

'IT WASN'T JUST ABOUT IMMIGRATION OR ECONOMICS OR EVEN BUREAUCRACY'

Robert McNeil has studied media-driven migration debates over the past decades, examining their narratives and underlying causes. Ultimately, as he put it, it was about identity, control, and how people felt their country was changing—often in ways they didn't fully understand and didn't feel they had a say in. Consequently, his recommendations for other countries on how to succeed with migration policies reflect that perspective.



Rob McNeil is the Deputy Director and Head of Media at the Migration Observatory. He also participates in Oxford University and COMPAS research projects, examining the social environments from which news stories and narratives about migration and migrants emerge and how media debate affects migration policy decisions (and vice versa). Rob is a former journalist and joined COMPAS in November 2010 after two years as the Media Director for the US environmental organisation Conservation International.

Dirk Bornschein: "Our main interest is in comparing immigration debates across different European countries — looking at their deep-rooted origins, internal dynamics, and consequences. But over time, we realized that these deep roots definitely deserve more attention. So today, we'd like to focus on them.

How would you explain the deep roots behind your country's perception of immigration?

McNeil: It's a hard question to answer because there isn't one national perspective on the issue of migration. There are a series of things that Britain has been wrestling with over the last few decades, but the deep roots are considerably deeper than a few decades.

I'll give it a try: "At the end of the day, you really can't ignore the UK's colonial — or rather, imperial — past. For centuries, Britain saw itself as a dominant global power. There was this belief that it was perfectly normal for us to go to other countries and, in one way or another, govern them.

Dealing with the post-imperial reality has been quite complicated. On the one hand, I think many people in the UK — in different communities — still carry this sense that, somehow, we're important, that we should be in charge or have influence.

But at the same time, there are also people who feel we have a responsibility — because we went abroad, we took things, we intervened in ways that had long-term consequences for how those countries developed. And let's be honest — it was often violent."

So, the colonial past has to be taken into account when we look at the development of the discussion.

McNeil: Yeah, and there is more. I also think that part of the whole British imperial myth-making — the way the empire has been remembered and talked about — is this idea that it was somehow benevolent. Of course, I don't really know — I wasn't there — but the way Britain has traditionally told the story of its empire suggests that we ruled with a gentle hand, that we were fair, even civilizing. That kind of narrative has been quite powerful.

So, this storytelling has a long tail, and it had implications for the kind of post-1948 migrations to the UK, insofar as it's created a sense among people that they had a right to come to the UK. But it also created a degree of responsibility on the part of the British establishment to answer that question. Were you telling the truth when you said this was the mother country? And if so, doesn't that mean that you should be open to these people?

I think that component of the story of modern Britain is quite fundamental to who we are or how the nation depicts itself, certainly politically. That sense of collective identity is an important sort of foundational component of the British migration story.

But what does migration actually mean for Britain? Watching the images of some of these riots, it is difficult to accept that this is still valid.

McNeil: It's easy to focus on some of the unpleasant, even ugly, events that have happened over the years — like the race riots in Brixton in the 1980s, or more recent unrest around hotels housing migrants. But the reality is, the UK has actually been relatively successful and quite open when it comes to migration. There's a strong idea — especially here — that people who've come to this country over the past century have the right to be British."

There is a sense that the idea of mother country, well, actually not even mother country anymore, that sense of British identity is not linked to your race anymore.

From the 1950s to the 1990s, there was a struggle for this space, with some discussions forming part of a debate about the old idea of Britain as a global superpower that ruled these places and people. In contrast, Britain was an idea that encompassed a community that extended beyond our national borders.

You mention the 90s, is this awareness still valid?

McNeil: Of course, the time doesn't stand still. I think that, during the 1990s in particular, there was a shift—around the same time as the anti-apartheid movement in the late 1980s and early 1990s and movements like Rock Against Racism—which helped establish norms in British society that Britishness is not synonymous with whiteness. And that, of course, people from the former colonies and similar backgrounds needed to be recognised as having value within Britain and as belonging in Britain as being British.

