COMMENTARY

Number 10 – the biggest number in the UK's migration debate.

COMPAS
CENTRE ON MIGRATION, POLICY & SOCIETY

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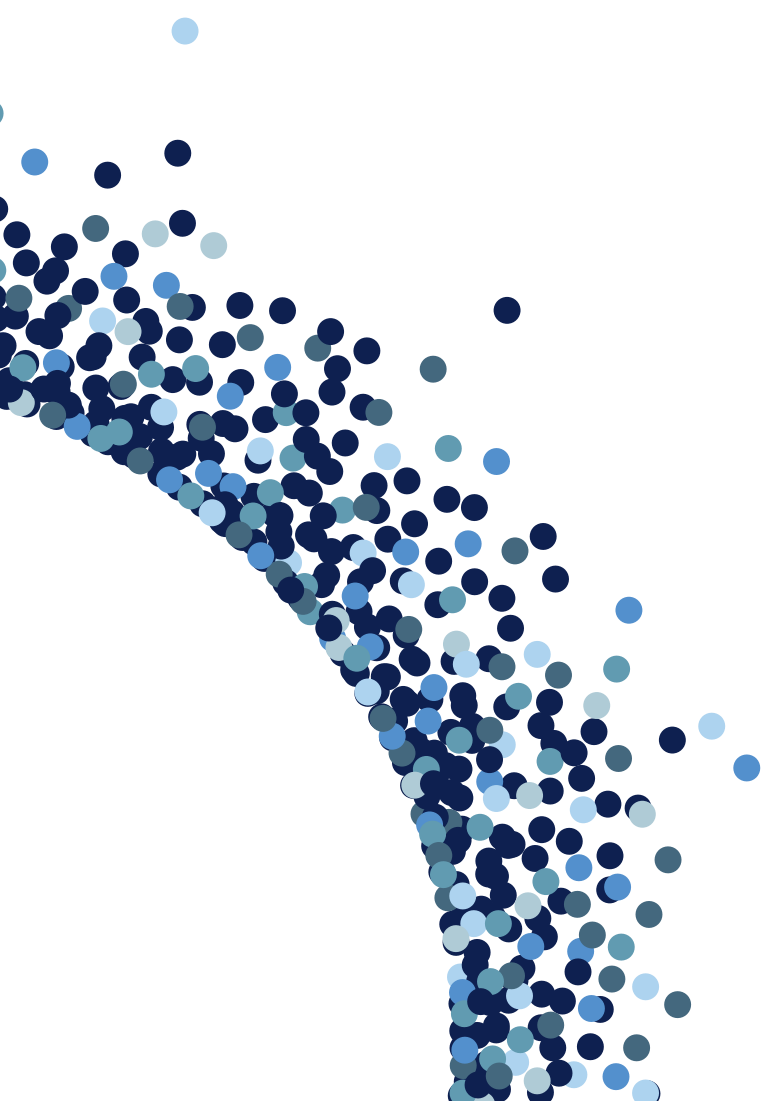
www.migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk

This commentary outlines the migration related policies presented by the three main national UK parties (Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrats) in their manifestos for the 2017 general election. We look specifically at policies that have a direct bearing on migration flows into or out of the UK, rather than those focussed on the social impacts of migration, and consider only the policies as they are presented in the manifestos, rather than other statements or assurances from the party leaders, or their representatives, about migration.

Net Migration

Net migration is the balance between immigration – the number of people moving to the country for at least a year – and emigration – the number of people leaving for a year or more. Essentially it is a measure of the impact of migration on the UK population. Since 2010, the UK's migration debate has been defined by the "tens of thousands" net migration target. This – in theory at least – commits the UK government to reducing overall net migration to the UK to less than 100,000. The latest estimate of net migration is 273,000 for the year to September 2016.

Conservative Party
The Conservatives include a recommitment to the "tens of thousands" net migration target, which has been the centrepiece of their policy on immigration since 2010.

Labour Party
Labour rejects a numerical limit on migration arguing instead for migration levels based on the "economic needs" of the country.

Liberal Democrat Party
The Liberal Democrats also rejects a numerical limit on migration, calling for an annual debate on the UK's labour migration needs.

Rights for EU Nationals living in the UK

Currently EU nationals have the right to live and work in the UK, while UK nationals have the same rights in other EU member states. It remains unclear how Brexit will affects these rights. The UK has so far refused to make a unilateral commitment to EU nationals to protect their rights, arguing that this is a key factor in Brexit negotiations with the EU, and that it is dependent on the rights of UK nationals in other EU countries also being protected.

Conservative Party
No promises to unilaterally allow EU nationals to remain in the UK after Brexit, instead saying they intend to "secure the entitlements of EU nationals in Britain and British nationals in the EU" as part of Brexit negotiations.

Labour Party
Promise to "immediately guarantee existing rights for all EU nationals living in Britain"

Liberal Democrat Party
Will "press for the UK to unilaterally guarantee the rights of EU nationals in the UK, ending their ongoing uncertainty."

Work migration policies

Work is the most common reason for migration to the UK, so the regulation of migration for work purposes is a critical factor in the UK's immigration system.

