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Author(s): Jonathon Porritt and Colin Hines  
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# Reflections on the Current Immigration Debate in the UK

BY JONATHON PORRITT AND COLIN HINES<sup>1</sup>

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*Jonathon Porritt is a Patron of Population Matters, and an eminent writer, broadcaster and commentator on sustainable development. He co-founded Forum for the Future, and as Chairman of the UK Sustainable Development Commission until 2009, spent nine years providing high-level advice to Government Ministers. His most recent book, The World We Made, seeks to inspire people about the prospects of a sustainable world in 2050.*

*Colin Hines has worked in the environmental movement for over 40 years on the issues of population, food, new technology and unemployment, nuclear proliferation and on the adverse environmental and social effects of international trade and the need to solve these problems by replacing globalisation with 'progressive protectionism' – also the title of his latest book. He is also the convener of the Green New Deal group and was the Co-ordinator of Greenpeace International's Economics Unit having worked for the organisation for 10 years.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: THE EU'S PRINCIPLE OF FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT

There's an extraordinary irony about the current immigration debate here in the UK. Two years ago, the UK was almost alone in pushing for far-reaching reforms to the interpretation of the EU's notionally sacrosanct principle of 'freedom of movement'. At the behest of the Tory Party's hard-line Brexiteers, the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, was humiliatingly despatched on a tour of EU

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1. The views expressed in this paper are those of Jonathon Porritt and Colin Hines, in their personal capacities.

capitals to secure some small-scale (but cumulatively significant) changes in what nation states would be permitted to do to allay concerns about immigration. These were dismissed out of hand by the UK's right-wing media, which would brook no further delay in an all-or-nothing Referendum on our continued membership of the EU.

Two years on, there isn't a country in Europe where the debate about immigration isn't very live indeed – apart from the UK! Astonishingly, immigration had almost no visibility at all in the 2017 General Election campaign, and (as yet) has played only a diminished walk-on role in the current Brexit negotiations.

This new positioning across the EU was best summed up by Emmanuel Macron in his election campaign earlier in the year, arguing that asylum, refugee and migration policy “must be profoundly reformed”. Since then, he's floated the idea elsewhere of a “Continental Partnership” between Britain and the EU that would allow for further restrictions on the freedom of movement whilst ensuring some kind of access to the single market. We shall examine other, equally important shifts amongst EU politicians later in this paper.

Similar changes are beginning to emerge here in the UK. As Vince Cable says, “I think you can interpret freedom of movement in a much more pragmatic way.” Indeed, the makings of such an agreement are already there, including David Cameron's hard-won, pre-Referendum reforms. Perhaps most importantly, things are changing within the Labour Party, where support for such ideas is growing, bit by bit, led by Chuka Umunna, Stephen Kinnock, Stephen Doughty and many others. They point out that even today's freedom of movement is not an unconditional principle. EU citizens can be required to leave if they have no job or prospect of a job three months after arrival. Restrictions are explicitly allowed for reasons of “public policy, public security or public health”, including an emergency brake if public services are being overwhelmed.

It's clear that both Labour and the Lib Dems are inching tentatively to repositioning themselves in a way that would allow them to demonstrate that they have responded to people's concerns, and are now able to address one of the biggest concerns of Brexit voters in the 2016 Referendum – namely, the imperative of being able to manage much more effectively migration from other EU countries.

## 2. THE CONTEXT

### 2.1 Facts and Perceptions

Before digging deeper into that increasingly dynamic scene, we need to establish a context – what exactly is going on that has stirred such controversy around immigration here in the UK, where the situation has changed dramatically over the last couple of decades?

In 2001, the UK population was estimated to be 59.1 million, with 4.9 million (8.3%) of foreign birth. By 2011, the population of the UK stood at 63.2 million, an increase of 4.1 million, with the foreign born population at 8 million (12.6%) (Migration Watch, 2016). By June 2016, the population of the UK had risen to around 65,648,000, an increase of 538,000 in one year (similar to the annual growth rate over the last 12 years) (ONS, 2017).

