

Conservative view on immigration

'IMMIGRATION IS OFTEN USED TO AVOID TOUGH DISCUSSIONS ABOUT STRUCTURAL REFORM'

Research Director Karl Williams sees, at the core of the migration debate, an attitude toward the significance of one's own country. Control over immigration numbers has been handed over to other institutions, such as universities. For him, immigration is as a factor of growth, but one that also partly hinders the modernization of the economy.

*The interview was conducted by Dr. Dirk Bornschein**

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Karl Williams is Research Director at the Centre for Policy Studies. As a data specialist his work at the CPS has focused on political economy, immigration policy and the intellectual foundations of free market conservatism – as well as content of the Thatcher Fellowship programme. Before joining the CPS in 2021, he achieved a distinction in the Political Thought and Intellectual History MPhil at Cambridge.

Dirk Bornschein: I would like to start with a historical perspective. How do you explain the deep roots in the UK's current debate on migration?

Karl Williams: That's a very good question. On the one hand, we see deeply rooted causes, but on the other hand, there are also some controversial interpretations. Just to provide some background: it's important to remember that, historically speaking, the United Kingdom was a country with net emigration before the 1990s.

This was partly due to the Empire. So, the big change was a direct consequence of Tony Blair's election in 1997. The first-time net immigration to the UK ever exceeded 100,000 people was in 1998. The increase in migration was part of a broader political programme to reshape modern Britain. During his time in office, various constitutional reforms were enacted, such as the Human Rights Act and decentralisation. There was a general desire to build a modern, multicultural Britain for the new millennium.

Another important element to remember about the 2000s and late 1990s was that, due to the legacy of Enoch Powell and the rise of the blood speech in Birmingham in 1968, it was very difficult for the right to speak sceptically about migration. As a result, any discussion of migration was very quickly shut down with accusations of racism.

Is this feeling still present in your country?

Williams: Much less. In Britain there's been a real shift in the last two years, and that kind of accusation doesn't work anymore.

This reference to the past is a good starting point. Another thing we should bear in mind is that the British public has always been skeptical of migration, for one reason or another. And consistently, in the winning party at every general election since the early 2000s, they've said they will bring down numbers, they'll bring down numbers. And therefore, you have on-hand politicians promising to reduce numbers, but in fact the numbers aren't coming down, and that's a very salient part of the debate because it becomes much more about the democratic legitimacy, not just of particular political parties, but of the Westminster system per se. And that definitely feeds into the populist critique.

Sometimes political observers concluded that at some moment the migration debate was tied to the broader feeling of distrust.

Williams: Yes, that's true. The roots of the debate were bound up with the debate on the European Union. From the 70s through the 90s, it was very much about sovereignty and the Gaullist argument that Britain isn't a truly European country and its destiny is the wide blue seas, not the continent.

It was only after the expansion of the EU eastwards and the decision not to impose transitional controls on migration from Eastern Europe that the EU and immigration started to become much more intertwined. And then of course you get the Brexit vote in 2016. And the polling around that shows immigration as the second biggest explicit reason for that, but of course a lot of people voting on sovereignty grounds would have had immigration as part of their mental package there as well.

These are the ingredients that go into the mix: promises and their failure to be kept, attempts to reshape British society, not only in terms of migration but in a very broad sense, and then the resistance to this.

You talked about Blair's intention to reshape British society. Could you tell us, how did you understand this project?

Williams: They were strongly influenced by the idea of written constitutional documents, which historically did not exist in Great Britain, with influences from the USA and the EU, right up to a federal constitutional structure in Europe, as was popular in the 2000s with the Treaties of Nice and Lisbon. I think that went hand in hand with a kind of modernization project. Tony Blair said we were all middle class now. A comprehensive economic transformation is taking place, away from Britain's old self-image as an industrial nation toward a service and knowledge economy. Added to this is Blair's invention of British values. If you do a search, this term doesn't actually appear anywhere until the 1990s.

This idea was about what defines Britain, how to hold together a country that is inevitably becoming more multicultural due to the migration of previous generations, but also due to the larger migration flows at that time. And that's why, for his government, it was always about tolerance and respect and freedom and all those beautiful, melodious words that don't have much substance.