Conservative Party
The Immigration Skills Charge was introduced in April 2017 to reduce demand for migrant labour. It is levied on employers that sponsor migrant workers visas. The Conservative manifesto proposes to increase the Immigration Skills Charge from £1,000 to "£2,000 a year by the end of the parliament". The Immigration Health Surcharge was introduced in 2015 to help cover the costs of non-EU migrant's use of NHS services and it is paid as part of the immigration application. The Conservative manifesto proposes to triple the surcharge from £200 to £600.

Labour Party
"Overseas only recruitment" is a practice in which recruitment agencies only advertise abroad for jobs in the UK. The Labour manifesto proposes to end overseas only recruitment as well as enforcing minimum wage regulation and working with trades unions to ensure workers rights.

Liberal Democrat Party
Will "continue to allow high-skilled immigration" to support key sectors of the economy.

Study migration policies

The UK is one of the world's largest destinations for international students, and foreign students contribute billions to the UK economy through fees and spending in the UK during their courses. After work, study is the biggest reason for immigration to the UK – and for non-EU migrants it is the most common reason. The international definition of a long-term migrant includes international students moving to a country for at least a year. If all international students leave the UK after finishing their studies, their long-term impact on net migration would be zero. However, there is insufficient information on student emigration from the UK and the impact of student migration on net migration and the size of the UK population remains unclear.

Conservative Party
The Conservatives will toughen the visa requirements for non-EU students and expect students to leave the country at the end of their course "unless they meet new, higher requirements" that allow them to enter the British labour market after finishing their studies. They also suggest that "overseas students will remain in the immigration statistics" and "within scope of the government's policy to reduce annual net migration." Along with this, the Conservatives will also triple the NHS surcharge for students to £450.

Labour Party
Labour will not include international students in "immigration numbers", but will "crack down on fake colleges."

Liberal Democrat Party
The Liberal Democrats propose to improve student emigration statistics and to remove students from "the official migration statistics." They also propose to "reinstate post-study work visas for graduates in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) subjects who find suitable employment within six months of graduating" and will also "give the devolved administrations the right to sponsor additional post-study work visas."

Family migration policies

Current policies currently require British nationals and non-EU nationals settled in the UK to earn at least £18,600 per year to be allowed to bring a non-EU spouse to live with them in the UK (this sum increases if the person wants to bring additional family members). This rule does not apply to non-British EU nationals.

Conservative Party
Will increase the income required to sponsor a non-EU spouse or family member.

Labour Party
Will "replace income thresholds with a prohibition on recourse to public funds."

Liberal Democrat Party
No specific commitments on family migration made – other than that family visas will be processed efficiently.

Asylum policies

Asylum applications in the UK have increased from 17,916 in 2010 to 30,603 in 2016 (main applicants). In 2015 David Cameron also committed to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees in the UK – which had been expected to be delivered by 2020.

Conservative Party
No mention is made of the commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrian refugees. However, they say that "wherever possible, the government will offer asylum and refuge to people in parts of the world affected by conflict and oppression, rather than to those who have made it to Britain." They intend to "reduce asylum claims made in Britain" and increase help for those "in the most troubled regions."

Labour Party
Labour is also unspecific on numbers, but says it will take a fair share of refugees. It adds that the party will review housing issues affecting refugees and their host communities suggesting that "the current arrangements for housing and dispersing refugees are not fit for purpose."

Liberal Democrat Party
The Liberal Democrats made specific numerical pledges and indicate that they will expand "the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme to offer sanctuary to 50,000 people over the lifetime of the next parliament and reopening the Dubs scheme to take 3,000 unaccompanied refugee children from Europe."

Conclusions
In broad terms the manifestos show two different approaches to migration policy.

On one hand, the Conservative approach – which is underpinned by a commitment to reducing net migration to the tens of thousands. Policies such as increasing charges for access to the NHS, increasing the levy on employers taking on migrant workers and increasing the income required to sponsor a family member have the potential to reduce immigration and net-migration, but they seem unlikely to deliver net migration in the "tens of thousands" on their own. Of course, there is an expectation that Brexit will reduce EU migration, but it is unclear by how much at the moment.

On the other hand, while the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats have been critical of the net migration target, neither has managed to cut through with a policy that will address public support for less immigration. Also, both parties have proposed to take international students out of the immigration statistics, but the potential advantages of this practice are less clear in the absence of a clear numerical target on migration.

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.
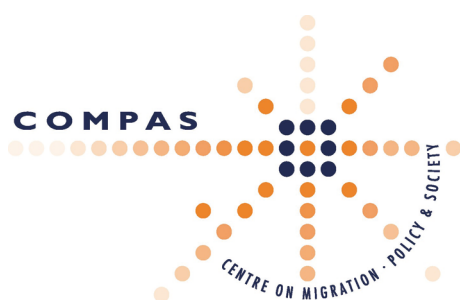
COMPAS

The Migration Observatory is based at the 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.
www.compas.ox.ac.uk

Press contact

Rob McNeil
Head of Media and Communications
robert.mcneil@compas.ox.ac.uk
+ 44 (0)1865 274568
+ 44 (0)7500 970081