

# **Migrants are Being Denied the Most Basic Form of Democratic Participation**

---

Peter Walsh criticizes the aggressive media in his country. He also points out that policy must take the specific history of England into account, but at the same time many people feel left behind. Additionally, Walsh emphasizes that every change needs time to be accepted. Therefore, it is not appropriate for the academy to take one side or to endorse too many values.



Dr. Peter Walsh is a Senior Researcher at the Migration Observatory. Alongside his research at the University of Oxford, he is a Departmental Lecturer in Migration Studies. He holds three degrees from the University of Cambridge, including his B.A., MPhil, and PhD. He is responsible for contributions in over 40 publications on Immigration Policy in the UK and wrote his doctoral thesis on immigration policy titled “The Legislature in Immigration Policy-Making: A Liberal Constraint?”

***Dirk Bornschein: When you think about the migration debate in your country, what are its deeper roots?***

**Peter Walsh:** Yes, it's important to really understand today's debate, not least the patterns of migration. And when we think about the history of migration and migration policy in the UK, at its heart is Britain's past as an imperial power, and this goes back centuries. The UK has been involved in moving people across countries and continents—through colonization, slavery, indentured servitude, military service—a global empire. At the core of this colonial activity, I think it's fair to say there was a racialized hierarchy. White British subjects were at the top, and colonial subjects were at the periphery.

Our first real immigration policy, I would say, was in 1905, which introduced something like a border with passports and IDs. Before then, there wasn't really a border, but we did have immigration. People arrived from all over the Commonwealth, including the West Indies or the Caribbean, South Asia, parts of Africa, Southeast Asia—which is incidentally where my mum was born, in Malaysia. She arrived in the 1970s. At that time the UK received lots of migrants, and that challenged assumptions about who we are as the British. We're white, right? But in the post-war period we had labor shortages. So, amidst the decline of the colonial power, in 1948 they adopted the British Nationality Act. And this act said that anyone born in a British colony could have the right to settle in the UK, thus not being subject to immigration controls in that post-war period. The best example of this, of course, is the Windrush scandal.

***Could you please explain what it was about?***

**Walsh:** Of course. So, again, the British Nationality Act said that if you were born in a colony, you could come to the UK to work. One boat with mostly Jamaicans on board was called the Empire Windrush. About a thousand people, and they had the right to settle in the UK. No need to show IDs or residence permits, because they were treated like British citizens.

But these people and many other ones arriving in this period raised anxieties about identity and Britishness, for that reason those rights were curtailed in 1962, when people who were born in a British colony no longer had the right to settle in the UK. Some of this Windrush generation who arrived in the postwar period were deported back to countries they hadn't been in for 50 years, or perhaps had never been in.

***In this context, what role does the British press play in shaping public opinion?***

**Walsh:** We're talking about the deep roots. It's fair to say that the UK has one of the most aggressive and migration-skeptical tabloid presses in Europe—The Sun, The Daily Mail, and especially the anti-immigrant Express. They've long portrayed migrants as threats, benefit scroungers, or bogus asylum seekers. This dehumanising, sensationalist, polarising language is echoed by political figures as well. Even Keir Starmer recently, when he was giving a speech about immigration, spoke of, quote, “an island of strangers”. So, in the UK, there is this pattern that discussions about immigration and migration policy are rarely about policy trade-offs or long-term strategy. The discussions are quite moralized, and they're often emotionally charged. So that's the media and politics side.

Incidentally, Starmers line about “island of strangers” harked back to a speech, I think in the 80s, by Enoch Powell, famous rivers of blood speech, where he said, hey, hang on a minute, look, we're going to have a problem here. We're having all this black migration, one day, they will rebel against their masters and they will quote, “have the whip hand over the white man”. This can be seen as a precursor to the great replacement theory. In the literature, it is undisputed that hard times, economically difficult conditions, and economic recessions are associated with hardened attitudes toward immigration.

***What do you mainly think about when you talk about difficult times and the consequences of economic failure for attitudes toward immigration?***

**Walsh:** There's a particular moment in British history—the 1980s era of Thatcherite neoliberalism and the accompanying deindustrialization—that left many working-class communities economically vulnerable. She shut down the mines. You know, I was born and raised in Nottingham, one of the northern mining towns. Deindustrialization is important. It truly is the genesis of a debate in which migrants are scapegoated. They're blamed for job losses, wage stagnation, and strains on public services.

***Do you see parallels to today?***

**Walsh:** Actually, you see that amidst a cost-of-living crisis, you see those same themes today and it's about the white British feeling that they've been left behind, abandoned. And you see that particularly in post-industrial towns, there's a strong economic component to that as well.

