

# Essays

## Immigration and the election

**Don Flynn, Rob Ford, and Will Somerville**

**The 2010 general election was the most unpredictable and enthralling in recent history.** This article delves into the election through the prism of immigration. How did immigration play in the election and in the actual campaigns? What was the salience of immigration to the result? What lessons can be learned as immigration assumes critical importance to the Labour leadership election?

This article is divided into three parts. In the first part we focus on how immigration and immigration policy changed under the Labour government. Second, we analyse how immigration played in the election and critique the gathering wisdom of how immigration drove Labour's loss and the Liberal Democrats' 'boom and bust'. We find voters did switch from Labour and the Liberal Democrats as a result of immigration, but also that these were second order issues and less important than in 2005: in 2010, economic issues were manifestly more important.

Finally, we begin to unpick the implications of that analysis, focusing in particular on how a social democratic narrative might develop in the longer term and what lessons could be learned.

### **Immigration under New Labour**

Labour in power made substantial changes to immigration policy. Prior to 1999, the country's immigration policy framework had been in place for more than a generation. The approach, created when the British Empire was being dismantled, was based on two pillars. The first pillar, limitation, comprised three laws – enacted in 1962, 1968, and 1971 – that together had the goal of restricting immigration. The 1971 Immigration Act, the capstone legislation that repealed all previous laws, made a strong statement: Britain was a country of 'zero net immigration'. The second pillar, integration, involved a framework of race relations inspired by the US civil-rights movement. The most potent policy measures were anti-discrimination laws, in a limited form in the 1965 and 1968 Race Relations Acts and most comprehensively enacted in the 1976 Race Relations Act. The dominant post-war policy model thus emphasised both the integration of immigrants through a 'race relations' approach and the restriction of immigration (Somerville, 2007).

The Labour Party discarded this template. Politicians made a commitment to economic migration as part of economic policy and, as a result, limiting or restricting immigration was no longer the sole goal. Among the most important new policies that enabled

change were those aimed at high-skilled immigrants (such as the Highly Skilled Migrants Program, now incorporated in Tier 1 of the new Points-Based System or PBS); the expansion and redesign of the work-permit system (now Tier 2 of PBS); and measures to attract international students (including two Prime Ministers' Initiatives).

While the government has opened up channels for students and certain workers, it has also attempted to restrict other migration streams, notably asylum, in response to increased application numbers in the last decade (which peaked in 2001-2002) and public and media pressure to reduce the numbers of asylum seekers, and in more recent years aimed to reduce immigration – and especially illegal immigration – full stop. Successive pieces of legislation have sought to curb the number of asylum applications, speed up application processing, and more effectively deport failed asylum seekers. The government also instituted a set of internal and external measures to reduce 'undesirable flows'. These include more restrictive visa regimes for some countries and mandatory identity cards for foreign nationals living in the UK. In addition, the government has implemented major institutional reforms, probably the most important of which was the creation of a separate arms-length agency that has greater operational freedom and combines customs and immigration functions: the UK Border Agency.

Overall, Labour was a boldly reforming government on immigration, re-casting immigration policy as a component of economic policy. In many senses, Labour actually achieved a significant degree of success in this approach, at least measured in terms of easing labour bottlenecks and containing cost growth. It may also have achieved some success in decoupling race from the immigration debate. However, polls showed that the public was never won over to a more liberal immigration regime and never believed the government had control over immigration, which became a consistent political liability for Labour from the late 1990s on, when immigration became a salient issue.

### **Immigration and the 2010 Election**

In the run up to the 2010 election, mainstream politicians were largely silent on immigration (1). Gordon Brown and David Cameron shared a desire to keep it that way, albeit for different reasons. Brown didn't want to talk about immigration because Labour has long been vulnerable on immigration issues – Labour supporters are internally divided and swing voters view Labour as weak on the issue – while Cameron was silent because keeping the volume low on immigration was critical to his detoxification strategy – designed to move the Conservative Party away from policies and issues associated with 'nasty party' intolerance. For mainstream politicians, the recent calculus has therefore been that there is more pain than gain in talking up or talking down on immigration, largely because of broad support for the existing policy of managed migration but also out of concern over the political message.

