Changing the debate on migration

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migrants’ rights network
working for the rights of all migrants

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Migrants' Rights Network

Migrants' Rights Network is a young, dynamic national NGO working and campaigning in support of migrants in the UK. Our work brings together migrant activists and support organizations, think tanks, academics, faith groups and public sector representatives to advocate for a rights-based approach towards migration in the UK.

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Immigration is one of the topics that dominated the 2015 General Election. When the first edition of this pamphlet was released last year, the myths around this subject were entrenched in public consciousness. Over a year later we have seen the horrifying effects of this: nearly four million people turned out to vote for anti-immigration party UKIP while the Government has looked the other way as desperate asylum seekers and migrants have been killed trying to make it to Europe.

The one-sided migration ‘debate’ is characterised by myths and stereotypes. It has proved extremely damaging – and at times fatal – to migrants’ and asylum seekers’ lives. This updated pamphlet provides some important facts which are sorely needed in this increasingly anti-immigration climate.

The refugee crisis that has escalated in Europe due to conflict across the Middle East and North Africa has further shown the human consequences of Britain’s xenophobic rhetoric. The Conservative Government met little opposition when it chose to withdraw support for Mare Nostrum, the search and rescue opposition for people drowning in the Mediterranean. Thousands of desperate people are living in a camp in Calais; Britain’s response was to ‘strengthen borders’. While the swell of public opinion has recently forced the Government’s hand in committing to take more refugees, they have consistently refused to take part in a fair asylum system. In the first three months of this year they rejected 64% of asylum cases – even though the UK gets a relatively small number of asylum applications.

Meanwhile, the reality for far too many of the people from abroad who make it into Britain’s rigorous immigration system is one of destitution and discrimination. Countless asylum seekers and refugees are held in detention centres and face abuse of a physical and psychological nature. State support for asylum seekers has been cut; projections suggest they will receive around 50% less than British benefit claimants. While asylum seekers, who could face persecution at home, are forcibly removed from the country in the dead of night.

We have reached this point because of a weakness on the Left. A significant number of
politicians who claim to be pro-immigration accept immigration myths in some form or another. For instance, many ignore the benefits of multi-language society and adamantly proclaim that immigrants must learn English, despite the fact that only a tiny number can’t and that the Coalition government cut funding for English classes in 2011. This buys into the idea that ‘they’ are different from ‘us’ and that ‘they’ cause British society’s problems.

The absent response to the misleading, often hysterical, coverage of migration has exacerbated prejudice and strengthened the toxic anti-‘foreigner’ feeling in this country. Far too many perpetuate the myth that people from abroad move to Britain to claim from the system. The reality is only 1% of migrants claim benefits, in comparison to 4% of the British population. Most immigrants are in work and they are key to running public services, like the NHS.

Yet politicians still routinely use the word ‘immigrant’ as if it were a dirty word. It has become so powerful in its negativity that they go so far as to interchange two very different terms: ‘asylum seeker’ and ‘migrant’. The former are forced to leave their country of origin due to persecution, the latter make the choice to leave. Purposefully confusing these two terms minimises the human suffering that exists just beyond this country’s borders and sends a message to the public that all people from abroad are out for what they can get. And so, unless they have wealth to buy them privilege, British immigrants and asylum seekers have become less than human.

Sadly, some believe that while all of this may be true, the electorate won’t listen to the truth about migration. But public opinion is not rigid and social change is not achieved by simply pandering to opinion polls. On immigration we must challenge, confront and transform misconceptions, to prove that people from abroad – whether they are classified as immigrants, asylum seekers or refugees – have not caused low wages or this country’s housing crisis. Wealthy landlords, voracious employers and a deregulated market have laid the ground for inequality to breed. In fact, migrants and asylum seekers share common ground with Britons who bore the brunt of the economic crisis: both are exploited and used as scapegoats for this country’s problems. But mistruths about immigration shroud this potential base for solidarity.

That is why the facts in this pamphlet are so important. We must use them to inject rationality and humanity into the migration ‘debate’. It is only with such facts that we can create a rival narrative, in which we remind the public that immigrants and asylum seekers are human beings too.

Maya Goodfellow
Migrants or refugees?

Too often, terms with very different meanings are used interchangeably to describe migrants. This can result in confusion and create an inaccurate perception of what is going on. There are many different reasons people move from one country to another, some people choose to move and some are forced.

**Migrants**: An umbrella term to describe those who move from one place to another to find work or better living conditions.

**Immigrants**: Those who come to a country mainly for work, generally to settle.

**Asylum Seekers**: Those who apply for protection under the United Nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and are awaiting a decision from the government as to whether they are recognised as a refugee.

