



COMMENTARY

Tangled Up in the Net? Challenges with Reducing Net Migration to the Tens of Thousands

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In his major speech on immigration today (14 April 2011), David Cameron gave a strong reaffirmation of the government's commitment to reducing net-migration to the "tens of thousands". This key election promise of the Conservative Party has been the subject of much debate with equal levels of support – in particular from the right-leaning press – and criticism including from within his own government. Lib Dem Business Secretary Vince Cable publically criticized the leaked speech even before it was officially delivered.

Whatever one's views on the benefits and costs of reducing immigration in the UK, it is clear that achieving the net-migration target of the tens of thousands presents an enormous challenge.

There are several reasons for this.

Firstly, the target includes migration of British and EU nationals whose entry and exit Britain cannot restrict. This means that even if the government achieves significant reductions in net-migration from outside the EU, the target may not be achieved simply because, for example, immigration from other EU countries may increase (without proportionate increases in emigration) or because emigration of British nationals may decline.

Over the past few years, positive net-migration of EU nationals (58,000 in 2009) has been roughly offset by similar magnitudes of negative net-migration of British nationals (-44,000 in 2009). But there is no reason why this will continue to be the case. It is plausible to expect, for example, that immigration and net-migration of EU nationals will increase again as the economy recovers and as government policies make it harder for employers to recruit migrant workers from outside Europe.

>> Read our briefing ["Long-Term Migration Flows to and from the UK"](#)

Much of the government's plan is also focused on cutting abuse of the immigration system – this is, of course, essential, but in terms of reducing numbers it can only achieve so much. While abuse is a challenge for a range of different immigration channels such as students and labour migrants, immigration to the UK is primarily done legally. While making efforts to stamp out abuse will reduce numbers to some extent it is unlikely to reduce immigration by the kind of figures that are required to make a significant impression on overall net-migration.

>> Read our [commentary on the government's plans for addressing abuse in the immigration of students](#)

The next challenge is that whenever government does try to reduce legal immigration, it faces significant opposition from a wide range of stakeholders. Employers and universities have pushed back hard against both the labour immigration cap – securing exemptions to intra-company transfers – and against deeper cuts to student visas. These sorts of exemptions benefit employers and universities, but they clearly make it less and less likely that the government will be able to cut net migration to the tens of thousands figure.

One important element of Mr Cameron's speech is his focus on welfare reform as an important element of the policy to reduce net-migration. This demonstrates some recognition that immigration reform has to be addressed by a whole systems approach – rather than imagining that one can reduce immigration purely through reform of immigration policy. Immigration is not a tap that can be turned off and on through allocation of visas and border controls – it is complex and runs through all sorts of issues that affect a wide range of public policies, including but not only welfare policies.

The welfare system may encourage British workers not to take certain unappealing jobs that then go to migrants, but this is only one facet of the system that incentivizes businesses to employ migrants – other considerations include a lack of adequate investment in training – there are many well trained construction workers from Eastern Europe and little investment in training of British ones, for example.

Also, parts of the economy have developed a dependence on low cost workers, and public policies have played a role in this – in the social care sector, for example, there is a growing demand for low-cost workers as the privately run care homes funded by local authorities are pushed to care for more people but with less money made available. In reality the only workers who take many of these low paid jobs are often migrants. In London more than 60 percent of care assistants are migrants, primarily because of the low wages on offer.

>> Read our policy primer on [“Social Care for Older People and the Demand for Migrant Workers”](#)

Finally we need to think about how the changes the government is pushing for will impact on public opinion. Will reducing the number of migrants proportionally reduce public concern? What types of migrants does the public have in mind when they express opposition to immigration? The answers to both of these questions are unclear at best.

>> Read our briefing on [“UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern”](#)

>> Read our policy primer on [“Public Opinion and Public Policy: Complexities of the Democratic Mandate”](#)

While it is not impossible to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands, there are clearly very big challenges. Reducing immigration is a lot harder than increasing it.



The Migration Observatory

Based at the Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford, the Migration Observatory provides independent, authoritative, evidence-based analysis of data on migration and migrants in the UK, to inform media, public and policy debates, and to generate high quality research on international migration and public policy issues. The Observatory's analysis involves experts from a wide range of disciplines and departments at the University of Oxford.



COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford. The mission of COMPAS is to conduct high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform policy-making and public debate, and engage users of research within the field of migration.

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