And aren't you also talking about the re-design...

Williams: When I talk about the re-engineering of British society, that's what I mean, a project for modern Britain. It's kind of a political and moral project, I'd say.

We have discussed the 1990s; let us now turn to the present and return to the topic of immigration. How do the major political movements view immigration in the current context, and how should it be addressed?

Williams: So, in 2019, Boris Johnson was elected on a manifesto that, among other things, said, “get Brexit done”. But it also promised to bring overall immigration down and move to a visa system.

In reality, under the Conservatives, we opened the doors to global migration—4.65 million people in under four years, a net increase of about 2.5 million. That’s the biggest migration wave, the largest demographic shift in a thousand years of British history, and it’s arguably killed the Conservative Party. They had their worst election results in modern history, in 2024. It’s now polling third in the polls; some polls show Reform ahead of the Conservative Party by a double margin. It’s not dead yet, but it’s on life support. So, I think the failure on migration more than anything else has hurt that party.

And the Labour Party?

Williams: I think Labour struggles with migration because a large section of the activists, the Labour intelligentsia, are instinctively pro-migration and very sceptical of the nation state, very internationalist, which is perhaps an element of the deep roots of this we didn't discuss, and that's there too—the nation state versus globalization.

But not all of them?

Williams: No, Labour's electoral coalition is fragmenting, because on the one hand, you have the traditional Labour base, which was blue-collar, predominantly white British workers in the North, the Midlands, and Wales, who are instinctively and always have been sceptical about migration. But you also have young people and students who overwhelmingly vote Labour, and they tend to be much more pro-migration, though concentrated in smaller areas and major cities. Labour also does much better electorally among migrant and ethnic minority voters. So Labour is pulled in many different directions and is struggling to square the circle.

I think it was in 1995 that Gary Freeman described this kind of anti-populist norm, the idea of Britain's reinvention during the 90s. You should not rely on race, ethnicity, migration status, or similar factors to win votes. That had become a quite established part of modern politics and modern policy debate, to the extent that you then had pushback from people who were concerned about issues of migration and felt that their voices were being stifled—this idea that it's not racist to talk about immigration.

Can you explain us, how this counter-movement to the anti-populist norm evolved in time?

McNeil: That begins to emerge quite significantly, I would say, during the 1990s and the very early 2000s, when there's a sense among people who would naturally be rather skeptical about migration and high levels of migration, especially because we start to see reasonably high net migration after a period when it had essentially been flat for quite a long time.

Some kind of Labour grandees have now come out in the last week and said Labour should suspend the ECHR (European Convention of Human Rights) or leave it. That is certainly not mainstream opinion in Labour but that position is now the accepted consensus on most of the right.

Isn't that breaking a taboo? What do you think?

Williams: At the moment, the Conservatives have belatedly introduced a series of restrictions that have contributed to a decline in numbers, and Labour is benefiting from this, but I think it is only temporary and the numbers will rise again. As far as illegal migration is concerned, they are really stuck. I believe that without leaving the ECHR, the waves of migration cannot be slowed down.

We haven't yet discussed the new force in British politics, Nigel Farage and the Reform Party.

Williams: They are leading all polls massively. But much of the support for Reform is more of a middle finger to the other parties. It is anger and hatred, disillusionment, disappointment, especially among former Tory voters who feel betrayed. And yes, absolutely, the most important factor driving support for Reform is immigration.

It is important to remember that voters as a whole do not have a good understanding of numbers. Most voters believe that illegal immigration is higher than legal immigration, even though legal immigration is ten times higher than illegal immigration, perhaps even twenty times higher. Nevertheless, my theory is that the pace of change due to legal immigration has been so rapid that people have experienced demographic change in their own neighbourhoods.

And all of that, even though immigrants from the European Union are becoming fewer and fewer.

Williams: Exactly. The profile of migration is very different now. Previously, up until 2020, most migration was under freedom of movement from the EU. Now there's a net outflow of EU citizens. Almost more than 100% of net migration is coming from outside the EU. And it's mostly not the USA, Australia, Canada, or other anglophone countries. It's predominantly India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nigeria, Ghana, Zimbabwe, Nepal, with lots of students from China, though the Chinese tend to leave again rather than settle.