**Refugees**: People fleeing their country of origin due to fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership in a particular social group, or political opinion and who have officially been given permission to stay in the country.

There is no such thing as an ‘illegal’ or ‘bogus’ asylum seeker. Under international law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in any country that has signed the 1951 Convention and to remain there until their claim has been assessed.

Source: Refugee Council
The truth about refugees and asylum seekers

Media coverage of migration is often misleading and increasingly hysterical. Instead of empathising with the plight of desperate migrants, the media, until very recently, has chosen to stoke up prejudice. The refugee crisis escalating in Europe due to conflicts across the Middle East and North Africa has been ignored to the point this became impossible, showing just how far this xenophobic attitude has skewed perceptions. These attitudes effectively shut down any real discussion about how, or why, Britain should play a part in supporting refugees and migrants.

Despite a promise to give 20,000 people ‘humanitarian status’ in the face of huge public support for refugees, the Government is still refusing to take part in a fair asylum system. In the first 3 months of 2015 they rejected 64% of asylum cases and have restricted the already basic rights of those who are granted asylum.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work while their claim is processed. The Government is cutting the already limited support to the few asylum seekers who have come to Britain – those with children now have to live on £73.90 a week as a result of cuts of up to 30% in their support payments.

**Perceptions on the share of asylum seekers as % of migrants (UK)**

![Image of perception and reality]

**What people think**

- 62%

**The reality**

- 4%

Source: IPPR, ONS

**In the first 3 months of 2015 the UK Government rejected 64% of asylum cases.**
In reality the number of refugees coming to Britain is an incredibly small percentage of the world’s refugee population. The vast majority – 86% – of refugees are taken in by developing countries with far fewer resources than Britain\(^5\). In 2014, Turkey – whose GDP per capita is about four times less than Britain’s – hosted the largest number at 1.59 million refugees\(^6\).

Britain had 31,945 applications for asylum in 2014; but in Sweden – whose population is nearly seven times smaller than ours – there were 81,325 such applications. France had more than twice as many, and Germany – with 202,851 applications – had more than six times the British rate\(^7\).

### Asylum and new asylum applicants 2014

Adjusting the figures for each country’s population, the country that received by far the most applicants was Sweden with 8,365 per million people living there. The UK received just 494, which compares to 2,513 for Germany and 972 for France.

The UK has one of the lowest rates of applications per resident in Europe at just 0.5 per 1,000 – 1 asylum application for every 2,000 residents.

Source: Eurostat\(^8\)
Patterns of migration

The distorted debate around migration is clearly evidenced by the gulf between public perception around numbers, versus the reality. Polls show that people think there are far more immigrants in Britain than there really are. On average people think that immigrants make up a quarter – 24.4% – of the population when it is actually half that, at just over 12%. In a global context, Britain has a smaller proportion of migrants in the population than the US (13%), Canada (20.6%) and Australia (25%).

The movement of migrants is not just one way. Large numbers of people emigrate from Britain every year. An estimated 323,000 people emigrated from the UK in 2014, joining the almost 1 in 10 British citizens that already live overseas. Internal migration within Britain is also an important factor. 2.85 million residents moved between local authorities in England and Wales last year, an increase of 5% compared with a year earlier.

Migration flows are complex and there is broad consensus that the net migration target is unhelpful and shouldn’t guide future policy.
The real impact of migration on the economy and jobs

Migrants increase the labour supply of a country and help to grow the economy through increased consumer demand, which leads to the creation of more jobs\textsuperscript{16}. Some argue that there is a fixed amount of work to be done in the economy, and that more migrants means less jobs for those already living in Britain. In reality, migrants not only increase the size of the economy but also the number of jobs available\textsuperscript{17}.

Despite the myths, the majority of new jobs created are not taken up by immigrants. The immigrant share in new jobs is – and always has been – broadly the same as the share of immigrants in the working age population\textsuperscript{18}.

Between 2005 and 2008, generally a period of economic strength and high migration in Britain, employment of existing British workers increased by 116,000\textsuperscript{19}. Even in 2008, when migration was high, the number of UK unfilled vacancies reached almost three quarters of a million\textsuperscript{20}.

All the evidence suggests that migrants – especially migrants from the new EU member states – are net contributors to the public purse. In fact, new EU migrants paid in via taxes about 30\% more than they cost public services\textsuperscript{21}. In particular, they were far less likely to claim benefits and tax credits.
In total, there is evidence that migration has positive effects on the average wage\(^2\). By adding the skill sets of migrant workers to existing sectors, there is an increase in overall productivity, which in turn increases the average wage. In some sectors, if migrants have skills that are direct substitutes for existing workers, and if collective agreements are not enforced, then a slight downward pressure on wages at the lower end of the labour market might be felt\(^2\).

