

UK Immigration Policy: More Rhetoric than Reality?

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UK immigration policy has the reputation at home and abroad of being firm and effective in its declared aim of restricting immigration to the UK to a limited set of categories of people who are entitled to enter and remain in the country. This paper argues that while the policy aims may appear clear and straightforward, the exceptions to them are essentially open-ended and have permitted the continuation of immigration at a relatively high level.

Historically the UK has been a net exporter of population. Since the 1980s the UK has increasingly, if unwillingly, become a net importer of population. Regular immigration has increased substantially, especially since 1997, and now forms the major component of UK population growth with substantial implications for future population projections. In 1998 net immigration amounted to about 178,000 people compared to a UK population total of about 60 million.

Since the mid-1990s asylum claiming has been effectively out of control and has made the existing immigration policy almost irrelevant as far as numbers of persons entering the country is concerned. There were about 58,000 asylum claimants in 1998, including an estimate of dependants, compared with about 5,000 per year during the 1980s. The trends up to September 1999 suggest a total for the whole of 1999 of 78,000 including an estimate for dependants. While most claims are rejected, most claimants stay anyway. The recent steps which the UK has taken to limit asylum claiming have been ineffective by comparison with other European countries.