So those are the kinds of deep roots, I think. No, there is something else that is worth mentioning. While the economic conditions tended to work against integration, there was already, decades ago, an opposite trend. This was the UK's integration policy. It was about creating the conditions for harmonious race relations—that was the term. We still have that legislation on the books; it's not a term you see much these days. It's more about community cohesion or integration, but actually that race relations legislation introduced anti-discrimination policies, it was quite progressive. So, you have these two contrary trends: a fairly progressive integration policy and a tough immigration policy.

Those are the roots in a nutshell.

***Can we go back to the media for a moment? You described one part of the press in pretty strong terms. How much do the British media feel a responsibility to educate, like you see in some other European countries?***

**Walsh:** It's a complex landscape. When it comes to migration, there are basically two main camps: those who are skeptical about immigration and those who are pro-migration. Newspapers like The Guardian, which are associated with left-wing values, tend to be more pro-migration. The Guardian highlights economic contributions and migrant success stories, and you could say it presents a more balanced view. It's not completely free of skeptical opinions, but it usually emphasizes the benefits — things like fiscal contributions, cultural diversity, and so on.

On the other hand, the skeptical papers — which, by the way, tend to be the biggest sellers — focus on issues like lack of control, claims that migration numbers are out of control, net migration figures, and so forth. This is often linked to debates about pressure on public services and housing. Another common theme is portraying migrants as benefit or social security scroungers — suggesting that's their main reason for coming to the UK. Sometimes the focus is on bogus asylum seekers or economic migrants.

That's the general picture. But I'd say the skeptical voices dominate the debate. And it's not just the tabloid press — I was just talking about them — but papers like The Telegraph have taken a pretty migration-skeptical stance for many years now. The Financial Times is more neutral, probably because of its focus on economics and finance, so it's more balanced. But The Times these days is definitely migration-skeptical. So overall, it seems to me that the balance in the debate leans heavily toward the skeptical side.

***The newspapers are only one part of the media, isn't it?***

**Walsh:** That's true, it's only a partial view. I'm on X myself, and it's actually pretty interesting because there's a whole range of opinions there. I'd say I tend to read stuff on X that probably leans toward my own biases. But even there, the overall tone feels skeptical. At the same time, I also see posts from what seem like ordinary people — often journalists, researchers, and others — sharing a completely different perspective.

There's a lot of talk about the "great replacement" theory, which used to be seen as pretty fringe but now feels quite common, though some of it is supported by evidence to some degree. On the flip side, many people only get news that matches their existing views. There's this one commentator in the UK — he was once a pretty left-wing professor who studied right-wing movements but seems to have shifted his stance. He has around 80,000 subscribers on his Substack, each paying about £6 a month, and he gets to keep 80% of that.

***It's a good business when you get lots of subscribers.***

**Walsh:** Yeah, it's big business. Then, in the migration sector, I mean, migrant rights, organizations, NGOs, and they tend to be much more liberal in their views. If you want you can get your balance on X.

***We've discussed deep roots, historical experiences, and the media. How do you personally view the current situation regarding immigration in the UK — its consequences and potential opportunities?***

**Walsh:** There are two main points for me, which also show up in public concerns and political debates. The first one is simply about numbers. Leading up to Brexit, the whole migration debate really centered on one number: net migration. This tied into two main arguments — one about pressure on public services, and the other about increasing diversity and worries about integration.

What struck me most was that the whole basis for Brexit was about controlling the border. I think that's the main reason people voted for it. But then, after Brexit, immigration numbers actually hit record highs. That happened because of some liberalizations introduced by the conservative Boris Johnson government. They lowered the salary thresholds for skilled work, reduced the skill level required — you didn't have to have a graduate-level job anymore; jobs requiring a certain level of education or equivalent were enough. Plus, businesses no longer had to advertise jobs domestically before hiring someone from abroad — they could just recruit straight away.

***What did that mean in numbers?***

**Walsh:** So, in the pre-Brexit period, net migration would be anywhere from 250,000 to 350,000 a year. In the post-Brexit period, it shot up to over 900,000 in one year as a result of those and other liberalizations

The other big liberalization was allowing graduates to stay in the country after graduating for two years to find a job. That was called the graduate visa, another effort from Boris Johnson. Now we see net migration is coming down because the previous government introduced, before it lost in the election, a number of restrictions. The Labour government is celebrating and claiming credit for those, but actually, they didn't have to do anything, those restrictions were already there.

For me, the question is: what's this debate going to look like going forward? What's really interesting is that we were told the post-Brexit system would focus on high-skilled migration. But there was one exception — for so-called lower-skilled, low-paid work — and that was social care workers. That's what drove a big part of the huge increase in migration. Now that route has just been closed because it was responsible for a large share of that growth in net migration.