An important statistic here is the percentage of live births in England and Wales being born to mothers from outside the UK. In 1990, it was 11.6%; by 2015, that had risen to 27.5%, the highest level on record (ONS, 2016). It is estimated that net migration (the difference between those arriving in and those leaving the country in any one year), plus births to foreign-born parents, has accounted for 85% of UK population growth since 2000 (Migration Watch, 2016).

In December last year, the Office for National Statistics reported that 650,000 people migrated to the UK in the year up to June 2016, and 315,000 left, making the total net migration figure 335,000.

Between 2004 and 2016, there were around one million migrants from Eastern European countries coming to the UK. As indicated above, many end up returning to their home countries. Over 90% of international migrants to the UK go to England rather than Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (Migration Watch, 2016).

If net migration continues at around recent levels, then the population of the UK is expected to rise by nearly 8 million people over the next 15 years (almost the equivalent of the population of Greater London at 8.7 million), and by 9.7 million over the next 25 years, from an estimated 64.6 million in 2014 to 74.3 million in 2039. It is assumed that net migration will account for around 50% of this

projected increase over those 25 years, but 75% of this increase would be from future migration plus the children of those migrants. There is no particular reason why this level of population growth will stop there. Unless something is done to change current policy, growth is projected to increase towards 80 million in 25 years, and to keep going upwards (Office for National Statistics, 2015).

By any standards, this is a big change in the lives of a lot of UK citizens: roughly half a million new residents arriving in the UK, every year, for the last ten years. So why would anyone imagine that this kind of 'demographic disruption' would not be of concern to many people here in the UK? Much of that growth happened during the time when Labour was in power, and many former Labour Ministers have acknowledged that they simply failed to understand either the short-term impacts of such changing circumstances, or the long-term implications. And public opinion has changed a lot during that time.

Despite uncertainties involved in measuring and interpreting public opinion, the evidence clearly shows high levels of opposition to immigration in the UK. In recent surveys, majorities of respondents think that there are too many migrants in the UK, that fewer migrants should be let in to the country, and that legal restrictions on immigration should be tighter.

Immigration is ranked by people consistently among the top five issues facing the UK. As of June 2015, it was the issue picked most often by respondents (45%), followed by the NHS (40%) and the economy (26%). In the 2013 British Social Attitudes survey, large majorities endorsed reducing immigration: over 56% chose 'reduced a lot', while 77% chose either 'reduced a lot' or 'reduced a little'. Levels of concern about EU and non-EU immigration were roughly similar amongst citizens in the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Portugal and Spain. Whereas in Greece, Italy and France, most were concerned about immigration from non-European countries (The Migration Observatory, 2016).

## 2.2 The Dilemma for the Progressive Left

All this poses a massive dilemma for those whose views are centre-left and generally progressive. They remain reluctant to acknowledge that large numbers of people are angry because they 'were never asked' about what would be the right level of immigration for the UK. Worse yet, they remain insensitive to the fact that this demographic disruption has been significantly exacerbated by the economic reality of many people's lives in the UK and elsewhere.

This kind of large-scale migration has occurred at a time (between 2005 and 2015) when, on average, between 65-70% of households in 25 high-income economies experienced stagnant or falling real incomes. In the USA, for instance, the median real income for full-time male workers is now lower than it was four decades ago. The income of the bottom 90% of the population has stagnated for over 30 years (Jacques, 2016). This has led (in ways that should be wholly understandable to anyone of a progressive persuasion) to growing and now chronic insecurity on the part of tens of millions of people in such countries, and particularly in the UK and the USA.

The fact that very high net levels of immigration may have had a relatively limited but broadly positive impact on the economic prospects of most people (as demonstrated by a number of reports from the Office for Budget Responsibility) is neither here nor there. What cannot be disputed is that mass immigration has cut the earning power of the unskilled:

Mass immigration increases inequality. This is the unpalatable fact the liberal left in Britain refuses to accept. Markets are imperfect instruments. But it is not necessary to subscribe to free market economic theory to believe that large increases in supply tend to drive down the price. And the price of labour is the wage. New Labour allowed direct competition to enter the UK labour market on a scale unprecedented in our history. It is the relatively unskilled in the bottom half of the distribution who have lost out. The liberal elite do not suffer. Indeed, they benefit because many of the services they consume are provided at lower prices than would have been the case without mass immigration. It is sometimes argued that immigrants do jobs that native British workers are unwilling to take. Very well then, without mass immigration, employers would be

obliged to raise the real wage rate to induce these people to take the jobs (Ormerod, 2015).