And I think that this, in a sense, marks the peak of this type of narrative, because from the 1940s to the 1990s and early 2000s, a parallel narrative had emerged about the role of immigrants in building the nation. And that, for example, for the establishment of the welfare state and the NHS. The idea that these are people that came in and provided basic public services, working as doctors and nurses in the NHS, and that built the idea of Britain as a sort of inclusive nation, right? The sort of apex of this period of national reinvention from being this kind of racist colonial power to being this nation of inclusivity, or the storytelling around that, was the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony.

This is how myths are created.

McNeil: Absolutely. The idea of people arriving from the colonies and building the NHS as a visible symbol of who we are. This storytelling around 2012, a kind of depiction of Britain, was this hugely optimistic, perhaps slightly naive perception of the nation as something that had emerged in a new form from its history. That's one bit—the colonial bit, the series of developments that then start to fall apart more recently, I think.

This backlash, how could that happen?

McNeil: In the first place, there's always been and there will be in any large high-income country a degree of some animosity, particularly when you've got new communities coming in. And Britain is categorically a country that has had this sort of problem with racism, with kind of failure of community cohesion.

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.

And then a bunch of things happened, around the late 1990s and the early 2000s—the Balkan Wars—that started to create scenarios with relatively significant flows of migrants or asylum seekers trying to reach various parts of Europe, including the UK.

That also coincides with the beginning of the Eurostar/Eurotunnel connecting France and the UK. You start to see movement of irregular migration through the Eurostar tunnel around that period. The UK generally was not able to cope with this immigration. The securitization narrative emerges, something that also occurs around the September 11 attacks. In this period, a new and important organization appears in the UK: Migration Watch, a migration-skeptic think tank.

How could you describe the position of Migration Watch?

McNeil: There are not taking a hard right position, but rather taking a sort of establishment position, with a broadly anti migration perspective without focusing very much on identity politics and things like that, a more technocratic anti migration policy and they start their media coverage. They stimulated the idea, that it's not racist to talk about migration.

In these years, however, the European Union also expanded, of which the United Kingdom was still a member at that time.

McNeil: This also had consequences for the immigration debate. The United Kingdom had long been a supporter of EU enlargement, particularly the Conservative Party. They assumed that Britain's relations with some of these countries would help to reduce the dominance of France and Germany in the EU.

So, the EU is expanding and the United Kingdom makes the decision, by the way, in contrast to most countries in Europe, to open its labor market and its borders at the same time. Well, in Britain English is spoken, an omnipresent international language, so obviously it's a fairly easy country to settle in. It is also a high-wage country with a flexible labor market and good opportunities for people, and it is the only place to which most people from these countries can go to work. Additionally, there is a long-term UK relationship, especially with Poland after the Second World War, I mean, through the Second World War and beyond.

Was the relationship with Poland also reflected in immigration?

McNeil: If you go back to 1950, the 1951 census, the second largest foreign-born population in the UK after the Irish was Polish people. And that then drops down over the next half century, up until again, after 2000. According to the 2011 census, the Polish had become very significant again, but that flow of people starts initially with quite a positive public response, you get this narrative around the brilliant Polish plumber, these great workmen who come in and do affordable work. They're not lazy, like the welfare-dependent Brits that we're so fed up about having to pay large amounts of money to for doing basic jobs. This was the initial storytelling about Polish, not just Polish, but Eastern European migration to the UK – very positive.

It seems that, as with other topics, the course of the discussion often depends on external or internal events that influence people's perceptions and underlying interests.

McNeil: Yes, but the story doesn't end there. In 2008 we suffer the financial crisis and a quite different story begins to emerge, the story about competition. Unemployment is rising, and there's a sense that, why Piotr from Poland got a job and Peter from Peterborough doesn't have a job, and what's going on here.

