

Shortcuts



BEFORE AND AGAIN

Labour can forge new immigration policies that build on its past achievements—*Thom Brooks*

No single issue cost Labour the general election. But a failure to convince the public on immigration is at the heart of Labour's continuing headaches.

Margaret Beckett's official report into the party's defeat found immigration one of four key issues that stopped Labour from reclaiming 10 Downing Street. It's easy to see why. Emblazing 'controls on immigration' on mugs was as empty a slogan as it was a pledge. The question is not whether Labour supports border controls, but rather whether the public believed the party was able to do it.

And the commitment to ensure all customer-facing staff in public authorities speak fluent English – now pinched by the Tories – was hardly worth making. Almost all do already – it simply confirms what is already the case, rather than proposing a significant change that will get noticed.

Finding new policies consistent with Labour's fundamental values is no easy task, and a root and branch review of Labour's immigration policies is long overdue. But we need not start from scratch. In the 2005 white paper 'Controlling Our Borders: Making Migration Work for Britain', then home secretary Charles Clarke set out an ambitious programme of reforms such as: a new points-based system, English language tests, fixed penalty fines for employers found to hire illegal workers, pre-boarding electronic checks at airports, increased residency requirements for permanent settlement, the citizenship test, and new measures tackling abuses of the asylum system.

Most of Clarke's reforms became law – and form the bedrock of our current immigration system. It is no overstatement to say that Labour substantively rebuilt immigration rules for the better. Standards were

raised and new tests introduced, but the rules became far more transparent than they had been, leading to much greater consistency.

This is not to say Labour got everything right. There were factual inaccuracies in the citizenship tests. And government after government have failed to review how well the test meets its purposes of ensuring new long-term residents acknowledge and respect widely shared British values. Healthy economic growth during the New Labour years was a pull factor increasing migration to the UK in numbers greater than anyone had predicted, as was opening the labour market before many other EU countries to new member states. Labour continues to pay the price for it – as net migration reaches new heights seven years into David Cameron's time in office.

So a new approach can improve on Labour's fundamental reforms of immigration to get the system working again – and go some way towards winning back public confidence.

Government can and should do more to help local communities manage pressures on public services caused by immigration. Home Secretary Jacqui Smith introduced a migration impacts fund – a pot of money paid into by migrants through a surcharge on immigration applications. This was used to help support integration and provide relief where needed in schools, housing, health care and housing.

Don't worry if you have never heard about it – the fund was scrapped within weeks of the coalition taking office in 2010. Labour should bring this policy back in a bolder form through something like an EU migration impact fund. This could be funded through immigration application surcharges across member states and distributed across the EU to relieve the impact of immigration on public services.

A second proposal is to take contribution more seriously. Migrants bring economic benefits like job creation, new investment and much needed skills. The problem is the benefits are distributed unevenly, leaving some feeling worse off.

We should have a new contribution test. Migrants seeking permanent residency or citizenship should make a contribution through education or training in places like colleges or jobcentres. This would allow the public to see and to benefit from the skills

and experiences migrants bring to Britain. What's more, migrants would improve their employability through such opportunities, and interact positively in their local communities in ways that can make a difference.

We can also do more on improving the advice ministers receive. The Migration Advisory Committee is a small group composed exclusively of economists. They make recommendations on salary thresholds for sponsoring family visas and advise on jobs exempt from standard immigration controls for example.

But immigration is about more than economics. The committee should be expanded to include experts in law, social policy and other related areas. An expanded expert panel could provide more robust advice in these and more areas and better assist government in achieving policy aims.

These are only a few ideas about how Labour can build on its past achievements and forge new policies consistent with its values. Immigration is no mere area of academic study for me. I am an immigrant. I sat and passed the citizenship test. I paid into the migration impacts fund. I became a British citizen. I'm not alone – and I strongly recommend that whatever immigration policies we defend take some account of the voices of those like me that are immigrants. For too long policies have been created by people of good intention and little personal experience. If we want things to improve, we must listen to the voices of both the public at large and immigrants themselves. **F**

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