

BALANCED MIGRATION



Speeches by Nicholas Soames MP and Frank Field MP

Westminster Hall, House of Commons

Tuesday 2 February 2010

Population and Immigration

Motion made, and Question proposed, That the sitting be now adjourned.-(Mr. George Mudie.)

9.30 am

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Mr. Nicholas Soames (Mid-Sussex) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to debate the impact of immigration on the population of the United Kingdom—a debate that needs to happen more regularly. I called for the debate because our country truly faces a turning point of historic proportions, which will profoundly affect the future of our children and subsequent generations.

In fact, this is a crisis, of which members of the public are instinctively aware and about which many of them are rightly uneasy, but the Government are in almost total denial about it. I refer to the impact of mass immigration on our population, which will inevitably have the most serious consequences for our public services, our environment, our quality of life and even the future stability of our society. In some places, that is clearly already the case.

I want to deal with three issues: first, the reliability and relevance of population projections; secondly, the impact of population growth at the projected level; and thirdly, the measures that the all-party group on balanced migration, which is co-chaired by me and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), wishes to see put in place to tackle the problem.

First, on population projections, I regret to say that the Minister of State has become increasingly wild and incautious in his remarks as the debate has developed. In a recent article for the *Sunday Mirror*, he said—this is a particularly vulgar quote—

"If Cameron wants to put a cap on our population, then he'd better start issuing condoms, getting euthanasia clinics in place or even introducing a Chinese style 'one-child' policy."

This is much too serious an issue for it to be a matter of "Cameron", even in an election year. The facts should not be politicised in that way. That is why I and others formed the all-party group—it now numbers 40 Members, some of whom, I am grateful to say, are in their places this morning—to press for an objective, careful, rigorous and

humane approach to immigration and for cross-party agreement on what needs to be, and what must be, done.

The Minister's approach also ignores the fundamental fact that if present levels of immigration continue, immigration will account for 68 per cent. of our population growth over the next 25 years. The reality is that immigration and population have become inextricably linked. I regret to say that the Minister's remarks are a very unimpressive attempt to camouflage the failure of the Government's immigration policy.

Let us examine the facts. The Office for National Statistics—the official body responsible for these matters—projects that the UK population will reach 70 million in 20 years' time. The Government's response is to wriggle; they say that projections are not forecasts. Of course they are not, but they do tell us what is likely to happen in the absence of a major change of policy.

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The Government also say, quite correctly, that some ONS projections have been wrong in the past. Of course they can be wrong, and the further ahead they look, the greater the risk of error. That is why the Government like regularly to quote a 1965 projection of the population in 2000-35 years ahead—which assumed that the baby boom would continue and which was therefore seriously wrong. However, on a 20-year time frame, the ONS has been accurate to within plus or minus 2.5 per cent. over the past half century. At the very least, that suggests that its projections should be taken seriously. It is absolutely intolerable, and an unedifying spectacle, to see Ministers attempting to rubbish the work of valued public servants just because it does not fit their political narrative.

What distinguishes our present situation from any other period in our history is the massive impact of immigration on the size of our population. The well-known waves of immigration in past centuries were not remotely on the scale that we are seeing at present. The Huguenot and Jewish immigrations were spread over about 50 years and amounted to only about 1 per cent. of our population at the time. The east African Asians, who have been so spectacularly successful here and who have integrated so well, numbered 27,000, spread over two years.

Net foreign immigration into this country is now at 21,000 a month. That amounts to nearly 1 per cent. of our population every two years—25 times higher than at any time in the last 1,000 years. As a result, immigration now heavily outweighs the other two factors—births and deaths—in terms of population growth.

Peter Bottomley (Worthing, West) (Con): I ask my hon. Friend to reflect, either now or later, on how that net immigration of 21,000 compares with the number of people returning or coming from overseas and registering with GPs. That figure has reached 600,000, but the maximum number for people returning to this country is 69,000. That indicates that immigration is substantially higher than the Government's immigration figures suggest.

Mr. Soames: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who makes an extremely important point. Of course, we are talking about not just those who register, but the large numbers who, as we know, do not register or appear in the figures.

Death rates are fairly steady. Birth rates vary more widely. Since reaching a historic high in the baby boom of 1964, the total fertility rate has fluctuated within a fairly narrow band.