***Again, how many social workers came to the UK?***

**Walsh:** I don't know all the exact numbers, but in one particular year, about 150,000 people came to the UK just to work in social care. That alone accounted for something like 30% of the increase in migration before and after Brexit — just in social care. It's an incredible growth, and these workers were also able to bring their family members — partners and children.

So, the big question is: how are we going to manage without that migration? I wouldn't say it's impossible, but it would definitely require significant government investment to improve pay and working conditions in that sector, which are famously tough.

***You think that native population can be convinced by better salaries?***

**Walsh:** For now, native Brits don't want to do that kind of work, but the government hasn't made any real commitments yet. So that's going to be a big question, especially with an ageing population — will we continue to see high vacancy rates in that sector? In the past, the government tended to treat migration as a quick fix rather than a long-term solution, relying on a global labor pool over which they have little control.

But for me, the bigger issue — and it really is a big issue, even if the numbers aren't huge — is unauthorized cross-channel migration.

***But the numbers of irregular migrants coming across the channel are much lower.***

**Walsh:** So, you might ask, why is this important? The numbers are about 30,000 a year, compared to an inflow of 1.2 to 1.3 million — so that's just a low single-digit percentage of the total. But it's never just about the numbers. Even before Brexit, in the early 2010s, the main focus of migration policy was control. The message was always: we need to take back control of our borders

**Walsh:** Those 30,000 people get a lot of attention because they're a very visible sign of a lack of control — and that's the real issue.

***Given the significance of the numbers, how important is the issue of migrant integration for society?***

**Walsh:** That's the other issue. Integration is always a factor. There used to be a big focus on Muslim integration, especially after the 7/7 terror attacks in 2005 and 9/11. That's less central now, though it's still an important part of the conversation. Now the question is broader: Do these people share our values? Are they behaving in ways we consider appropriate?

This question gets exploited by right-wing figures who argue, basically, "If you bring in people from the Third World, you get the Third World." In other words, they claim these people aren't compatible with Western civilization. That's the kind of language they use, with integration remaining a constant issue.

***Could you tell us a bit about the integration policies being discussed in the UK?***

**Walsh:** Fortunately, when it comes to integration, we don't have a single, unified policy like Germany or Sweden. It's mostly handled locally, at the municipal level. NGOs fill in a lot of the gaps by providing services, including English language classes. But there's no overarching national integration policy. Sometimes the government funds these efforts, but often it's charities supported by donors, churches, and other community organizations.

***The terms populism and polarization are very topical in several European countries today. What is the situation in the UK in this regard?***

**Walsh:** I'll deal with polarization first. There's a big divergence in views. If they're far apart, they're not speaking with each other. There's no common ground. There's divergently opposed views. There's a phrase, polar opposite. That, for me, is what polarization is properly about. There are arguments about whether this is getting worse in the domain of immigration discourse. And I think, it's getting worse.

But then a senior colleague of mine, who's actually an ex-journalist, said, well, you know, it's actually, if you have a longer view, this is the importance of history, it's been like this before. There may be cycles to some extent, but it's always been fertile territory for polar opposite views.

Now, more broadly, there is actually some agreement amongst the UK population, and this data go all the way back to the post-war period, to the present. The majority of the UK population believes there is too much immigration. They have thought that even when net migration was negative, the numbers sometimes don't seem to have a great bearing on it. It seems now for the time being, relative to our European neighbors, we are on the liberal side, even though a majority still wants less immigration.

***And the other term, populism?***

**Walsh:** As far as the term populism is concerned, this is not my topic, but according to my perception, some people use it as a somewhat dirty word. I don't have any particular normative judgments about the populist views of the public on immigration, except to say that the parties will argue, look, we're the party of the people, talking about the reform, we reflect the ordinary person's view, and that's their appeal to populism, and I take a similar view.

***From your perspective in the UK, do you have recommendations or general reflections for other European countries or the EU on how to handle immigration?***

**Walsh:** A part of my job, and it's really baked into the DNA of the Migration Observatory, is that we don't make policy recommendations. And this stems from our view of what academics should do in this space, which I can talk about. Essentially, if you start any kind of policy recommendation that's substantive is going to be value laden.

**Walsh:** The only thing I would say is that, as much as possible, policy should be evidence-based — and that also means being sensitive to history. History matters for two main reasons.

First, it gives you perspective. It helps you see that current debates and policies don't just appear out of nowhere — they have a history. So, if you want to understand where we are today, you need to take history seriously. Of course, there's always the question of how far back you go.

Second, history helps you avoid repeating past mistakes. That's really important. For example, after the Windrush scandal, the government commissioned a report called the Lessons Learned Review. The idea is that any future government facing similar issues can learn from that and avoid making the same errors.

