

Make immigration boring again

A polarised debate ignores the trade-offs involved,
we can do better

Why is immigration policy hard? In my book *Why Immigration Policy is Hard And How to Make it Better*, I set out two reasons. The first is that our world is very unequal so many more people want to move to a high-income country like the UK than are going to be admitted and that leads to what I call the “infernal circle”. Countries like the UK put controls on immigration. People who would like to migrate seek to circumnavigate these barriers. That then leads the residents to perceive a loss of control over migration, so they put on more controls. And then there are ever more elaborate attempts to evade and avoid controls. And so, we go round and round that infernal circle.

The second reason is that migration policy requires making choices – saying “yes” to some people who want to migrate and “no” to others. That’s it. While it sounds easy, this can involve very difficult trade-offs about who we care about. And those trade-offs for many are so uncomfortable that we try to pretend they don’t really exist.

Immigration policy is hard, but we make it much harder than it needs to be because the discussions around it at the moment are too binary – is immigration good or is immigration bad? And too polarised – the view that it is very good or very bad. The right often dehumanises and demonises migrants, but the left also sometimes dehumanises migrants, by portraying them

as almost superhuman. Both these ways of dehumanising migrants are just not helpful for getting us to a better policy.

What do we need to do to get to a better policy?

To make immigration policy better, I have five suggestions:

- First, we need to acknowledge that we are going to have immigration, and we are going to have controls on immigration.
- Second, make immigration policy boring. At the end of the day, immigration is just about changing the size of your population and changing the mix of your population in age, skill or some other way.
- Third, I think we should give less power to lobby groups in setting migration policy. We’ve been just too accepting of business claims that the economy needs migrants. When employers say they can’t find workers, we need to ask more often whether this is because of poor pay and conditions.
- Fourth, I think we need to recognise that immigration policy actually is hard. Don’t pretend that you can solve the infernal circle, but don’t ignore it either. We need to face up to the difficult, uncomfortable trade-offs that are sometimes there.
- Fifth, I think we need to be more long-term. I think too often short-sighted governments have used higher immigration as a way to avoid dealing with longer-run problems.

The trade-offs in immigration policy
can be so uncomfortable that we try
to pretend they don’t really exist

Looking at the whole picture

In this extract from his new book Alan Manning explains how economists think about immigration

The non-economist's view

Some people I met thought it self-evident that immigration has benefits for those in the receiving country. If you are cared for by a migrant nurse, or served a meal by a migrant waiter, the benefit is literally right there in front of you. If that migrant had not been allowed into the country, your illness would not have been treated nor your meal served. It is obvious that immigration has benefits and should be encouraged.

For others, it is equally self-evident that immigration reduces opportunities for those in receiving countries. They see a migrant in a job they covet and think immediately that the job could have been theirs if only the migrant had not been admitted. If you see a migrant in a house when affordable housing is hard to find you think that the house could have been yours.

Both of these views are understandable, but I think they are both the wrong way to think about the impact of immigration on the destination country. And even though they express opposing views about the impact of immigration, they are both wrong in the same way: they only look at part of the picture.

The person seeing the migrant working for them is seeing themselves as a consumer and the migrant as a worker doing things for them. That is part of the picture. But the migrant is also a consumer, with people doing things for them that they might have done for a local. That is seen by the person who sees the migrant as competing for housing, but they are neglecting that the migrant living in that house may also be working providing goods and services for others. Our economy is a giant web of people doing things for each other. Some do more for others than others do for them; those people are a net benefit to society. Others get more out than they put in. Migrants may put in more than they take out, but it is their net contribution that we need to assess.

The economist's view

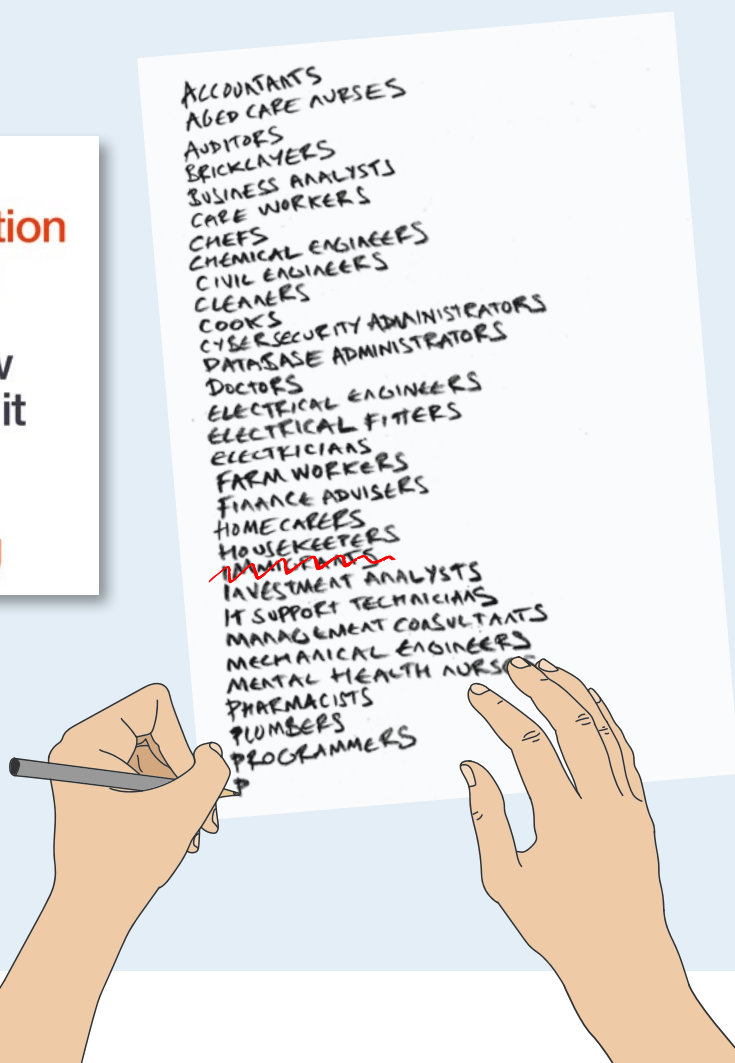
Economists have a different way of thinking about the impact of immigration on locals.

