingdom. The UK would invest in a development fund for Rwanda and financially support migrant's relocation and accommodation costs to move to Rwanda. The first flight for this plan received legal clearance from the High Court of Justice and was scheduled for 14 June 2022. A last-minute interim measure by the European Court of Human Rights led to the plan being halted until the conclusion of the legal action in the UK. At the end of 2022, the High Court further ruled that though the plan was lawful, the individual cases of eight asylum seekers due to be deported that year had to be reconsidered. The Court of Appeal ruled on 29 June 2023 that the plan was unlawful; with an appeal to the Supreme Court of the United Kingdom leading to a concurrence with the lower court on 15 November 2023. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 overruled the courts' judgments and declared Rwanda a safe country.

After Keir Starmer and the Labour Party won the 2024 general election, **Starmer announced that the Rwanda plan would be cancelled and replaced by the *Border Security Command***. The total cost of the scheme is estimated to be £700 million, and four migrants were voluntarily relocated while it was in place.

(Source : Wikipedia - Nov 6, 2024)

NB : Similarities with the "Pacific Solution" that Australia announced in 2001, under which refugees were to be sent to Papua New Guinea and Nauru; the scheme was modified in 2013 to deter refugees trying to arrive by boat.

4. Positions of the Prime Minister and Shadow Prime Minister

a) **Keir Starmer's position**

→ **a more humane approach ?**

Last month, after Starmer spoke about "resetting" Britain's approach to immigration in a way that respects international human rights standards, **Labour also announced plans to permanently shut down the controversial Bibby Stockholm, a barge moored off the coast of Dorset that is used to hold asylum-seekers**. In a surprise appointment, Starmer then chose Richard Hermer, a distinguished human rights lawyer who began his career at famed human rights firm Doughty Street

Chambers, as his attorney general.

Another sign of change at the Home Office is that it now refers to migrants as “irregular” rather than “illegal,” a term routinely used under Tory governments that implied criminality and reinforced harmful stereotypes.

(Source : ForeignPolicy.com - Nov 6, 2024)

→ **Visit to Italy**

Starmer, who leads a center-left government, has raised some eyebrows in September when he visited Italian Premier Giorgia Meloni and praised her nationalist conservative government’s “remarkable” progress in reducing the number of migrants reaching Italy’s shores by boat.

→ **Recent declaration on smuggling gangs**

« People-smuggling gangs sending migrants across the English Channel in small boats are a serious threat to global security and should be treated like terror networks », British Prime Minister Keir Starmer told an international law-enforcement conference on November 4, 2024.

Starmer told a meeting of the international police organization Interpol that “the world needs to wake up to the severity of this challenge.”

“People-smuggling should be viewed as a global security threat similar to terrorism,” he said.

Starmer, a former chief prosecutor for England and Wales, said his government would be “taking our approach to counterterrorism, which we know works, and applying it to the gangs.” That means more cooperation between law enforcement agencies, closer coordination with other countries and unspecified “enhanced” powers for law enforcement, he said.

Starmer said that in counterterrorism operations, “we can shut down their bank account, cut off their internet access and arrest them for making preparations to act before an attack has taken place.”

“And we need to stop people-smuggling gangs before they act too,” he said.

(Source : APNews - Nov 6, 2024)

→ **The summer race riots**

From 30 July to 5 August 2024, far-right, anti-immigration protests and riots occurred in England and Northern Ireland, within the United Kingdom. This followed a mass stabbing in Southport on 29 July in which three children were killed. The riots were fuelled by false claims circulated by far-right groups that the perpetrator of the attack was a Muslim and an asylum seeker, in addition to broader Islamophobic, racist, and anti-immigrant sentiments that had grown leading up to the protests. The disorder included racist attacks, arson, and looting and was the largest incident of social unrest in England since 2011. By 8 August at least 200 people had been sentenced with 177 imprisoned, to an average sentence of around two years and up to a nine-years. As of 1 September 1,280 arrests and nearly 800 charges had been made in relation to the unrest.

(Source : Wikipedia - Nov 6, 2024)

British Prime Minister Keir Starmer had promised that the rioters would suffer "the full force of the law."

Two weeks after the start of the racist violence that affected many towns in the United Kingdom, following the death of three children in a knife attack in the town of Southport on July 29, falsely attributed on social media to a recent migrant of the Muslim faith, the British courts had indeed increased their severe sentences.

According to a BBC count on Tuesday, August 13, almost all those already convicted for their part in the violence have been sent to prison. Out of 54 convictions, 47 adults and 3 minors have been given a custodial sentence, averaging two years. A total of 275 people are being prosecuted for their role in the riots. Those who pleaded guilty were tried under a fast-track procedure; the others were almost systematically remanded in custody, pending trials that are expected to take place mainly in September.

Penalties were particularly severe for those not directly involved in the riots, but who incited violence on social media. In Northampton, a 26-year-old man who had called for the burning of

hotels and law firms helping migrants was sentenced to three years and two months in prison. The police hadn't had much trouble tracking him down: He'd posted the messages on his X account, on which he was listed under his real name and with a real profile photo.

(Source : LeMonde - Nov 6, 2024)

b) Kemi Badenoch's position

Tory leadership contender Kemi Badenoch has said "not all cultures are equally valid" when it comes to deciding who should be allowed into the UK.

In an article for *the Sunday Telegraph* at the start of the Tory conference, she said: "Our country is not a dormitory for people to come here and make money. It is our home.

"Those we chose to welcome, we expect to share our values and contribute to our society."

In her *Telegraph* article, Badenoch sets out what she calls a **"hard-nosed" policy on immigration**. She calls for a complete overhaul of the system to ensure every public servant makes it a priority - not just the Home Office - and does not rule out leaving the European Convention on Human Rights.

She also calls for a better "integration strategy" that emphasises British values and culture.

Drawing on her own background as an immigrant - she was born in the UK but spent her childhood in Nigeria - Badenoch writes: « Culture is more than cuisine or clothes. It's also customs which may be at odds with British values. »

"We cannot be naïve and assume immigrants will automatically abandon ancestral ethnic hostilities at the border, or that all cultures are equally valid. They are not.

"I am struck for example, by the number of recent immigrants to the UK who hate Israel. That sentiment has no place here."

(Source : bbc.com - Nov 6, 2024)

Focus : the 'Rivers of Blood' speech

The **"Rivers of Blood" speech** was made by the British politician Enoch Powell on 20 April 1968 to a meeting of the Conservative Political Centre in Birmingham. In it Powell, who was then Shadow Secretary of State for Defence in the Shadow Cabinet of Ted Heath, strongly criticised the rates of immigration from the New Commonwealth (mostly former colonies of the British Empire) to the United Kingdom since the Second World War. He also opposed the Race Relations Bill, an anti-discrimination bill which upon receiving royal assent as the Race Relations Act 1968 criminalised the refusal of housing, employment, or public services to persons on the grounds of colour, race, or ethnic or national origin. Powell himself called it "the Birmingham speech"; "Rivers of Blood" alludes to a prophecy from Virgil's *Aeneid* which Powell (a classical scholar) quoted:

'As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding; like the Roman, I seem to see 'the River Tiber foaming with much blood'.

The speech was a national controversy, and it made Powell one of the most talked-about and divisive politicians in Britain. Heath, the leader of the Conservative Party at the time, dismissed him from the Shadow Cabinet the day after the speech. According to most accounts the popularity of Powell's views on immigration might have been a decisive factor in the Conservative Party's unexpected victory at the 1970 general election, although he became one of the most persistent opponents of the subsequent Heath ministry.