But even before 2008, the numbers of people coming from the EU were really, really, really, high. And within this framework, anti-populist norms no longer play such a significant role. It was naturally much easier for white Europeans to speak out against migration, and to do so quite aggressively.

... That's really surprising...

McNeil: Yes, it became possible to talk about immigration without automatically being associated with race. That marked a really significant turning point — because now, it was acceptable to be critical of immigration without immediately being labeled a racist. The old norm, where opposing immigration was seen as inherently populist or discriminatory, started to break down. Immigration became a legitimate and central topic in policy debates.

Then, something else very important happened in 2008. Alongside the financial crisis, the concept of net migration was introduced as a key policy metric — and that had a major impact on how immigration was discussed and measured.

In a way, this new category contributed to change the focus. That is political communication.

McNeil: Earlier, I mentioned Migration Watch, the think tank. They were involved with a parliamentary group called the Cross-Party Parliamentary Group for Balanced Migration. In 2008, two Members of Parliament — one from the Labour Party and one from the Conservatives — published a paper that was essentially written by Migration Watch. The paper called for what they referred to as “balanced migration.”

This marked a really interesting rhetorical moment in the UK’s migration debate. The concept of “balanced migration” turned out to be a very effective communication tool. The media picked it up enthusiastically — it got widespread coverage in the right-wing press, but also caught the attention of outlets like the BBC and even some left-leaning newspapers. Many people began to think, “Well, balance doesn’t sound like a bad idea.” The language here is important: when you talk about things being “out of balance,” it naturally implies there’s a problem. And when they talked about “balanced migration,” what they really meant was one person in, one person out — essentially, zero net migration.

Up to that point, the UK hadn't really had a migration debate focused on this kind of technocratic framing — on the idea that there is a “right” quantity of migration, and that it should match the number of people leaving the country. That kind of discussion was new.

What consequences did this change have for the 2010 elections?

McNeil: The Conservative Party adopted this as part of its election platform. They didn't push for zero net migration, recognising — quite sensibly — that such a goal wasn't realistically achievable. Instead, David Cameron stated that net migration should be in the “tens of thousands,” not the “hundreds of thousands.” This effectively set a nominal cap on net migration at around 100,000 per year. And this was a hugely significant moment in the UK's modern migration debate, because it established a very specific public expectation — one that the government had virtually no chance of meeting without implementing extremely radical policies.

And those kinds of policies simply weren't possible given the actual powers the government had at the time. In particular, the existence of free movement made it impossible to control EU migration — which meant the government didn't have the tools to achieve that target. At the time, the narrative was that non-EU migration was the bigger issue. But by the time of the EU referendum, in 2016, EU migration had become the dominant driver of net migration to the UK — especially after the accession of Romania and Bulgaria, which significantly increased migration flows from those countries.

In other words, the talk of "balanced migration" — and the expectations it created, which couldn't be met under the existing conditions — became a benchmark by which the public and the media could judge the government's performance.

McNeil: Exactly! There's also something really important about how the data was published. I was actually there while all of this was unfolding — the Migration Observatory was set up just as this policy came into effect, and I was part of the team.

One of the things we did quite well — and this had a real impact — was that net migration data was released quarterly, every three months. Now, the quality of the data itself wasn't great. I won't go into all the details, but it was based on a method that wasn't very robust. Still, the overall figures weren't completely off — they gave a general sense of the trends.

But what's crucial is the timing: with data being released every three months, migration stayed constantly in the spotlight. There was a steady drumbeat of attention on the issue throughout the year. And that regular rhythm helped reinforce public perceptions that there was a problem — especially as it became increasingly obvious that the government was failing to meet its targets. Again and again, the numbers fell short, and the sense of failure kept growing.

In some other countries, growing resistance to migration is being linked to socio-economic issues, such as the housing crisis.

McNeil: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I mean, that's absolutely the case. All this coincided with the financial crisis. I mean, they're like various different crises of European unemployment and the value of the Euro as well. And the United Kingdom was, in a sense, indeed a special case. It was buffered quite well from some of the worst components of that crisis, partly because of immigration, because it had this flexible labour market. You had all of these Polish people who'd come in pre-2008, and a lot of them left, actually.