In line with this general strategy, the manifestos of the three main Westminster parties revealed little about their immigration plans, which largely hewed to similar lines, such as cross-party support for the Points Based System. The Conservatives promised a cap on immigration, but provided few details about how it would be implemented. Labour promised tighter controls and more emphasis on speaking English (including mandating public servants to have fluency in English). The Liberal Democrats also promised more control, alongside progressive policies of earned regularisation. For the main parties, discretion was the better part of valour.

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

In contrast, radical change was promised by UKIP and the BNP. UKIP promised a halt to immigration (a five year freeze) and a maximum level of *net* immigration of 50,000 per year. The BNP made repatriation central to their pitch, offering £50,000 to encourage resettlement by those defined as not 'White British', with an expectation that 180,000 people per year would take up the offer. Both sets of policies came apart under media and policy scrutiny, although coverage levels were relatively low (2).

As the campaigns geared up, the cacophony of noise on immigration increased, with immigration issues alive in the media and heard on the doorstep. There was an implicit (and sometimes explicit) difference between local campaigns – where tough talk on immigration was frequent and *de rigueur* – and the national campaign, where there was a deliberate effort to give it a low profile. Politicians and their strategists managed to keep immigration at arms' length until the start of the campaigns. However, like much else in this election, the leaders' debates changed everything.

Immigration was the only issue to surface in all three debates. The debates revealed marginally different narratives (Conservatives would implement a cap, Labour would ensure only those with needed skills would be let in) but few details. The discussion on immigration remained steadfastly anchored on limits. This is hardly a surprise: the 'numbers game' has long been a feature of the British debate on immigration. While testy, it is worth remembering that despite the sharp words, the discussion on immigration was ultimately a civilised one and all three leaders were careful not to play the race card. In the immediate aftermath, analysis indicated only Cameron 'cut through' (Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute, 2010, 3).

One aspect of the immigration issue that got particular play was amnesty or regularisation. The Liberal Democrats were the only party to support an earned amnesty for irregular immigrants. Other parties made consistent attacks on this specific element of policy. Brown and Cameron made the case that amnesty doesn't work and that it would lead to more illegal immigration, using the old saw that 'amnesty is a magnet for more illegal immigrants' which combines both these lines of argument (3).

However, by far the most important moment in the campaign as far as immigration was concerned, and perhaps overall, was the comments by Gordon Brown about Gillian Duffy. 'Bigotgate' dominated coverage of the campaign for several days and five or six media cycles. Our analysis of the British Electoral Study shows it was the campaign event recalled most by voters. Rather less clear is how much it impacted voting intentions: Labour retook Mrs Duffy's home seat of Rochdale from the Liberal Democrats, for example.

The issue arose after Gillian Duffy, a self-proclaimed lifelong Labour voter, met a canvassing Gordon Brown and questioned why he had presided over Eastern Europeans 'flocking' to the country. In the privacy of his car, Gordon Brown later decried the exchange as a disaster and asking why his handlers had allowed a 'bigoted woman' to enter into discussions with him. This private exchange was caught on a live microphone and heard by all broadcasters. A series of *mea culpas* followed, with a distraught and fatigued Brown further embarrassed by pictures of him, head in hands, in a BBC radio studio, listening to a playback of his remarks. The impact was perhaps greater on pundits than voters but the incident nevertheless fixed the idea in voters' heads that a 'disconnect' existed between an arrogant government which was imposing an immigration policy and the voters bearing the costs of this policy.

On a local level, immigration is said to have played heavily on the doorstep by

activists from all the major parties. However, interviews with such activists suggested there was little sense of consistency about immigration on the doorstep, that is, no single aspect appeared consistently. Some reported specific aspects of the phenomenon itself (Eastern Europeans, illegal immigration, asylum seekers), others mentioned job security and wages, many mentioned cultural change. The lack of clarity on what the electorate was concerned about is something we consider further below but looking back at the campaigns, it seems immigration issues roiled below the surface, appearing in debates and at other key moments, like the comments on Gillian Duffy, without any particular narrative on the issue ever becoming set in stone. Throughout, the tone from mainstream parties remained civil.

### *Immigration and vote choice*

Our analysis of commercial opinion polls suggests immigration was important to voters but did not *determine* the overall result. Opinion polls before, during and after (including exit polls) did not show immigration as a determining factor.