Think about the visible effects of immigration in terms of the shops you see on the high street or the presence of mosques or similar things—that was previously confined to a few big cities. The recent wave of migration has spread to towns and cities that had been untouched, even to villages.

And on top of that, you have channel crossings and migrants being housed in hotels or bedsits, and rundown coastal towns or ex-industrial mill towns—places where hotel prices and rents are cheap.

A fundamental change in the life they were used to...

Williams: In public opinion, all of this is somehow mixed together and influences each other. I often have to remind myself that I know all the statistics, as far as they are known. But 99% of people don't know them because most people aren't that interested in politics. And all this diffuse anger flows into Reform because people no longer trust the Tories on this issue.

How has this topic affected the polls over the years?

Williams: YouGov does polling on this. And back in 2020, if you asked which party do you trust to handle immigration and asylum the best, 37% of voters would have said the Conservative Party, so over a third. When that question is asked today, it's 6%, and the number of trusting Reform is at 37%, 38%. The Tories fail on that. It has created a vacuum, and Reform has filled up that space.

After discussing the underlying causes of the migration debate, we spent a long time talking about the political parties. On a completely different note: Is there a well-defined integration policy in the UK?

Williams: No... Looking back 20 years, the policy was explicitly multicultural policy. So, it was not about integration. It was about tolerating different groups. And then there were regular reports on integration issues. One of them was the so-called Casey Report.

And there was another one, but the key term there is 'parallel lives'. It diagnosed the case that there were communities where people spent the whole day, the whole week, without coming into contact with anyone who did not speak the same language and did not have the same migrant background.

I think that for various reasons it was difficult for both the left and the right to talk about integration.

Could you elaborate on that a little more? What are the different reasons from the perspective of the right-wing and the left-wing?

Williams: On the right, it often goes back to Enoch Powell's legacy that's made it harder to talk about than it should be because you get called a racist. And on the left, I think, there is two things going on there. There's a sort of radical relativism. For them, no culture should be superior to the other, so you shouldn't integrate it into it.

But there is also a deep-seated rejection of Britain, England and our history. Conservative philosopher Roger Scruton refers to this as 'oikophobia', or hatred of one's homeland. However, his theory is based in part on his interpretation of Nietzsche, namely the idea of resentment, a kind of withdrawal from the world of power. I simply think that many left-wingers engage in a kind of self-flagellation and then wish to escape the constraints of the nation state in British history.

And that is why the idea of integration itself is viewed almost as something bad by parts of the left, and why there has been little incentive there to develop an integration policy.

In other words, the left prefers the multicultural society and the term integration could be seen to close to racism?

Williams: Yeah, because their argument was that it presupposes your culture is superior and other people should integrate into that, so I think that's been a strong thing on the left.

We have discussed political parties and their stance on immigration. There are two other sectors that have a certain influence on the discussion: academia and the media. What role do the media play in the migration debate?

Williams: That's a good question... I mean, obviously the sodium feature of the British media landscape is the BBC. And I'm not saying this just because I'm good at spotting it when things get tricky, but I do think it's generally true that they lean left—not because they're explicitly biased, but because most of the people who work there, in their own lives, are a bit more left-leaning, surrounded by left-wing people with certain assumptions, and therefore the BBC has consistently been out of step with public opinion on migration and has tended not to do anything that would be seen as feeding into an anti-migrant narrative, for example.

And the newspapers?

Williams: Well, the media landscape is a bit different in places, because there are some papers like the Express, whose readership is very migration-skeptical and who lean into that strongly.

Then, in the more broadsheet papers like the Times or the FT, historically they've generally reflected what I'd call the city establishment, the economic establishment: that migration is economically a good thing, and they've promoted those arguments.

Then there is still social media.

Williams: Of course, the other element in the landscape is online—Twitter. I know TikTok is huge for the migration debate and for Reform, but I'm 35, so I don't really get TikTok and I've never really used it. On Twitter—or X, as it's now called—you've got the popular debate there, but there's also a very important policy debate. Things that have emerged through anonymous accounts on Twitter have become mainstream when journalists at outlets like The Telegraph pick them up, or through think tanks. I think that's definitely driving the conversation. And that Twitter-to-the-conversation pipeline is very data-driven.