We would argue that there are many other and more important causes behind today's rising inequality – not least the kind of neoliberal globalisation that has dominated our economies for the last 50 years. We now know, indisputably, that a rising tide does not lift all boats. But we have to become far more sympathetic to those whose boats are now so hopelessly stuck in the toxic mud of that cruel ideology.

And here's the thing: all of that can only get a great deal worse in the future. There is absolutely no reason to suppose that the situation in the Middle East (and pre-eminently in Syria) is a kind of 'geopolitical blip' before stability returns to the region, and that migration pressures from the Middle East will therefore slow. And even less reason to suppose that population growth in many African and Middle East countries will move through the usual 'demographic transition' towards declining fertility levels.

What we do know, as a matter of increasingly painful inevitability, is that the lives of tens/hundreds of millions of people (particularly in Africa and the Middle East) will be devastated by the effects of climate change. We know that many of those people will have no choice but to leave their homes and communities if they are to have any prospect of survival, let alone a better life. And we know that many of them will seek to come to Europe, as the place that offers the best possible refuge in an all-encompassing storm that is not of their own making.

One snapshot of the potential scale of mass migration without border controls was provided by a global Gallup poll of half a million people in 154 countries (representing more than 98% of the world's adult population) that took place between 2010 to 2012. This underscored how potentially well-founded public concerns are in richer countries about uncontrolled mass migration. It showed that around 630 million of the world's adults would like to leave their country and move somewhere else permanently, with 42 million expressing a preference for the UK, a destination second only to the United States. And that's even before the impact of accelerating climate change.

### 3. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLITICS TODAY

Despite such a rapidly evolving context, Labour, the Lib Dems and the Greens, in the meantime, have largely stuck to a script that extolls the benefits of the EU's freedom of movement principle and of large-scale immigration, whilst choosing to downplay the disbenefits, even as the gap between them and public opinion continues to get wider. Worse yet, they have often set out to imply that any deviation from 'the script' (on the part of individuals in any of those three parties) encourages hidden racist or xenophobic tendencies, and are therefore (by definition) 'unprogressive'. In the meantime, the Conservative Party and others on the Right of the political spectrum have succeeded in using anxiety about large-scale immigration to spearhead every other aspect of today's divisive, illiberal politics.

An 'open borders' position still has strong support across the progressive spectrum. A new 'Alliance for Free Movement' was launched in February this year, demonstrating yet again that many people still apparently believe that the free movement of people provides a bulwark against unacceptable neo-liberalism, instead of seeing it for what it really is – the principal tool used by unaccountable neo-liberalism to keep wages low and workers cowed.

The free movement of people can build our collective power and creativity in the face of attempts by the super-rich to turn the world into a gigantic marketplace, in which we are all isolated individuals competing against one another (The Alliance for Free Movement, undated).

In other words, the will of the millions of people in the UK who feel (and often are) left behind, who in no way count themselves as beneficiaries of an inherently unjust global economic system, and who want politicians to take back control by actively managing and progressively reducing immigration, alongside other critical measures, must apparently be set aside so that we can make the privileges of our still relatively wealthy country accessible to all-comers.

What lies behind this irrationality? Global inequality and its history are elegantly cited as the reason that rich countries have an apparently permanent, non-negotiable moral and legal responsibility, forever into the future, to take in economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. It's part of the burden of our imperial past. And that means that the push factors behind migration (war, inequality, and environmental



threats<sup>2</sup>) have to be tackled first, before we even begin to think about limiting the options for those escaping such destructive trends.