MORI polling consistently showed that immigration/asylum was not critical. In fact it was the fourth priority in the election, behind the economy, etc. Only 14 per cent thought it very important. (This is lower than the issue appears in day-to-day politics.) These polling results (i.e. that immigration was the fourth most important issue) applied to *specific polls in marginal seats* as well as across the general public (Ipsos MORI, 2010). Polls for YouGov ranked immigration higher (the second most important issue) but it was still behind the economy (YouGov, 2010, 3). A major exit poll conducted by Greenberg-Rozner indicated immigration was a key issue and cost Labour votes, but again did not determine the result (Greenberg-Rozner, 2010).

However, a dominant narrative, largely unchallenged, is beginning to emerge. That narrative is that immigration cost the Labour government and the Liberal Democrats support. This was particularly the case for working class voters who are most hostile to immigration. Social democratic policies were out of line with their preferences: Labour did not favour clear cuts in immigration levels and the Liberal Democrats favoured an amnesty for irregular immigrants. While there is some evidence to support this interpretation with the sharp rise in votes for the BNP and UKIP, the true picture is much more complex.

### *Labour*

Could Labour have won with a very thin margin if they had played their cards more effectively? Some Labour activists and thinkers feel that immigration played very badly and cost them seats. Internal debates in the Labour Party and among liberal-left commentators have begun to support this view. David Goodhart has, for example, suggested Labour should become the 'anti-immigration party' (Goodhart, 2010). This ideological push for a more limited immigration stance appears based on the claim that existing Labour policies caused the working class to suffer wage stagnation while pushing economically inactive people further away from the labour market and into dependence on state benefits, as migrants undercut wages and competed successfully with natives for jobs.

Others ascribe the loss of the so-called 'C2s' in the Labour vote to worries over immigration. The source of this view derives mostly from a Progress pamphlet written by Liam Byrne. C2s – or in the near-equivalent description of Mosaic (the political database used to

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

highlight voting blocs) 'Industrial Heritage' (4) – did indeed desert Labour (a drop of over 20 per cent in a single electoral cycle) (Byrne, 2010). Byrne and others have correlated this to immigration and welfare reform, particularly through the implication that C2/Industrial Heritage wages have been squeezed since 2005 (5). There is however no evidence that C2 voters are more hostile to immigration on the whole – they are more hostile than professionals, but no more so than other working class voters.

Such views are resonating with the Labour leadership candidates. For example, Ed Miliband suggested on the Andrew Marr show that the benefits of immigration were unevenly distributed. David Miliband has said that the Points-Based System should have been introduced earlier. Ed Balls has gone furthest, questioning whether the Labour government had been tough enough on immigration and promising tougher rules to protect the working class, including rethinking the relationship with the European Union.

This is not a universal view. Sunder Katwala at *Next Left* has questioned the 'depressing consensus' and called attention back to the economic insecurity faced by lower income and semi-skilled groups for example (see Coats, 2010). The established voice of the party on such issues, Jon Cruddas, has been much more supportive of immigration, arguing that the roots of insecurity lie elsewhere, especially in housing (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2010). Newly elected Labour MPs, such as Lisa Nandy and Chuka Umunna, have supported such analysis (Umunna and Nandy, 2010).

The loss of C2s *is a salient fact* in Labour's defeat, and our in-depth analysis of the British Electoral Survey (below) *confirms* that immigration was a major part of their decision to switch votes. However, this was not a sudden trend. Labour lost C2s in 2005 and arguably 2001, and our evidence indicates that the bigger element of the decision, by an order of magnitude, was about economic opportunity, not immigration. We flesh out the detail and the implications of this below.

### *The Liberal Democrats*

As noted in the introduction, immigration has also been linked to one of the main storylines of the general election: the Liberal Democrat 'boom and bust'. Generally, given how high they were riding in the polls, their result in terms of a final tally of MPs was seen as very 'surprising' (6).

Was the softness of the Liberal Democrat vote due to their immigration policies? It is certainly true that the Conservatives thought they were vulnerable, bringing the issue up unbidden in the debates and following it up with local strategies. Liberal Democrat activists also referred to hearing about it on the doorstep. However, immigration-as-cause-of-failure is not backed up by empirical evidence.