***You mentioned evidence-based policy. Of course, that makes sense — but evidence has to be understood within different contexts, shaped by the perspectives of various political groups?***

**Walsh:** Again, as far as possible, policy should be based on evidence. But that doesn't mean you just follow the data blindly. Data doesn't speak for itself — that's why people like me have jobs. I also recognize that in some situations, especially when you're trying something new, there might not be much evidence about what the likely impact will be. In those cases, I think it's fair to rely on logical reasoning. But in general, policy should be guided by the best available evidence.

***Values have to be seen related to evidence?***

**Walsh:** Let me put it this way: there happens to be a lot of evidence when it comes to policy decisions, and that evidence helps make the trade-offs clearer. It allows for better decision-making that aligns with whatever principles or values you hold. There's always a normative element involved.

Let me give you an example: Peterborough is a city in England, not far from London, that experienced significant immigration — especially from Eastern Europe — after the 2004 EU expansion. I have a neighbour there, she's 80 years old, white, and English. There's a local shopping area that's changed a lot over the 20 years I've been visiting my grandparents in Peterborough.

Back then, everything closed by 5:30 — the place was completely dead after that. It was quiet, and in many ways, cleaner. Now, since immigration, every other shop is an ethnic grocery store or a restaurant. Many of them stay open well into the early hours of the morning.

Personally, I think it's much more vibrant. But for my 80-year-old neighbour, the pace of change was simply too fast.

That's a good example of how value-laden these issues are. There are always value judgments politicians have to make. But I don't think I should be the one making policy decisions. My job is to analyze the evidence, so that politicians can look at that evidence and make informed choices that reflect their political values.

***I'd like to return to an interesting point you made a moment ago — about the role of academia in public debate. You mentioned that, as the Migration Observatory, you don't aim to make specific policy recommendations. Isn't that also connected to the broader role of academia in political discussions?***

**Walsh:** Okay, I have quite a specific view on this. Broadly speaking, there are two views on what the proper role of academia should be in debates on migration.

One — and I think it's the more common view — is that academics have their own specific, often quite niche areas of research, and that they also bring certain values with them. The current thinking is that academics should be open about those values. It's usually referred to as positionality, which basically means: "I'm being transparent about where I'm coming from, and how that influences my analysis."

I was in Nuremberg a few weeks ago at the BAMF, and this view was presented to me as the appropriate role for academics. And my view is: that's completely wrong. The debate around migration is already highly polarized. If an academic comes in and says, "Oh yes, I'm a lefty liberal, like most other academics," that can undermine the entire research programme — because it becomes tainted by the political stance of the researcher. You lose credibility right away.

So, I made that point — and this German professor, who must have been about 80 years old, turned to me and said, "Oh, that's so interesting."

***Instead, your view is...***

**Walsh:** ... My view is that as Migration Observatory and as Academia, we need to be politically as neutral as possible. That doesn't seem to be the dominant position in Germany. In the UK I analyze the mainstream data, I interpret that data as accurately and as neutrally as possible, and I put it out into the public domain, and I do not make policy recommendations.

**Walsh:** That means in this incredibly polarized debate, there's still an organization, the Migration Observatory that has the reputation for being neutral, and indeed our research is used by people on the left and right, and we're still credible.

It's not for us to make policy recommendations, we are academics. You present what you have and then you leave it to the policymakers to decide.

***Could you give me a concrete example for this difference, something that happened in your professional life?***

**Walsh:** Once, I was asked to write a report for a university — a policy brief analyzing UK policy. I wrote it, and then they said, “Where are the policy recommendations? What’s the point of a policy brief without recommendations?” And I made the same argument I just explained to you: you won’t have any credibility if you come in with these left-liberal policy recommendations. As soon as you make policy recommendations, anything meaningful is going to be value-laden.

***Joe Giles (Policy researcher, European Diplomats): In your eyes, what is the relationship between democracy and immigration?***

**Walsh:** "For me, the two are closely connected. The key idea comes from a principle of democracy described by Robert Dahl. He argues that at the core of democracy — both as a practice and as an ideal — is the belief that people should have a say in the policies that directly affect their lives. But when it comes to migrants, they often have almost no influence, they're being denied this most basic form of participation — unless they've naturalized and become citizens. They have very little say in decisions that often affect them even more than the people who actually do have a voice. That creates a real tension.

And then you have to ask: in a representative democracy, isn't there a risk of a tyranny of the ethnic majority? And this is exactly where rights come into play — to protect against that, to ensure that even minorities have a meaningful way to take part in society.

Often, these kinds of rights are secured at the local level. People talk about the basic rights of living in a city — the right to access services, to be part of everyday life.

It's a big issue — a critical one — and it really strikes at the heart of what democracy is supposed to be about. And honestly, I don't have a solution to it. It's just an observation.

***Peter Walsh, thank you very much for this wide-ranging and thoughtful discussion.***