How is the topic of immigration specially addressed in these media?

Williams: There was a lot of pushbacks pointing out the share of social housing in London occupied by people born abroad. And then left-wing media outlets have felt the need to push back against that. So that's a new element in the debate in recent years.

One thing to think about is to what extent is the media reflecting public opinion, and to what extent is it driving or shaping it. My view is that most of the media is still trying to catch up with public opinion on this, especially if you look at the polling. You've got data showing over 70% of people say immigration has been too high over the last 10 years. About 49% say migration has been mostly very bad for the country, versus around 16% who say it's been mostly good, and about 30% who say it's been a mix.

Only 2-3% of the population think migration has been too low over the last 10 years. So, my sense is, overall, the media has been more behind the curve than ahead of it, not creating the atmosphere.

Let's focus on BBC for a moment. Many observers have pointed out that this kind of media is known for its educational purpose. This could be helpful when they get people into the necessary change of times, but risky too. How do people see the credibility of BBC in these days?

Williams: Oh, lost. I mean, the right has been critical of the BBC for over 20 years now, and parts of the left are very critical of it these days too.

Why?

Williams: The BBC sits in the middle of political polarisation and therefore gets shot at by both sides. That is part of it. And the BBC has now ended up in a media landscape where it has to compete more against Netflix or digital channels and is therefore in a sense trying to compete for audience share and that is inevitably changing its content. Their license fee is now always up for debate and the BBC has to demonstrate value.

And of course, one way you could demonstrate value is by gaining audience share. Another is by being a public-service broadcaster that has low audience share but provides content that isn't done elsewhere. And I think the BBC has hovered between those two approaches and ended up succeeding at neither. One area where this might especially come to the fore is around topics like migration or any other politically contentious issue. You know, the BBC is going to be a lightning rod for that.

Another problem you pointed out earlier is that the BBC tries to connect with its audience, but if this relationship fails in the long term, sooner or later its reputation will suffer as it loses touch with the general perception.

Williams: Yes, I think there is a really important overarching point to be made here, namely the generational divide in views on the state of modern Britain and the role of immigration in it. I think that people who formed their views in the 1980s and 1990s, for example, are now running the institutions, but the reality on the ground has changed significantly.

This is very evident in right-wing politics, where much of the anger about migration is driven by younger politicians, younger MPs and, above all, younger people in think tanks, the media and so on. Within the Conservative Party, there are politicians who believe that it is their job to defend institutions because they are conservative.

And then the younger people say, 'No, none of these institutions are conservative anymore. Why are we defending them? We should dismantle them.' And all these institutions are seen as partly responsible for ushering in the era of mass migration.

Another actor who can drive immigration debates is academia or perhaps think tanks. What role do they play in the discussion?

Williams: I think academia is certainly quite influential in the debate. The source that both sides often treat as authoritative is the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford. They're respected for their neutrality and academic rigor, so I'm thinking of people like Madeleine Sumption. Journalists go to them for quotes, for stories, or they'll read their analyses, or they're the kind of people who get called to select committees in Parliament.

Similarly, on the Migration Advisory Committee, which is the official body that advises the government on its policy, that committee is made up overwhelmingly of academics from various universities.

There's definitely an institutional link in there into the conversation. And again, because they're an official body, they're cited as a source of authority in the wider conversation, the debate, politically.

Do they try to be neutral, or do they have a position?

Williams: No, I think they try to be neutral. And largely, I think they succeed at that, they are bound by the limitations of the data. There are still criticisms, you can level at these organizations, but I don't think lack of neutrality is one of them.

In terms of the role of think tanks, certainly in Westminster, right wing circles, conservative circles anyway, the think tanks have done a lot to drive the debate over the last couple of years.

You're working for the Centre for Policy Studies (CPS), founded by Margaret Thatcher 50 years ago. How do you see your role, or the role of other think tanks?