The most obvious criticism of this interpretation is that there were similar attacks on other Liberal Democrat policy positions, most obviously on security. On the basis of exit polls and surveys we cannot disentangle immigration from other factors. Moreover, the Liberal Democrat surge did not 'pop' like a balloon. A better metaphor would be a slow puncture, shown by polls which saw the 10-12 point surge in the Liberal Democrat share of the vote after the first debate and then a gradual loss over several weeks back to not a dissimilar position from where they started. If immigration was a sudden clincher (especially as commentators point to the third debate) then you would expect sudden changes.

Finally, we should not forget that there was a rise in the national share of the Liberal

Democrat vote to nearly a quarter (or 6.8 million people), which of course belies their share of Parliamentary seats, less than a tenth.

#### *Analysis of the results in the 2010 British Election Study*

Data recently released by the 2010 British Election Study provides a valuable resource to empirically test several of the propositions and insights we discuss above.

Firstly, we examine how widespread concern about immigration was among voters in 2010. Looking at the most important issue data, it is clear that this was an election dominated by the economy. Nearly half of all voters volunteered economic concerns as the top priority facing the country, while another 8 per cent named the related issues of unemployment and consumer debt. Immigration was clearly an issue concerning the electorate, gaining the second most mentions at 14 per cent among both all voters and 2005 Labour supporters, but it ran a distant second to all-encompassing economic concerns. Immigration was also considerably less salient than in 2005, when a quarter of voters named it as their most important problem. Perhaps the most worrying sign for Labour electorally was that public services such as the NHS, education and pensions – the party's traditional strongest points – had almost completely disappeared from the political agenda. Less than 2 per cent of voters named one of these issues as their top priority, compared with over one in three in 2001.

*Table 1: Important issues and perceptions of Labour's performance, 2010 and 2005*

<b>Most important issue</b>	<b>All voters</b>	<b>2005 Labour voters</b>
The economy	47.0	47.5
<b>Immigration</b>	<b>14.3</b>	<b>14.1</b>
Crime	5.2	6.3
Unemployment	5.1	6.2
Consumer debt	3.0	2.7
<b>Ratings of Labour performance</b>		
The economy	-29.8	24.7
<b>Immigration</b>	<b>-58.1</b>	<b>-30.3</b>
NHS	-6.2	41.3
Education	-15.1	33.9
Taxation	-26.2	21.8
Afghanistan	-44.0	-7.4

(Source: British Election Study)

Ratings of the Labour government's performance also suggest the party might be vulnerable over immigration. The scores show the net ratings, with negative ratings of performance subtracted from positive ratings. Immigration stands out as the issue with the most negative ratings among the overall electorate of -58. This is, however, an improvement on the abysmal -65 the party recorded on the issue in the 2005 British Election Study. It is however the negative ratings among their 2005 supporters that would most worry Labour politicians. Labour's 2005 voters held positive views about every area of policy except Afghanistan, where they were mildly negative, and immigration, where they

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

were very critical Labour's record, with negative ratings outnumbering positive ones by 30 percentage points.

Immigration therefore looked like an issue with the potential to move some votes in 2010 – although it was not as important to voters as in 2005, and far less important than the economy, the strongly negative judgements on Labour's performance left the government vulnerable.

Was this vulnerability concentrated among core working class Labour supporters, as some commentators have suggested? We define the anti-immigration vote in three ways: those who prioritise immigration as the most important problem facing the nation; those who rate Labour's performance on immigration as 'very bad'; and those who when offered a range of eight emotions to describe their feelings about immigration – four positive and four negative – chose three or four negative words (7). On all of these definitions we found the same pattern – concerns about immigration were most prevalent amongst older, more economically insecure, white working class voters, particularly those with skilled manual jobs such as the 'C2s'. The flipside to this is that the young, educated middle class voters who have traditionally found the Liberal Democrats most appealing were little concerned by immigration, nor were the ethnic minority voters or the public sector middle class voters who also form important pillars of Labour support.

This underscores an important point – Labour's voting coalition is diverse, and includes important groups of voters who are either unconcerned about migration or worried about the discriminatory effects of 'tough' migration policies. Labour's relative success in urban areas with large minority populations may in part be due to its liberal positions on immigration and on combating discrimination. This might be putting too much emphasis on identity politics among voters when there are other plausible explanations, for example the unwinding of anti-Iraq war voting (Iraq was a salient issue for just 3 per cent of voters according to Ipsos MORI data). However, it is an important consideration.