But it also made the UK very attractive to Europeans, because there was work here. We weren't necessarily in the same kind of depths of recession and crisis as some of the countries in the Eurozone. But, in any case there is a sensation of an economic decline.

And the migration from non-European countries?

McNeil: You know, for a long time, being part of the EU meant that migration from Europe to the UK was largely an elite phenomenon. In contrast, earlier waves of Commonwealth migration, which we talked about before, were often to fill very low-wage jobs. But over time, Commonwealth migration became harder — visa requirements were introduced through the '60s, '70s, and '80s, and by the '90s it was no longer easy to come to the UK that way.

Then, with the EU expansion — especially when countries like Romania and Bulgaria joined — a new wave of lower-wage workers began coming to the UK from Central and Eastern Europe. They filled jobs in sectors that had either been in decline or were barely viable before. These sectors suddenly took off again, because they had access to low-cost labour. For example, soft fruit farming and other seasonal agricultural work suddenly became more viable again, simply because there was now a supply of cheap labour.

There is the economic advantage of immigration, which many people talk about. And how did the people perceive this?

McNeil: Yes, economically, the UK actually benefited in many ways. But because these migrants were doing low-paid jobs, they weren't perceived as part of the economic elite. Instead, they were seen as competing with British workers at the lower end of the labour market. One of the big differences with this wave of migration compared to earlier ones was where people settled. Commonwealth migrants had tended to move into urban areas — big cities. But a lot of EU migrants came to do agricultural work, which meant they ended up in small market towns and rural areas — places with little to no history of immigration. Suddenly, migration was visible in communities that had never experienced it before. That changed the public conversation. And on top of that, you've got a broader backdrop: since the '90s, there's been a sense across Europe and the West more generally of relative economic decline — especially as global power shifts towards countries like China and India. When people feel like their standard of living is stagnating or slipping, it's easy to look for someone to blame — and migrants often become that scapegoat.

You mean you don't actually see any losers as a result of the immigration process?

McNeil: To be fair, there are some real economic impacts at the local level. One of my colleagues has researched this — whether British workers are losing out to migrants at the bottom end of the labour market. And sometimes what you see is that Brits shift out of manual labour jobs and move into more managerial roles — while migrants take on the riskier, lower-paid physical jobs. On paper, that looks like economic progress. But in practice, it might not feel that way. Take someone who used to run their own painting and decorating business. They might now work for a bigger company, managing a team of self-employed Polish or Lithuanian workers. They've lost the independence they used to have. And while those migrant workers might be scraping by as self-employed individuals, many British workers might not be willing — or able — to make it work in the same way.

So yes, macroeconomic analyses might show that everyone is better off on average. But the day-to-day reality — the lived experience — can still feel like a loss. People feel like their communities are changing, or like they've lost control over their lives. And that matters, even if it doesn't show up in GDP stats. People don't respond based on national-level economic reports. They respond based on how it feels to be them, in their communities, in their lives.

In our time line we are very close to come to the Brexit debate.

McNeil: Yes, the Brexit debate. By that point, a few things had happened. First, the government had made big promises about reducing net migration — promises it simply couldn't deliver on, especially while still a member of the EU. Second, there'd been a long-standing Eurosceptic media narrative in the UK — led by powerful outlets like the Murdoch press, the Telegraph, Daily Mail, Daily Express, and others.

These voices — alongside parts of the Conservative Party — had spent years ridiculing EU bureaucracy and painting it as overreaching and undemocratic. And let's be honest — nobody loves bureaucracy. If you're told again and again that this distant institution is responsible for your problems, you might start to believe it. When people were told, "We can't control immigration because of EU rules," that message landed. And it was true — the UK had seen a massive increase in migration, and under EU freedom of movement, there really wasn't much it could do.