Williams: Yes, but first of all, we've always had strong informal links with the Conservative Party, though of course we'll talk to anyone about policy areas. We're about the ideas, not the politics.

In our case, the paper that broke the dam here, the one that made it easier to talk about migration games, is what the CPS did last year with Neil O'Brien and Robert Jenrick. Once we published that, a lot of other think tanks started publishing too. Migration Watch has been around for 20 years and has done some great work, but they weren't very influential; they were often seen as cranks, sadly.

When the CPS starts saying things, it suddenly gives people permission to talk about it as well, especially when we back it up with a 120-page data-heavy report drawn from the (Office for National Statistics) and the OBR (Office for Budget Responsibility) and the Census and the Treasury and DWP (Department for Work and Pensions) in the Home Office. Think tanks do play a part in shaping the elite discourse around immigration.

Some of that leaks out through Twitter too. I've seen graphs I made for the CPS being retweeted without attribution and then the media picks up on it.

In some European countries the migration debate is linked to polarization and populism, like saying the way we define our policies strongly influences how democracy develops. How do you perceive these two concepts?

Williams: I do think the UK is in a situation of increasing polarization. Partly it's a direct result of protest—that's the right word—but it's almost the left and the right bouncing off each other. Black Lives Matter was very polarizing, and then you react to that, it bounces back, and the left reacts to the right, and the right to the left, though we've got here a more moderate version of that dynamic than in America.

There are probably a whole host of deeper structural trends behind polarization: the media landscape is more fragmented, so people live in conversations and bubbles more.

The more profound issue is this: it used to be that both the left and the right accepted the rules of the game and played off against each other within those constraints. Now, on both sides, people are questioning the rules by which you play the game. That has really changed.

What else has contributed to the polarization you see?

Williams: The key part of the polarization process was the Brexit vote. The real surprise for Leave voters, like me, is the strength of the reaction to that vote. Britain has never been terribly pro-EU as an ideal project; once we were in, we muddled along, it was fine. A few people cared about being out, but no one cared about being in, apart from maybe 5%.

The Brexit vote and the reaction to it created probably the deepest cultural split this country has seen. But you'd have to go far back to find something so polarizing. After that, the efforts of the losing side to try to nullify the decision or prevent Brexit, and the three years of parliamentary battles, had an enormously polarizing effect on British political culture. And I think that was somewhat smothered by Covid. With Covid over and migration rising again, that fissure is surfacing again in a different way.

In your opinion, the Brexit caused that fissure?

Williams: Many would say that, but also that it reflected deeper cultural trends. If you're looking for the origins or proximate cause of the polarization we see now around issues like migration, you have to go back to 2016 and Brexit. But you can also trace Brexit to factors that go back decades. Yes, there are a lot of cultural issues.

Migration touches on that in a visceral way because it's a visible emanation of who is "they" and who is "we," and where the nation-state is and where the borders are.

You talk about, a country organized as a nation-state or strongly influenced by global solidarity and human-rights rules?

Williams: Yeah.

Do you use the word populism, and what sense does it make for you, personally? Or maybe there's no sense.

Williams: Yeah. If I were using it, I'd try to use it in a slightly analytical way. There are two ways to use it. One is to mean people offering simple solutions to complex problems. The other is to identify a broader phenomenon of popular discontent with the way British politics has been run for the last 30 years. In the same way the post-war consensus disintegrated in the 1970s, there's a sense that the consensus Britain had in the late 1990s and 2000s is now breaking apart, and populism is the solvent in which that's dissolving.

Of course, more broadly, the common use of the word populist is often pejorative—an insult. It's not necessarily backed by analytical content; it's often just "Trump populist, therefore populist bad."

A few days ago, I spoke with an Irish colleague who pointed out three reasons for a less confrontational debate on immigration. First, he talked about the media system—saying "Ireland tends to be more centre-oriented". Second, he was proud that the government tries to avoid ideological debates around migration.

So, what do you think about that?

Williams: Yeah, I can't say I know that much about the Irish media ecosystem, but I'd defer to your Irish colleague's expertise on this.