The irony here is telling. Many of the organisations in the vanguard of the fight against the worst excesses of today's neo-liberal globalisation are the ones that are most outspoken in favour of open borders. The fact that it is the self-same, self-serving elites that benefit most from an open borders, pro-globalisation position, goes unremarked. Open borders for capital, goods, services and people is a precondition for neo-liberalism to thrive in the EU, regardless of its impacts on individual nation states, on communities hollowed out by the loss of jobs and on thriving local economies, and on the countless individuals 'left behind' by this devil-take-the-hindmost form of capitalism. Yet still we are told that 'freedom of movement of people' is the sine qua non of progressive politics today.

The reality is that progressive politics in the UK cannot prosper unless it can call on the broad and deep support of millions of people in the UK whose values are still all about fairness, about progress (as in better lives for their communities as well as for their own families and children), and about that delicate balance between entitlements and obligations. The majority of those people believe that an 'open borders' position is demonstrably unfair, is insensitive to their understanding of what makes for cohesive, tolerant communities, and may also dilute their entitlements (particularly in terms of education, housing and social services) at a time when so many things are becoming less and less secure.

#### 4. POTENTIAL POLITICAL FALLOUT

The current positioning around the issue of immigration of those on the Left is not consequence-free. What has to be recognised by politically active progressives in the rich countries is that if they continue to dismiss concerns about immigration as ignorant and ill-informed, or even racist and xenophobic, then the future will, without doubt, belong to the right, and even to the extreme right. The likes of Nigel Farage and Marine Le Pen have focussed ruthlessly on how to benefit from public concern about immigration, and media powerbrokers such as the *Daily Mail* have become only too adept at whipping up such sentiments.

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2. The exclusion of population growth from this list is another massive blind spot for those who subscribe to the open borders position and indeed for "progressive spectrum" politics in general.

#### 4.1 Stealing the brightest and the best

Moreover, such positioning is far from “progressive” when seen from the perspective of countries losing some of their most talented citizens as they exit to work in wealthier countries. There was a lot of concern in the UK in 2013 that the extension of freedom of movement rights to Romania and Bulgaria in 2014 would result in the arrival of masses of “beggars and benefits cheats”. That didn’t happen. Indeed, the reality is very different: it’s the Romanian health service that is experiencing the real migration crisis, as their newly-trained doctors leave for UK and other rich countries. The number of doctors in Romanian hospitals has fallen by virtually a third from 21,400 to 14,400 since 2011 (Gillet and Taylor, 2014).

This is typical of our inability to see what the real problems are here. Britain is the world’s second largest importer of health workers after the US, including more than 48,000 doctors and 86,000 nurses in 2014. While 5% of Italy’s and 10% of Germany’s doctors were born overseas, the figure for the UK is 26%. Incredibly, since 2000 at least 11,000 doctors in the Philippines have retrained as nurses and gone abroad, earning four or five times as much as they would as a doctor back at home (McGeown, 2014). The country provided the highest number of non-British qualified nursing, midwifery and health visiting staff, with 8,094 out of a total of 309,529 for whom data was available. The Philippines also provides the third highest number of NHS staff overall with 12,744. While the figures help illustrate the extent of the contribution of migrants, they do not paint the whole picture, as many will have taken British nationality since arriving (Siddique, 2014).

In terms of nurses, more than one third of NHS trusts went overseas to recruit nurses in the last year, with even more drawing up plans to do so now. While many NHS trusts targeted countries in Europe, several travelled thousands of miles to the Philippines, Australia, the US and India in search of staff. A main driver of this process is the shortages following the axing by NHS Trusts of thousands of nursing posts, in an attempt to find £15bn of ‘efficiency savings’ by 2015, leading to redundancies and freezing of posts, so that staff who retired were not replaced.

Rich countries (and the skilled migrants they attract) do indeed benefit from this permanent brain drain from poorer societies. It allows them to prop up any sectors of their economy with domestic labour shortages, and so avoid

the necessity of investing properly to train more of their own, and to pay them properly. But the negative impact in those countries from whom these highly-qualified personnel are recruited is extremely significant. In truth, stealing the brightest and the best from poor countries is the polar opposite of good, responsible internationalism.

## **4.2 Impact on infrastructure**

If net migration continues at around recent levels, as already explained, then the UK's population is expected to rise by nearly 8 million people in 15 years, almost the equivalent of the population of Greater London (8.7 million). At least 75% of this increase would be from future migration and the children of those migrants. As already indicated, future population growth would not stop there. Unless something is done about this growth, it is projected to increase towards 80 million in 25 years and keep going upwards.