That gave Eurosceptics an open goal.

McNeil: Absolutely, they could say, "See? We told you it's not racist to worry about immigration. It's out of control. And these migrants get benefits, use the NHS for free, and we can't even deport criminals because of EU laws."

That narrative was simple, easy to grasp, and powerful. Meanwhile, the pro-EU argument — that being in the single market benefits the UK economically — felt abstract. It couldn't compete with a very human, emotional story: "This guy just arrived and is claiming benefits — and there's nothing you can do about it."

So, in the end, it wasn't just about migration or economics or even bureaucracy. It was about identity, control, and how people felt their country was changing — often in ways they didn't fully understand and didn't feel they had a say in. And, you know, membership of the EU had actually meant that for a long time European migration to the UK was quite an elite migration. And the government making promises about tackling net migration that it simply cannot deliver on. Instead, the UK had a massive, massive increase in migration, which causes major public concerns, and was basically told by the EU, like it or lump it, nothing you can do about it, we're not going to allow you to do this, because one of the fundamental principles is freedom of movement, so you signed up for that, that's what you take, right.

But on the surface, there were two kinds of storytelling, the human one and the bit that says, the UK benefits economically from being part of the trading bloc.

McNeil: That's it.

... and the lack of flexibility of the European Union...

McNeil: Fundamentally, the EU's firm stand on free movement, combined with a very strong anti-EU movement in the UK press, along with the UK's pledge to reduce net migration to the tens of thousands and its failure to do so for reasons not really tied to EU membership, but rather to the practical realities of running a functioning economy, and then the rise of another movement on top of that.

This as short summary of the reasons for the Brexit.

McNeil: I have to tell something else, a little anecdote about working at the moment. In the end of 2012, I made a throwaway comment in a meeting, my Nostradamus moment, which now seems obvious. I said: nobody's going to talk about anything except Romania and Bulgaria, because on January 1, 2014 they'll have full access to the UK labour market. And within about a week, the countdown began in the media. "Oh my God, look at what happened with Poland." Suddenly we had a million people from Poland in the UK in ten years, right? "And the Romanians are poorer than the Poles. And Bulgarians, we don't know much, but Bulgaria sounds far away and dodgy," right?

The storytelling about Romanians was tied to Roma communities, to antisocial behavior, criminality, begging, vagrancy, all of that. So, in 2013 we see a massive spike in public focus on EU migration. By that time, when the media talks about EU migrants, they're not talking about French, German, Italian, or Spanish people or finance workers—they mean poor people.

How did you see this discourse?

McNeil: Well, the Romania-Bulgaria discussion was fundamentally xenophobic, or possibly racist, because it was basically about Roma. And that discourse was jumped on and ridden by the Eurosceptics, you know, there were literally stories in the British newspapers saying things like 21 million Romanians and Bulgarians could come to the UK.

It would literally mean emptying the country. It's preposterous, but the kinda scaremongering about that level of migration coupled with the fact that we had seen this fundamental shift on the high streets of the UK in the 10 years before that, where we've gone from most people never really having met a Polish person to there being basically a Polish shop on every corner. That sort of shift was massive, and people felt it and saw it. And this was then linked to the war in Syria, and the beginnings of significant flows of people into Europe. By 2015, the general election in the UK, you've got a kind of like a perfect storm of this massive fear of people arriving from other European countries, plus big flows of people from a serious, a serious crisis unfolding in the Middle East. The world seemed to be collapsing and that migration to the UK was a significant component for the people.

The Conservative Party couldn't do anything?

McNeil: They were seriously worried about the performance of UKIP. You know, UKIP ends up with this with quite significant representation in the European Parliament. And the way Prime Minister David Cameron chooses to try to shoot the UKIP fox is to say, well, if you elect us in 2015, we will we will have a referendum on EU membership.

And then, people voted by narrow margin for the Brexit...