Migrationwatch, which has done so much to raise the tenor and rigour of the debate, has done research for our cross-party group. It has done some calculations on the effect of varying the birth rate while holding the death rate and net immigration constant at the level of the most recent principal projection by the ONS. Those calculations demonstrate that even if birth rates fell to the lowest level for a century, our population would still hit 70 million, not in 2029, but in 2036. Of course, the likelihood of a fall in the birth rate is reduced by the fact that one in four births is now to foreign-born mothers, who have 35 per cent. more children on average than British-born mothers.

The conclusion, therefore, is inescapable: the only way to limit our population is to bring immigration down substantially. Indeed, it must be reduced from last

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year's figure of 160,000 to 40,000 or less if we are to avoid a population of 70 million. It is also important to understand that failure to bring immigration under control will mean a continually growing population of well beyond 70 million, and even up to 80 million or 85 million, in the latter part of this century.

What is the Government's response? They tell us that immigration is already coming down, partly as a result of their new points-based system—"partly" is the word. Net foreign immigration fell by 80,000 between 2007 and 2008, the last year for which statistics are available. Of that decrease, 70,000 was due to a greater number of eastern Europeans returning home. That, of course, had nothing to do with the Government's immigration policy, because eastern Europeans are not subject to it. Even that decline is now in some doubt, however, because a Polish professor is suggesting that any return of migrants to Poland has been much smaller than British figures suggest. As for the points-based system, these are early days. We await the outcome for 2009 with interest.

What is clear, however, is that tier 4-students-is in serious difficulty. The BBC quoted a freedom of information request showing that the British high commissions in Mumbai, Delhi and Dhaka issued nearly 20,000 student visas between June and August this year. It went on to quote an Asian immigration lawyer, who said that

"the majority of these students are not genuine, especially from the Punjab. They come here to work in the guise of student visas".

He said that he was now worried that the problem is causing great resentment among the local Indian community who settled here in the 1960s.

"There is some tension in our community",

he said.

It is true that the Government have removed a couple of thousand educational institutions from the list of potential sponsors, but the checks on individual applicants are still far too weak. Perhaps the Minister will be good enough to tell us when we may expect to see the Government's review of student visas, which was originally promised for last December. While I am on the subject of the points-based system, I shall take the opportunity to commend the Government on one significant step forward-their proposal to introduce a second points-based system for economic migrants who decide that they would like to settle in Britain. That will introduce a welcome element of flexibility to the issue of work permits without, in the long term, adding to our population.

I have focused on the numbers because they are a vital element in the debate. They are what the Government seek to ignore or dodge, as the mood takes them. However, they cannot be dodged and must not be ignored. That brings me to my second topic-the impact of population growth at current and projected levels.

Population growth is already impacting on our schools. There is a rush to build more primary school places. Maternity units are affected; in some places mothers have to be turned away. Housing is also affected-nearly 40 per cent. of new households will be the result of future immigration. Housing is an increasingly serious problem. There is already a grave shortage, particularly of social housing, the waiting list for which in England has risen by 70 per cent. in seven years. We are told that

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there are still plenty of green fields in England and that only 11 per cent. of our land is built over. It may be so, but it certainly does not feel like that.

I want to offer one more, very important, quote:

"Great parts of this country are already over populated, the transport system is a nightmare and some social services are barely able to function. Yet the government remains in denial about the massive social implications of unchecked immigration, a piece of social engineering that might yet stand as the only lasting legacy of new Labour".

That comes from a lifelong supporter of the Labour party, a former editor of the *Daily Mirror*, Mike Molloy, writing in a newspaper last week. It is not a matter only of impressions. England as a whole is now, with Holland, the most crowded country in Europe. We are nearly twice as crowded as Germany and four times as crowded as France. One need only go to those two countries to see that that is the truth. The public understand very well that we simply cannot go on like this without a serious deterioration in our quality of life.

What more should we do? First, there should be an overarching political commitment to take the measures necessary to get immigration down. No single measure will achieve that. There is no silver bullet. Secondly, there should be a serious effort to tighten the chaotic state of student visas. As I mentioned, some bogus colleges have been eliminated from the list of potential sponsors, and those that can still sponsor students now have some new responsibilities. That is welcome, but the universities

and colleges that issue the key document-the confirmation of acceptance for studies-are the very same bodies that have a clear financial interest in the admission of foreign students to the UK. We must return to a situation in which there is also a check by a UK-based immigration officer before a visa is issued, especially in countries of immigration concern. Those highly trained and exceptional immigration officers have the local knowledge that will help them to detect bogus applications-something that an admissions tutor based in Britain is clearly incapable of doing. On work permits, we would like the bar to be raised in the points-based system, at least for as long as we have 2.5 million of our own people unemployed in Britain.