It's important to be completely logical about this. The UK is already struggling to maintain critical infrastructure, to meet housing demand, and to invest sufficiently in education, healthcare and social services. These increasingly significant deficits are not caused by high levels of immigration: they're caused by wretchedly inadequate economic and fiscal policy, going back at least a couple of decades.

But continuing population growth clearly exacerbates those deficits. The UK's Total Fertility Rate has not been above 2.1 children per mother since 1972, but 'population momentum' (the increase in the numbers of births when babies born at the peak of population growth reach reproductive age), plus net immigration, has led to a population increase of nearly 10 million people since 1972.

Beyond that, if 75% of future population growth is accounted for by immigration, rather than by any 'natural increase', these pressures will build and build, as the direct and inevitable consequence of the sheer growth in the numbers of people using the nation's infrastructure, needing proper housing, and relying on high quality education, healthcare and social services.

That is not the fault of individual immigrants – far from it. But net immigration (of around 335,000 a year over the last two years) obviously contributes to these problems.

Housing provides the most obvious example of this. The Local Government Association calculates that we need half a million new homes to avoid 'an emerging nightmare'. More than three million adults aged between 20 and 34 are now living with their parents; house prices are rising faster than average earnings, and there are at least 1.7 million households on the waiting lists for affordable homes across England. The number of people renting has doubled, and the average first-time buyer is now aged 35. This housing deficit is already causing untold social and economic damage, and there are no long-term solutions in sight.

## **5. DEVELOPING A MORE REALISTIC POLITICS AROUND IMMIGRATION**

### **5.1 A Changing Scene in the EU?**

Although we hear relatively little about this in the UK press, many European countries are now beginning to address exactly the same challenge: finding appropriate policy responses to the will of majorities in their countries to lessen the flow of migrants.

The previous Dutch Deputy Prime Minister, Lodewijk Asscher, has stated that "support for free movement is crumbling when people see that it turns out to be so unfair", and that Britain leaving the EU "gives a unique opportunity to do this in a very different way" (Redgrave, 2017)

Former Danish Prime Minister, Helle Thorning-Schmidt, and former Finnish Prime Minister, Alexander Stubb, have called for debates on the application of the free movement principle. The EU Commission's Vice-President, Jyrki Katainen, has talked of understanding the "unwanted consequences" of freedom of movement (Ibid.).

The Social Democrat Austrian Chancellor, Christian Kern, has called for the EU to reconsider freedom of movement rules, and in particular to consider discrimination in favour of indigenous job-seekers. He has proposed a system whereby "only if there is no suitable unemployed person in the country can [a job] be given to new arrivals without restriction" (Chance, 2013).

Nor is the European Commission deaf to these voices. It has recently tightened up its rules on access to social security, saying that Member States may decide not to grant social benefits to mobile citizens who are economically inactive, meaning those who are not working or actively looking for a job, and do not have the legal right of residence on their territory. Even in Germany, there's a profound re-think going on, with the German Bundestag in the process of introducing significant restrictions on all benefits for non-German EU citizens (Toynbee, 2017).

So why would we not be supportive of an emerging Europe-wide reinterpretation of the principle of freedom of movement? This could include some of the policies agreed by the EU 27 in 2015 during David Cameron's renegotiation; it was agreed at that time that it is legitimate for countries to take measures where an exceptional inflow of workers from elsewhere in the EU is causing serious problems to a Member State's welfare system, labour market or public services.

The Lib Dems have already moved significantly in this direction. Former UK Deputy Prime Minister, Nick Clegg, recently stated: "There are plenty of politicians across the European Union who are now volubly saying that they think there needs to be a change to freedom of movement. So there is scope for a Europe-wide approach to this which I think would satisfy some of the government's needs" (Clegg, 2017).

## 5.2 Beyond the EU

At the same time, it's equally important to make this stricter approach to immigration more acceptable for those living in poorer countries, by promising realistic prospects of improvement in their domestic economic and social conditions. And the crucial thing here, obviously, is to tackle the root cause of why people leave their friends and culture in the first place.