The British Election Survey evidence suggests that immigration concerns were widespread, though perhaps less salient and intense than in 2005, but that they were concentrated in groups of voters with traditional affinities for Labour, whose support was critical for winning a fourth term. Now we turn to the key question: did immigration cost votes? One way to test this would be to simply compare the voting patterns of those concerned with immigration and those unconcerned about the issue. However, many voters concerned with immigration would already be aligned with right-wing parties – what we need to see is whether immigration *changed* votes. To do this we can exploit the panel nature of the British Election Study. Respondents were asked who they voted for in 2005 in one wave before the election campaign began, and then asked who they voted for in 2010 shortly after election day. Separating the questions in this way helps to reduce voters' tendency to project their current preferences back to 2005 (8).

In Table 2 we show the vote choices of 2005 Labour voters, comparing those most concerned with immigration with the rest of the sample. In each case, we observe the same pattern: those who were most worried about immigration were less likely to remain loyal to the Labour Party, and more likely to vote for the Conservatives or one of the fringe right-wing parties. 2005 Lib Dem voters were also more likely to defect to the right if they were concerned about immigration, but there was very little effect on 2005 Conservative voters.

Table 2: Vote choice 2010 by vote choice 2005

	All 2005 Labour voters	Immigration most important problem		Very negative about Labour immigration performance		3-4 negative emotions about immigration	
		Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
<b>Labour</b>	62.8	58.4	63.5	37.6	71.4	53.6	65.5
<b>Conservative</b>	11.0	13.6	10.5	26.4	5.7	18.0	8.9
<b>Lib Dem</b>	21.2	17.5	21.8	24.8	19.9	19.5	21.7
<b>UKIP</b>	2.1	5.6	1.5	6.1	0.8	5.1	1.2
<b>BNP</b>	0.8	2.6	0.4	2.6	0.1	1.4	0.6
<b>Other</b>	3.1	2.3	2.3	2.5	2.1	2.4	2.1
<b>N (weighted)</b>	<b>4,080</b>	<b>988</b>	<b>3,492</b>	<b>1,046</b>	<b>3,034</b>	<b>934</b>	<b>3,146</b>

(Source: British Election Study)

Our evidence suggests Labour voters annoyed about immigration were more likely to defect. However, this surface relationship may be misleading, as concerns about immigration may be correlated with voters' economic insecurities, in an election dominated by the economy. We therefore conducted a range of regression analyses to test whether immigration was significant influence on 2010 voting patterns after controlling for economic factors, building models of Labour voting, switching from Labour to the right-wing parties, and assessments of the three main parties' leaders.

The findings from all the models are fairly consistent: assessments of Labour's past record on immigration were a significant factor in vote choice decisions, particularly the decision to switch from Labour to a right-wing party, and in assessments of Gordon Brown and David Cameron. Prioritising immigration as the most important problem facing the country, or having negative emotions about the issue, were also associated with more negative feelings about Nick Clegg and a lower likelihood of voting for the Liberal Democrats, but had little effect on voting for the other two parties or assessments of their leaders.

However, immigration was a distant second to the economy in the 2010 election: assessments of Labour's economic performance loomed larger in the models of overall Labour voting, and in voters' judgements about Gordon Brown, David Cameron and Nick Clegg. Voters' assessments of their personal economic circumstances and of national economic circumstances were also significant in most of these models, with views about how the national economy had performed over the previous year looming particularly large. While immigration does seem to have influenced some voters, it is clear from these models that this election was treated by many more as a referendum on Labour's performance in the economic crisis.

Labour might have won some voters back with a more restrictive or populist line on immigration, but it would have won back far more by convincing the electorate that its economic policies were the best available. The Liberal Democrats did also perform less well among anti-immigration voters, but it is not clear from this analysis whether this was due to their specific policies in 2010 or their more general association with liberal policies on migration, as on other issues. It is quite possible that due to their reputation the Liberal Democrats would have performed poorly amongst anti-immigration voters regardless of their specific policies.

