

COMPAS Breakfast Briefing Summary

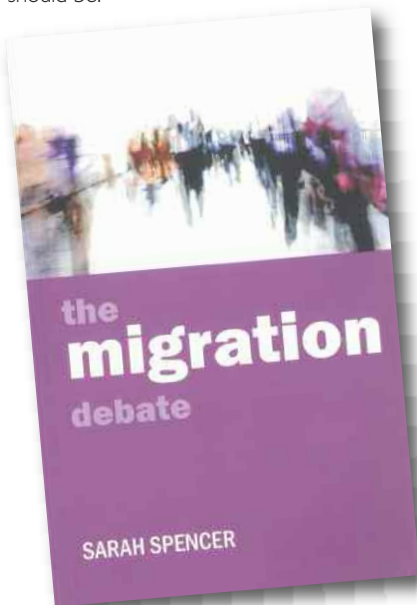


What is migration policy for?

Immigration ministers tend to be more explicit on what they intend to do than on what they hope to achieve, or how migration policy contributes to their government's broader economic, social and international objectives. Drawing on her new book, *The Migration Debate*, Sarah Spencer suggests there may be value in having that debate.

Canada's immigration law is explicit in listing the goals it is intended to achieve: a range of domestic and international objectives that include enriching the social and cultural fabric of Canadian society; reuniting families; supporting the development of a strong and prosperous economy; protecting the health and safety of Canadians and fulfilling Canada's international obligations to refugees.ⁱ The aims of migration law and policy in the UK lack this clarity. Governments tend to be more explicit on what they intend to do than on their long term goals, or how they intend to reconcile them where they conflict.

The purpose of this briefing is not to argue for a particular set of objectives but to suggest that there would be value in debate on what those objectives should be.



The Coalition Government's signature policy has been to deliver a substantial cut in net migration. In its Programme for Government, subsequent consultation papers and speechesⁱⁱ, its rationale for limiting numbers – set out in only a few words – has been to build public confidence in the immigration system, ensure cohesion, protect public services including schools, health and housing, and reduce the burden on the tax payer. It has acknowledged competing objectives – to attract the 'brightest and the best' migrants to contribute to the economy, remain 'a magnet for the world's best students', and respect human rights. Interpretation of human rights, in the context of family migration, is to be balanced against the broader public interest. In focusing on lowering net migration there has perhaps also been a desire to limit migration-driven population growth, a key concern of some advocates of reform, including the parliamentary Balanced Migration group.ⁱⁱⁱ

Competing objectives

In practice, successive governments have found it difficult to achieve the limits on migration they initially intend. In part this is because of the legacy they inherit, including established migration flows and limits in administrative capacity; in part because of the practical challenge, when more than 100m people enter each year, of ensuring that those not allowed to remain long term do subsequently leave the UK. A significant reason, however, is the competing objectives which governments recognise migration policy has to fulfil – whether seen as positive objectives or problematic constraints: principally relating to the economy, international agreements, social policy and human rights.



- Most apparent are economic imperatives. There is a consensus that the economy would pay an unacceptable price if there were no access for highly skilled migrants to the labour market, and that the financial viability of our higher education system would be threatened by a substantial cut in the number of international students – if less agreement on the need for migrants to access other parts of the labour market and education system. The planned expansion of tourism over the next four years, generating an additional £2 billion spend and 50,000 jobs^{iv}, will be a welcome boost to economic growth – but bring 4 million additional visitors whom the UK Border Agency will be expected to ensure return home.
- Compliance with international agreements, entered into because of benefits to the UK, bring their own constraints: notably freedom for EU citizens to live and work in the UK but also, for instance, limits imposed by the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) on the extent government can restrict the entry of a multinational company's own staff.
- Human rights obligations, not least the Geneva Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights, set limits on the extent to which individuals can be refused entry, removed from the UK, or left destitute as an encouragement to leave.
- Social policy objectives, while less overt, also play their part. Implicit in the Government's commitment to end detention of children has been the intention to protect the welfare of children caught up in the immigration system. Access for all migrants to NHS treatment for transferable diseases, without checks on immigration status, is defended on grounds of protecting public health. Family migration entry routes reflect a commitment to families as, in the words of the Home Secretary, 'the bulwark of society', and not just respect for human rights obligations. One ground for reform of family migration policy is to promote integration, yet restrictions attached to migrants' access to work, services and democratic participation could be said to work against that goal.

Moving forward

There has been no substantive debate in the UK on what the range of objectives should be, the priority they should be given, and the trade-offs to be made. Weighing up the relative importance of economic, social and international objectives is not straight forward, and the evidence base on which to do so, incomplete. Would it nevertheless be worthwhile?

How would the public react if asked to engage in this debate and reflect on the choices to be made? The vast majority of the population (78%) favour reducing immigration – if attitudes are solicited to 'immigration' as a whole. When asked to differentiate, however, they show greater support for some forms of migration (international students and workers with skills in demand) than others (including family migration).^v Does this suggest that there is some scope for a more nuanced debate on objectives than one that focuses on migrant numbers alone?

Could government lead an evidence-based discussion, engaging with the public up and down the country, on the options and their implications, on what can and cannot be delivered? Might the Opposition itself engage constructively in that endeavour? Those with a direct stake in the outcome of the debate, from employers and unions to service providers, families and community associations could also be asked their views. On the basis of those consultations, its own assessment of the contributions and costs of migration and of the UK's international obligations, government could then identify, make explicit and explain what its migration policy was intended to achieve.

This approach would undoubtedly be challenging, given the strength of feeling that migration can engender: Could it nevertheless be the means through which some consensus could be fostered on what migration policy is *for*, as the basis of a more reasoned and realistic debate on the policy levers to achieve it?

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<http://www.compas.ox.ac.uk/publications/migration-debate/>



COMPAS Breakfast Briefings present topical, cutting edge research on migration and migration related issues. This research is made accessible every month to an audience of policy makers and other research users.

ⁱ s3, Immigration and Refugee Protection Act 2001 ⁱⁱ Cameron, D (2011) Speech on Immigration to party members, 14 April 2011, <http://www.newstatesman.com/2011/04/immigration-british-visas-work>; UKBA (2011) Employment-related settlement, Tier 5 and Overseas Domestic Workers, a Consultation, June 2011 (Ministerial Foreword and Para 1.1); UKBA (2011) Family Migration, a Consultation (July 2011), Home Secretary Foreword ⁱⁱⁱ Balanced Migration <http://www.balancedmigration.com/ourcase.php>. See also Cangiano, A (2011) Demographic Objectives in Migration Policy Making, Migration Observatory, <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/policy-primers/demographic-objectives-migration-policy-making> ^{iv} HM Treasury (2011) Plan for Growth, http://cdn.hm-treasury.gov.uk/2011budget_growth.pdf ^v Blinder, S (2011) Public Opinion and Public Policy, Complexities of the Democratic Mandate, Migration Observatory <http://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-migration-determinants-attitudes>

Thumbnails - First page: Saad Qureshi, Photo Competition entry 2010; Second page: Robin Cohen, Photo Competition entry 2009