The indigenous populations of host countries have a right to control entry, taking into account not only their own interests but also a sense of charity to others. But in exercising charity, their chief concern should be the vast group of poor people left behind in countries of origin, rather than the relatively tiny group of fortunate people who get dramatic increases in their income through being permitted to migrate (Collier, P. p.270).

Beyond the horror of war and conflict, much of this is to do with poverty and people's immediate economic prospects, or with their sense of security and personal freedom in autocratic, oppressive political circumstances. But much of this also goes back to ruthlessly imposed notions of international competitiveness, which pit nations against each other in beggar-thy-neighbour economic warfare in the global economy.

Just to repeat the point from a domestic UK position, it must be made crystal clear during the debate about optimum levels of migration, that immigrants already in the host country should be under no pressure whatsoever to leave. Indeed, both of us are supportive of immediately guaranteeing the rights of all EU citizens currently working in the UK on current terms. Every effort should be made to encourage integration in a way that promotes more harmonious communities. Such a coming together might be made easier if the future is seen to be one where communities don't have to experience future levels of the kind of unacceptably large, permanent inward migration to which they are so strongly opposed. Such a clear-cut reduction in the number of economic migrants could also mean that the public becomes more rather than less amenable to a larger number of refugees being provided with a safe haven.

Against that kind of backdrop, it becomes possible to redefine the kind of progressive internationalism that we will need for the future. All foreign policy, all trade agreements, and all aid and development transfers will need to be focussed on minimising those factors that persuade people that their chances are better off outside their country than inside. Arms sales will need to be dramatically curtailed. Aid and development policies must prioritise employment opportunities for young men and women. Education for girls and access for all women to reproductive healthcare and fertility management must take centre stage in order to help reduce population growth.

In a world where overall population growth projections are rising, and where global migration is also on the increase, it is a complete dereliction on the part of all those on the progressive Left (and of environmentalists in particular) to continue to ignore population growth and not to campaign for its reduction. Without this decrease, all solutions to other aspects of ecological and social concern are made far more difficult to deal with. This refusal to engage becomes harder and harder to explain.

The demographic link between population and immigration is really not in dispute. At the beginning of 2012, the population of Europe was estimated at 503.7 million, an increase of more than 100 million since 1960. In 2011, around 68% of Europe's population growth came from net migration, which continues to be the main determinant of population growth as it has been since 1992. Given the ageing population in Europe, future population decline or growth will depend primarily on the contribution made by migration (Eurostat, 2017).

Continued global population growth is inevitable for the next few decades, but whether it continues in the longer term will be determined by the policy goals of nation states and the international community, as well as the resources allocated to ensure these policies are implemented successfully. The longer the delay in adequately focussing on the need to reduce population growth, the more momentum is built into the system for a continued increase in human numbers.

So let us end with one more round of inconvenient statistics. In 2016, world population was estimated to be 7.4 billion (Population Reference Bureau, 2016). Currently, it continues to grow, although more slowly than in the recent past. However, it is still rising by approximately 83 million people per year. According to the 2017 United Nations World Population Prospects Report, world population is projected to increase by more than one billion people within the next 15 years, reaching 8.6 billion people in 2030, increasing further to 9.8 billion in 2050, and to as much as 11.2 billion by 2100 (UN, 2015).

This 2100 figure represents a projected increase of nearly 300 million as compared with its 2012 report, which had a "medium-variant projection"<sup>3</sup> of 10.9 billion by 2100 (UN, 2017). This in turn was an increase of 800 million over the projections just two years before, in 2010, that the world population at the end of the century would stand at 10.1 billion (UN, 2011, page xvi). In other words, the UN world population projections for 2100 have increased, over the last six years, by over a billion people, from 10.1 to 11.2 billion.

This is a completely surreal situation in which we now find ourselves, and one which deserves far more attention from politicians of all parties.

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3. The UN's "medium-variant projection" assumes a decline in fertility in those countries where large families are prevalent, but also a small increase in fertility in countries with a fertility rate of less than 2.

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