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

Finally, it is worth noting that the regression analysis suggests the impact of immigration was focused on performance. It was not the voters who prioritised immigration who deserted Labour, nor was it the voters with the most negative emotional reactions to the issue; it was the voters who felt Labour had not adequately *managed* the issue. This suggests voters did not simply desert Labour simply because they were angry about immigration, they switched because they were angry about immigration *and they believed Labour had failed to address their concerns*. For many of these ageing, white working class voters such feelings about immigration may be a particularly salient expression of a more general sense of abandonment by the party since its move to the centre since 1997.

**A twenty-first century migration narrative**

Immigration may not have determined the results of the election, but the electoral campaigns may have facilitated and accelerated the emergence of a new political narrative on immigration that will dominate forthcoming political exchanges and developments, such as the Labour leadership election.

The Coalition deal on immigration was made on the Conservatives' terms, with an immigration cap. The obvious concession made to the Liberal Democrats was the agreement committing the government to ending the use of detention in immigration cases involving children. Given a broad swathe of support for ending the practice, covering human rights activists and establishment figures involved in child welfare, the two wings of the Coalition could make out plausible arguments to their respective supporters that the concession was both significant, in that it promised the end of an abhorrent practice, but could also be conceded without harming the overall capacity of the authorities to act decisively against immigration offenders.

But though the commitment to the cap on numbers was a part of the Coalition programme the Liberal Democrat left anticipated a dogfight in the government ministries over its details. Critics of the proposal had long warned that it would not be popular with business leaders and parts of the public sector, like the NHS, which had used migration to contain wage costs during a long period of expansion. They anticipate an eventual cap would be nuanced with appeals to flexibility and user-friendliness for hard-pressed businesses. The presence of prominent Liberal Democrats in the economic ministries, like Business Secretary Vince Cable, has indicated that this indeed may happen (Prince, 2010).

Difficulties exist for Labour at almost every level when confronting the new reality of the Coalition. In the election, Gordon Brown articulated a narrative that centred on control and reducing numbers, but with a twist that the focus would be on skills. The focus on understanding immigration as dependent on a country's skills offers one potentially cogent approach to limiting immigration that could square with 'progressives'. However, the technocratic language he couched this message in did not seem to reach the public, and the fundamental conflict between liberal opening and reducing numbers was not answered.

The current prevailing view amongst influential thinkers suggests that the government should be attacked from the right as it struggles to define a new immigration policy. A stance that is even more hostile to immigration than the one taken by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition is favoured by some as a price that needs to be paid to get the C2s back onside. But this will present difficulties to Labour as it builds a role for itself as the parliamentary opposition. If the Coalition's immigration policies come to be seen as a brake on growth, its leadership will be presented with the dilemma of whether it should set

its face against this criticism in the interests of maintaining a 'tough' stance, or join in and attempt to lead the call for a loosening of restrictions in the interests of economic recovery.

A plausible argument could perhaps be made for the triangulation of both elite frustration with tightened immigration policy, and the anxieties of core Labour voters, with a position which simultaneously argues that the Points Based System be allowed to work without a cap, as it was intended to, but that areas of policy like enforcement and migrant family reunification should be made more strict to underscore the message of 'toughness'. The difficulty here though is that this has precisely been the position of the Labour party throughout the thirteen years it was in government. Its problem lies in the fact that at its heart it has a dual message. The call for a mixture of pragmatic good sense to admit workers who would make a positive contribution to the economy on the one hand doesn't square with the simultaneous reiteration of the need for increased surveillance and policing of the border.

These two options might be summarised as being either (a) a shift to a consistently harder anti-immigration stance to win back disenchanted voters as the first and greatest priority; or (b) muddle through, much as the party has been doing, by advocating policies which are broadly liberal when it comes to the central issue of managing economic migration, but illiberal on matters concerning immigrant rights and tough enforcement.

Both options pose dangers for social democrat parties. An uncompromising position, including living with the harsh decisions which will need to be made to underscore a tough approach, will provide opportunities to score with the tabloid press and other constituencies favouring tough action, but it won't be popular with private sector employers and the managers of public services, who see migrant labour as a resource which can add flexibility to their operations.

The second choice – the 'steady as she goes' option – will, if adopted by a new Labour leadership, be seen by many as an anti-climax to a debate which promised much in the way of an uncompromising fresh look at the immigration issue. Its liberal economic management element will continue to dismay those who believe immigration has put working class jobs and living standards on the line, whilst its commitment to toughness courts the danger of alienating voters concerned over the consequences of policy on community relations and human rights.