McNeil: So, I have been in this communication role for six years, my phone rang 30 times a day, journalists asking me for analysis on migration issues. The day after the referendum, my phone stopped ringing. For a substantial period of time, the issue of migration fell off a cliff in the UK, partly because there was a sense that, well, it's done now, but also because actually there were some really significant issues that the country had to wrestle with, and they were a bigger deal in the short term.

And something else that happened, which is the value of the pound collapsed and that meant that actually the sort of the motivation for people to migrate to the UK dropped. Net migration continued to be quite high, it didn't really fall that much, but it but it stopped climbing, right. This meant that the quarterly drumbeat of stories about net migration ceased. The story stopped happening.

And what happened in public?

McNeil: Between 2016 and 2019 people stopped caring about migration or least it ceased to be something that people are worried about. The UK suddenly was the most positive about the benefits of migration to the country versus the cost and versus the kind of damage that it does. For three years it's going very much back to that story that I was talking to you about at the beginning, this idea of a nation built on migration and all this. In the time of the so-called Windrush scandal even a strongly right-wing newspaper, basically saying, we have failed, because this group of migrants in the UK is absolutely part of our community, and we should be protecting them. "Our government has failed." But something else happened 2018 and that brings us back where we currently are.

The arrival of the small boats?

McNeil: That's it. The UK isn't much more attractive to asylum seekers than other European countries, but it is an endpoint, not a transit point. If you've got a fake passport or whatever and you get into the UK on a plane, fine—but that's usually pretty hard. By contrast, getting in on a small boat means you have to go from Calais or nearby.

And suddenly we have a very different set of issues emerging, with a Conservative Party in complete disarray after the referendum—May as leader, not being adequately strong or effective, and then Johnson taking charge. It's led to a process of symbolic policymaking being introduced. So, you start to see approaches to addressing the refugee crisis that are about symbolically signaling to the British public that you're going to do something bold.

You mean Rwanda?

McNeil: It is a bit like the net migration target. They raise the impression; you can just smash it all up and do something totally different and this will be the end of all these people coming.

But we've also had a situation where the basic reality of the relationship between the UK and the EU and essentially the collapse in the global order in various different ways has created a scenario where we've got large numbers of people coming in, the asylum system is totally overwhelmed, it's poorly managed, and people feel frustrated and angry about it.

You mentioned several strategic mistakes on how to handle the immigration. I would like know your personal recommendations for other European countries or the EU itself. What should they care about to not repeat history?

McNeil: So, I would say, the strategic mistake that underpins where we currently are is a lack of acknowledgement of the need to demonstrate control. And linked to the EU, we are talking about bureaucracies they are never going to be popular, especially a supranational bureaucracy, like something which is outside or sits above of national legislature telling. You can't do this.

When a situation is unfolding, especially with something as identity-shaping as migration, we need to do something about it. If you don't allow a national government to take steps to reassure its people, then what will happen, I think, is that people will say it's not good enough—we're not prepared to accept that.

Fundamental ideals need to be reassessed on a regular basis to ensure that they're still relevant and pertinent and aren't damaging people.

Would it have been possible to prevent Brexit with different policies from the EU?

McNeil: Perhaps. I think if the EU in 2014, 2015 would have flexed, if they had understood that things get broken, but they didn't acknowledge some need for flexibility. Although, at that point in time and to be honest with you, I think that even if the EU had flexed, British public debate was open to finding a way to extricate itself from the bureaucracy.

Acknowledging flexibility and acknowledging that migration brings pluses and minuses. You need to be able to address the minuses as well as the pluses, that is really, really important.

If you basically sit in a world where you tell everyone, oh, this is great, and you should be grateful for it, when their life doesn't speak to that, you're going to have a problem. That is the fundamental strategic mistake and the fundamental driver of polarization. And this is linked on the immigration perspective to this.

So, my recommendation is flexibility and openness and acknowledging that actually intransigent positions which say immigration is fundamentally good and we should just all suck it up, they actually lead to anti-immigration policies existing.

Robert McNeil, thank you for your insights and analyses.