That leaves marriage as the third major category. Clearly there can be no question of preventing genuine marriage by a British citizen to a foreign national, provided that both are of a suitable age-at present 21. However, the days when we could allow marriages to be arranged overseas for the purpose of immigration must now come to an end. It is not helpful to the individuals concerned, who can often come under the most severe and unhappy family pressure. Nor is it any help in integrating those communities into our society. It is time to move on-a view shared by many in the communities concerned.

The public are right to be deeply concerned. In a recent survey, 85 per cent. were worried about the UK population reaching 70 million, and 50 per cent. were very worried. They want a Government, of whatever party, who face up to the reality of the numbers and take firm and effective action in response. That is also what the all-party group wants.

Mr. Edward O'Hara (in the Chair): Order. Many hon. Members want to participate in the debate. I ask hon. Members to bear in mind the fact that the Front-Bench speeches should commence no later than 10.30.

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9.46 am

Mr. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Lab): I want to begin by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames). At a time when most people did not want to discuss immigration, he secured immigration debates in this Chamber and in the House. It was largely through his pioneering bravery that I, too, became more vocal in the debate. I am looking for slightly different answers to the questions that he poses. I hope that by the end of the debate, when we have heard all three party spokesmen, we shall have a clear idea of the programmes that will be offered to the electorate.

I also hope that, as this debate will probably be our last on the subject before the general election, all three parties might want to apologise to the country for what they have allowed to happen to it. I am not saying that the policy was deliberate at first, or that it was engineered, as suggested in the quotation used a moment ago by my friend, the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex. However, what appeared to be an open-door immigration policy has wrought havoc in many sections of our community, particularly among the poorest. As we are now in an age when we feel that we should

apologise for what, in our current judgment, we see to have been appalling actions, even though we could not have had any effect on them, the electorate might welcome some more up-to-date apologies for what has happened to their country.

In some areas, Britain has changed. I do not blame the immigrants-the new arrivals, who came here to make a better life. I blame us, the political class, not only for not seeing that as an issue, or perceiving what the long-term consequences would be, although that was bad enough. I also blame us for a much more deep-seated failure to have any coherent sense of what the nation stands for. Because we did not have any clear idea of what Britain stood for, except for some vague and wonderful concept of our having always been tolerant-and I must say that my own experience does not lead me to believe that that was more than skin deep-we failed to take on from the Edwardian age what we now think it means to be a citizen of this country. None of us can blame the new arrivals, who were often invited by us to come here without knowing what we stood for and with no benchmarks to judge their standards by, for simply continuing to protect and promote the culture that they brought with them. The fault is not theirs, but it is certainly ours.

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Ind): The right hon. Gentleman is right to mention tolerance, which is a great tradition of our country. Pressures on jobs, housing and public services have been mentioned, but a more marginal consequence of immigration is that our traditions and culture are under threat-by the increasing use of sharia councils, for instance. That does nothing to promote equality. We should not be tolerant of that.

Mr. Frank Field: No, but think of what happens in Afghanistan. If the voters there feel that the "elected" Government cannot deliver common or garden justice, they will seek other forms to give order and principle to their lives. It is easy to get headlines by saying that we should not have sharia law here, but we ought seriously to consider why some people look to other ways of

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imposing discipline, order and fairness, and what lessons that might have for our widespread and more accepted judicial system.

First, as I said, I look for an apology from all three political parties. At worst, they participated in the silence while this great change was happening to our country. Secondly, they should apologise-*[Interruption.]* Hon. Members should not laugh. Immigration on this scale has forced down wages.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I was not laughing, but snorting with derision. Immigration was fine when the right hon. Gentleman and the Government whom he supported were elected in 1997. There was nothing wrong then. The problem has arisen in the past 10 years. I know that an election is coming up, and that the right hon. Gentleman, for largely historical reasons, will be running as a Labour candidate and will therefore be supporting the Government, but for him to ask other parties to apologise for the mess created by his own party is a bit rich.