Immigration may affect your material standard of living: whether you have a job, how much it pays and what you can buy with those earnings; and, if you own a business, how your profits; and how your taxes and public services are affected. For economists, the effects of immigration on material standards of living can only come through the impact on incomes, prices, taxes and public services. Compared to the non-economist's view, the economist's approach says that what matters is not whether the individual serving you a meal or living in a house is a migrant; it is, rather, how migration overall affects restaurant prices and housing costs. It depersonalizes the impact of migration. Whether or not the particular waiter serving you is a migrant is irrelevant.

To convince you that the economist's approach is better, consider the following story. Suppose we noticed that the waiter serving us is left-handed. Would we conclude that we need more left-handed people? Or we see that the person living in a house is left-handed. Should we then want fewer left-handed people to free up the availability of housing? Both arguments sound absurd, but if we replace the left-handed with immigrants, the arguments sound convincing to many people. The economist's approach would be to consider what the impact of left-handed people (which includes me) is on wages and prices. Any effect is likely to be tiny, and we should then come to the correct conclusion: we should be indifferent about whether we have more or fewer left-handed people.

**Why
Immigration
Policy is
Hard
And How
to Make it
Better
Alan
Manning**

This is an extract from *Why Immigration Policy is Hard And How to Make It Better* by Alan Manning, published by Polity Press. (https://www.politybooks.com/bookdetail?book_slug=why-immigration-policy-is-hard-and-how-to-make-it-better--9781509563654).



We need to acknowledge that we are going to have immigration and we are going to have controls on immigration

What would this mean for current UK migration policy?

On the managed part of migration: work, family and study – I recommend a period of stability, no more big changes like the rollercoaster of liberalisation and restriction we have had in recent years.

Perhaps the hardest part of migration policy, is what to do about asylum and refugee migration. Asylum-seekers attract more attention than their numbers warrant, but I would also warn against trivialising the numbers. Asylum-seekers made up only 5% of the immigration inflow a few years ago but for the year ending June 2025, they made up around 16% of the migrant inflow. If you look at the numbers actually granted settlement over 20% came through humanitarian routes. Those numbers matter because there is a cost to the taxpayer of humanitarian migration – not just the cost of hotels while claiming asylum, but

because many refugees subsequently have low employment rates and low earnings.

You might take the view that our generosity towards refugees should have nothing to do with the costs of the system as a whole but we really don't take that approach in most other areas of policy. I think home secretary Shabana Mahmood is right to say that we need policies aimed at reducing numbers and, what is probably not discussed as much as it should be, we need policies to improve outcomes for refugees.

The home secretary's strategy is to reduce inflows by making the UK a less attractive destination. And by linking settlement to contribution, I think she hopes to provide incentives to improve outcomes. She also wants to increase outflows by offering temporary protection more frequently than permanent protection. I don't think that there's any guarantee that the

government policies will work, but I also don't think they're definitely going to fail. Our evidence base is very mixed. At least the government is serious in attempting to think about the issue – more than people who are just saying "detain and deport" which is an immoral and impractical policy, and those who simply say, "safe and legal routes". Small-scale safe and legal routes aren't going to deal with small boats unless the people coming in small boats are eligible for the scheme. Large-scale safe and legal routes potentially mean much higher numbers arriving than currently do so and the cost would be correspondingly larger. Both these slogans are avoiding having to deal with what is a very difficult policy area.

There is a risk that more restrictive migration policies validate the narratives of the populist right. But if you let the existence of ethno-nationalistic rhetoric push you to a position of ignoring problems, you may also strengthen the populist right. It is hard to navigate a path between alarmism and complacency. But, as the second part of my book title says, I am optimistic we can have better immigration policies – they won't be perfect, they won't banish injustice, but they will be a lot better than the present mess.

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