I would argue that this is precisely why immigration is currently such a high priority in this country. Because for 30 years, governments have tried to avoid this debate, promising one thing and doing another, and not really addressing people's concerns. What we are seeing now is a reaction to that, and I believe that trust in politicians in general, especially with regard to immigration, has been completely lost. If that wound were healed, perhaps people would feel that they were being listened to more, that their concerns were being taken seriously, and there would not be so much anger and a sense of betrayal. And then the issue would become closer to the electorate. There is that sense of a Westminster bubble of politicians living very different lives, of being out of touch.

According to you, how should your country deal with migration? And why is that so?

Williams: We need to distinguish between legal and irregular immigration. On the legal side, I think we have to care about two things: the numbers, because that affects housing and people's sense of the pace of change, and the composition, so that you generally want arrivals who are more likely to be net contributors. It's hard to answer succinctly, because immigration is now so deeply intertwined with parts of the economy, the university sector, and the National Health Service.

And in my view, migration is often used as a way to avoid tough decisions about deep structural reform.

Could you provide us some examples?

Williams: It's like—better to pull the migration lever than take on the medical unions or the NHS, for example, who voted against expanding training places for doctors. Another way to fix it is to consolidate the university sector. We also need fees to rise in line with inflation for domestic students.

Many of the country's economic problems aren't directly related to migration, but they've become intertwined with it: our planning system is weak and makes building hard, energy costs are high, and that pushes us toward a model where cheap migrant labour is preferred to investing in automation. If you're going to unwind migration and move away from a cheap services economy, you also need to do very easy reforms.

And on irregular migration?

Williams: We are now at a point where it is clear that we will probably have to withdraw from the ECHR and the International Refugee Convention. Legally speaking, these obligations tie our hands. Parliament is sovereign, and if we take steps to repeal or withdraw from them, we could basically do whatever we want. Operationally, people will keep arriving on small boats, overstaying visas, and seeking asylum, because they know that once they apply, they'll have a strong chance to stay long-term.

There's a 60 to 70% chance of asylum on the first attempt. Even if human-rights defences fall short, we have lax labor-market enforcement and no ID requirements, so people can disappear into the underground economy. So, we need a system where staying isn't possible. That means removals, ideally to countries of origin.

But often people don't have documents anymore...

Williams: They often destroy their documents, and their countries don't want them back. We either need a third country like in the Rwanda deal, or somewhere like the Falkland Islands or Ascension Island. You'll need much tougher immigration enforcement, which means expanding enforcement—perhaps the next government can do that. Yeah, I do think we're going to see a fairly wholesale shift.

From your British perspective, do you have recommendations for other European countries on how to handle migration, something like lessons learned? What should they do or shouldn't do?

Williams: It comes down to accountability. Parts of our immigration system were handed off to actors like the universities. The only brake on how many students come over as migrants is how quickly universities can issue visas and thus how fast they can expand their campuses. In that accountability area, there's just been a lack of parliamentary scrutiny. There's been no willingness to discuss the trade-offs—e.g., if we want migration at this level, that means this number of this type of visa, that number of that type, etc. We've always had a system that's expected to run on autopilot, and then you don't worry about the outcomes.

My other point on migration is this: don't promise anything you can't deliver or aren't prepared to deliver. A smaller number in the tens of thousands worked for a while by limiting migration from non-EU countries, but once we had free movement – particularly with migration flows from Romania and Bulgaria – that became untenable. If you want to take action on migration, you have to provide the means to do so, not just pursue the goals. Otherwise, you end up with a reformed government or an anti-immigration party like the AfD in Germany or a nationalist government. If you keep telling people you'll fix it and you don't, people remember that and get angrier and angrier. Keep that in mind.

Any other lesson?

Williams: One would be that you do have to think about integration and have those conversations we haven't had. That has created a lot of problems, and a lot of it stemmed from people being afraid of being called racist—particularly with the grooming gang issues. As a result, local government and police forces and so on didn't get involved.

Yeah, I think you have to accept that you'll have tough conversations now. If you don't, you'll end up having even tougher conversations in the future. And by that point, people might not be willing to listen to you anymore because you've failed so badly, which is where things feel like they are now.

Karl Williams, thanks for sharing your insights.