Mr. Frank Field: The thought that I will be running "historically" as a Labour candidate has driven the Whip from the Chamber. Perhaps he is going to write it down on tablets of stone.

We have to make a distinction between the machinery left by the previous Government and the actual numbers. Indeed, one very good thing happened recently when the Conservative leader said that he wished to reduce net immigration to the levels of the early 1990s, not the late 1990s. Although I deplore what has happened since Labour came to power, I am not blind to the fact that the issue did not start with us; there was an acceleration in net migration under the previous Conservative Government.

Several hon. Members *rose-*

Mr. Frank Field: I shall give way first to the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green) and then to my hon. Friend the Member for Bassetlaw (John Mann).

Damian Green: The right hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way again. Will he acknowledge the simple fact that immigration has increased fourfold under the Government whom he supports? Many of his complaints about the pressure that immigration puts on public services, some of which I share—he and I do not disagree much about the solution—have come about in the past decade. To blame all three political parties is a bit rich.

Mr. Frank Field: I shall continue to do so; the electorate will decide. I agree that there is a difference in policy between the Liberal Democrats and the Conservative party. The Liberals are quite open about having an open-borders policy, inviting in anyone who wants to come here. That has not been Conservative party policy, and it is certainly not our policy.

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John Mann (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a fundamental weakness in the assumption that led to the Conservative party's signing the Maastricht treaty and that underpinned the logic of the Treasury and the Bank of England—I do

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not mean politically, but as institutions? I am thinking of the assumption that the economy would benefit from cheaper and younger labour. Flawed economic logic has underpinned policies from both parties across the generations.

Mr. Frank Field: I am grateful for all interventions, but particularly for the one just made by my hon. Friend. By allowing large numbers of unskilled labourers into this country, our immigration policy has fed the habit and weakness of British industry, which as a result has not taken labour upmarket and has not put a premium on high skills. All those crucial decisions for our economic future were put off because there was an endless supply of people; that not only meant low wages, but helped to beat down wages. It is those at the very bottom of the pile, who have had to bear the brunt of this wonderful, open competition, whom I wish to champion in this debate—to some extent, at least; it is not only they who concern me.

The third failure caused by our not getting to grips earlier with the number of people wishing to come here to work is that welfare reform was made even more difficult to accomplish; indeed, one might say that it was made impossible. Since 1997, more

than 3 million additional jobs have been created, but the number of workless people of working age has fallen only from 5.6 million to 5.2 million. Given how the economy was expanding, it could not have been a better time to have pushed through welfare reform with a process of tough love, but we failed to grasp the opportunity; it was impossible to grasp it because of our immigration policy.

I hope that we shall hear what the political parties wish to put in their manifestos. The all-party group on balanced migration believes that it is necessary for all three parties to subscribe to two main proposals if we are to reassure the electorate that, late in the day, we are getting a grip on the number of people coming here. The first is that we need not only a cap, and some idea of the numbers that we think can come here to work and be assimilated, but a points system-the Government have decided to use one-as a way of rationing who should fill those places.

The second proposal is to break the link between coming here to work and almost automatically becoming citizens. In other words, we should welcome the proposals now being considered by the Government that people can come here perhaps for four years and then return home. That would be an advantage to them and certainly to the British economy. The idea that working here should automatically lead to citizenship has led to the long-term growth in population, as have the changes in the birth rate mentioned by my friend, the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex.

My last point is not to do with the all-party group on balanced migration. I wish to speak about something that I believe will come to dominate the next Parliament-the free movement of labour in Europe. We are now seeing the limits of and the strains caused by the free movement of capital. Perhaps before the general election, we will see the inner cabinet of Europe having to preserve their currency by taking over the main negotiations on Greek debt.

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We are in an age that was never envisaged by those who told us that it would be good for us to sign up to the single currency. I pose a question. We hear all sorts of soft talk about countries such as Turkey gaining admittance to the European Community. Having free movement of labour among a group of western European countries that, generally speaking, have the same standard of living is a totally different proposition from having free movement of labour in a European Union where the standards of living are hugely different-so diverse that it is difficult to put the matter in arithmetical terms.