But the race to the bottom in wages began for many reasons. The root of this can be found in the deregulation of labour markets and the introduction of a raft of anti-union laws\(^2\). This gave employers the go-ahead to push back against decent wages and working conditions. Deregulation, the reduction in trade-unionism and the failure to upgrade or enforce the minimum wage, has been to blame for this race to the bottom.

The only way to ensure decent wages and working conditions for all workers is to: renew the regulation of employment conditions; ensure a stronger role for trade unions; and put policies in place to tackle the squeeze on living standards across the board.
Migration and public services

Housing

Successive government failure has meant that not enough housing has been built over a long period and there are now desperate shortages of affordable housing across the country. In some areas this has led to anger at the lack of housing being misdirected towards migrants. The majority of new immigrants are not eligible for social housing and myths of migrants ‘jumping’ social housing waiting lists are completely untrue. On average, immigrants are less likely to be in social housing than people born in the UK. Likewise, immigrants are much less likely to own their home and immigration is unlikely to have an impact on overall house prices.

Social Security

1% of migrants claim unemployment benefits compared to 4% of UK nationals.

Source: European Commission

The term ‘benefit tourism’ is often bandied around to conjure up images of lazy migrants heading abroad to live off benefits. But ‘benefit tourism’ does not exist. The UK is the only EU country to have a lower unemployment rate for migrants – 7.5% – than nationals – 7.9%.

Source: EHRC
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About 2.5% of Britons in other EU countries are claiming unemployment benefits – the same level as the number of EU nationals claiming jobseeker’s allowance (JSA) in the UK

The UK has some of the lowest benefits in Europe and the government has introduced harsher rules on claiming support. These include EU migrants having to wait three months before they can claim for JSA, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credits.

National Health Service

"Epidemics of health tourists cost us billions"

The Daily Mail, 3rd April 2013

The phrase ‘health tourism’ refers to the idea that migrants come to the UK with the sole intention of accessing free healthcare. We are told it is a major problem, but in reality this is not the case. A government report identified a "plausible range for health tourism" of just 5,000 to 20,000 visitors a year. This equals just 0.3% of total NHS spending – far from the billions of pounds we are led to believe is being spent. In reality, the UK is a net beneficiary of so-called ‘health tourism’. More British people receive treatment abroad than the number of foreign born who receive treatment on the NHS.

Immigrants resident in England account for 4.5% of the population but are responsible for less than 2% of NHS spending, meaning migrants cost the NHS less than British-born residents. In the NHS, you are far more likely to be treated by a migrant worker than meet one in the waiting room.
Students, migration and the skills shortage

On average migrants are younger and better educated than their UK-born counterparts. The most recent immigrants are better educated still. While more than half of the UK-born workforce left school at 16 or earlier, fewer than 1 in 6 new immigrants finished their education by the age of 16\textsuperscript{36}. In 2012, just over 1 in 5 UK-born members of the workforce finished education at 21 or later compared with more than 40% of all immigrants and more than 50% of all new immigrants\textsuperscript{37}.

While English may not be the first language of many migrants, the overwhelming majority speak English. Just 0.3% of the total UK population don't speak English at all\textsuperscript{38}.

The UK points-based system for non-EU immigrants means that migrants are only permitted to take jobs where there are recognised skill shortages and if they can prove, before entering the UK, that they have the necessary qualifications. Unlike in the United States, where the skill composition of migrants is tilted towards the unskilled, migrants in the UK are over-represented in very high-skilled occupations.

Source: HSCIC \textsuperscript{39}
Sources and References

The following footnotes refer to sources and reports quoted in the text:

1. See Refugee Council http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/glossary
6. See UNHCR above
16. Bennett, A. (2014), Does Immigration From EU Countries Cause Unemployment In The UK?, Huffington http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2014/01/21/immigration-ids-may_n_4632089.html
17. See Bennett, A. Huffington Post above
20. See Bennett, A. Huffington Post above
23. See Dustmann, C. and Frattini, T. UCL above


28. ICF GHK (2013), A fact finding analysis on the impact on the Member States' social security systems of the entitlements of non-active intra-EU migrants to special non-contributory cash benefits and healthcare granted on the basis of residence: http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?langId=en&catId=89&newsId=1980&furtherNewsYes

29. See ICF GHK above


33. See Channel 4 Full Fact https://fullfact.org/health/costs_health_tourism-37227


37. See Centre for Economic Performance above


The views, policy proposals and comments in this piece do not represent the collective views of Class or Migrants’ Rights Network but have been approved as worthy of consideration by the labour movement.