Although we would not expect the matter to feature in the coming election campaign, those who are lucky enough to be returned by the voters will need seriously to consider it. We should not do so under the guise of trying to attack the EU. Those who are sceptical-and those who are friends of the EU-need to look at whether a policy of endlessly increasing the borders of Europe will allow the free movement of labour that was envisaged in those early days, when there were only six core countries with similar standards of living.

Let me end by reading out the results of an immigration survey that is to be released tomorrow by the Townswomen's Guild, which has become concerned about the issue.

Members will know that Townswomen's Guilds were established to reach those parts of the country that the Women's Institute did not touch, although now both organisations have much more of a joint membership.

The Townswomen's Guild asked its members what the levels of immigration should be in this country. I have to confess to the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex that the results do not totally support the position of the all-party group on balanced migration, which is anxious to get policy commitments from all three parties that will prevent the population rising above 70 million. Only 17 per cent. of a record number of members of the Townswomen's Guild who responded to the questionnaire thought that that was a satisfactory position. Nearly 80 per cent. sought a much greater reduction. More than 50 per cent. wanted no net migration and nearly 29 per cent. wanted no immigration whatever.

The membership of the Townswomen's Guilds are part of the backbone of England. If we, as politicians who have represented such groups during this Parliament and hope to do so in the next Parliament, do not take seriously such a message, the game is well and truly up for democracy.

10.1 am

Mr. Mark Field (Cities of London and Westminster) (Con): I warmly welcome today's debate, and thank my hon. Friend the Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames) for introducing it. It gives us the opportunity to discuss openly the challenges that we face over immigration control. Unfortunately, as has been alluded to by both my hon. Friend and the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field), some politicians discuss this topic only when quick and populist headlines are required. That is regrettable because it reduces the legitimacy of immigration as an important issue to be discussed rationally and pragmatically. It also leads Government to produce confused and contradictory policies that are too lenient in some cases and too tough in others. Moreover, it fails to address the economic needs of our country, or prepare local authorities for the challenges on the ground. Most

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importantly though, it isolates the British public who are left feeling that the only outlet for their worries about immigration is to be found on the extremes of the political arena.

Let me make it clear that our borders should be open, to an extent, to hard-working, skilled professionals from abroad, but closed to those who will not contribute or integrate. We should also look more favourably on those who play by the rules by firmly rejecting the notion of an amnesty on illegal immigrants.

Immigration is the single biggest issue in my inner-city constituency postbag. It gives me daily exposure to what is, at times, the chaos in the Home Office. I regret to say that because the Minister has been extremely helpful to me on a number of occasions, and has taken great care with some of the cases that have come through. None the less, there is a problem in the Home Office that may, within a few months, face my hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Damian Green), so I hope that he, too, is listening to what I have to say. My team here at the House of Commons often despair at the day-to-day failings of the system. The last time I spoke in this House about

immigration, I touched on a few specific cases. All too often the Home Office has failed to serve the correct paperwork in relation to deportation attempts. I shudder to think of the cost of each of those attempts.

Many cases in my daily postbag prompt the question why the Home Office is so desperately inept at enacting its own decisions. Bizarrely, while we seem to find it, at times, impossible to remove people who have no right to be here, employers in my constituency have untold difficulties in securing passage for some of the highly skilled migrants to whom they have offered jobs. Such employers have looked for personnel in the UK, but are forced to employ skilled people from abroad as the domestic pool cannot often fulfil their need.

Despite stumping up increasing amounts to make applications for visas or for leave to remain-the fee for a paper application is now £820 and the cost of a face-to-face appointment a staggering £1,020-highly skilled migrants and their partners inform me that they are facing ever longer delays. Once an application is made, and that cannot be for fewer than 28 days before a visa is required, passports are retained by the Home Office. Any attempt to request the return of such documents for travel or businesses purposes results in the withdrawal of the application and the loss of fees. Getting any information on a likely time scale is near impossible for a full 14 weeks after application, and there is very little accountability in the management structure. Business folk in my constituency now say that their international companies are choosing to recruit highly skilled global personnel for the German or French offices rather than negotiate with the unpredictable and costly British Home Office.

Two meetings I had yesterday with constituents about their particular cases lead me to believe that the Government are now deliberately delaying applications in the hope that the published immigration statistics immediately ahead of the general election will show a decreasing number of successful applicants. That is cynicism at its very worst.