A third centre-left option, capable of standing up to the mainstream public narratives of contemporary life whilst at the same time setting a policy direction with ends that are consistent with broad social democratic values, is a feasible goal and in our view an urgent task.

A starting point for Labour in opposition, which it would be quite capable of coordinating with many on the Liberal Democrat benches, would be to screw further down on the issue of migration impacts, which the Coalition government has indicated will be its main reference frame for its policies. The evidence and evaluation of impacts at the point in which migration really seems to matter to people – in their regions, towns and neighbourhoods – is embryonic and incomplete. The work that has been done on the presence of migrants at these levels, by bodies like the Regional Development Agencies or research centres based in the affected area, have generally promoted a far more positive view of the experiences of the last decade than would perhaps be expected (McKay and Winkelmann-Gleed, 2005; SLIM, 2007).

Where they have been identified, talk about 'problems' is generally replaced by consideration of identified policy 'challenges', such as the need for short-term financial

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

support to public services which need to adapt quickly to new demands. Policy adaptations include better statistics and improved analysis of change in local areas as well as central government funding formulae, which redistribute the benefits of the growth to which immigration has contributed to regional and local administrations.

The construction of a narrative along these lines is well within the grasp of Labour in opposition, working with progressive members of the Coalition. Within this framework for research and policy debate there is space for the work of MPs, who could use their offices to review evidence about migration impacts with local government, public services, employers, trade unions, and community leaders. Opportunities to command the discussion at local and regional level could be built up through a communication strategy aimed at local actors.

The eminently defensible social democratic proposition that: (a) the UK benefits in terms of its economy and society from immigration; (b) that the challenges which undoubtedly exist at the level of integration and equitable outcomes are well capable of being met; and (c) that migrants *and* the communities they live in need to be involved in all these processes aiming for improvement as the bearers of rights as well as responsibilities, is an attainable goal.

Our review of the role immigration played in the 2010 election campaign, which has looked at the evidence of the various commercial surveys of opinion and the 'gold standard' of the British Election Study, has not led us toward a conclusion that tougher messages will necessarily win over those parts of the electorate most concerned about immigration. We completely endorse the need to reconnect with the moods and the feelings which exist amongst working class communities on immigration and other issues, but believe that this can and should be done by the strengthening of work that allows the political actors to get closer to the actual record of life in communities affected by immigration, and to build up the case for positive engagement at this level.

Immigration can become part of the political imagination of the country if local engagement is prioritised. We believe a more intensive campaign by Labour to persuade 'traditional' Labour voters that the party was listening to them and responding to their concerns, on other issues as well as immigration, might have won many of the voters who switched parties, for instance.

In a nutshell, our view on the role of immigration in the election is that it was a symptom of a wider breakdown in communication between Labour's elite and its base, a problem unlikely to be resolved by more restrictive migration policies, however well they are communicated. We would hope that there is sufficient openness on the part of the centre-left today to at least consider a new approach.

**Don Flynn** is Director of the Migrant Rights Network. **Rob Ford** is Research Fellow at the Cathie Marsh Centre for Census and Survey Research at the University of Manchester. **Will Somerville** is a Senior Policy Analyst at the Migration Policy Institute and author of *Immigration under New Labour* (Policy Press, 2007).

## References

- Byrne, L. (2010) *Why did Labour Lose – and How Do We Win Again?*, London, Progress.  
 Coats, D. (2010) 'It is economic insecurity, more than immigration, which Labour struggles to talk about', *Next Left* 25.05.2010.

- Cruddas, J. and Rutherford, J. (2010) 'See the bigger picture', *New Statesman* 31.05.2010.
- Goodhart, D. (2010) 'Labour must become the anti-immigration party', *Labour Uncut* 18.05.2010.
- Greenberg-Rozner (2010) 'The change election – what voters were really saying', 7-9 May 2010, available at: <http://www.thersa.org/events/audio-and-past-events/2010/appetite-for-change-post-election-analysis>
- Ipsos MORI (2010) 'Thompson Reuters Marginal Polling, Wave 1', 24.03.2010, available at: <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Polls/Reuters%20topline%20for%20the%20website.pdf>
- Ipsos MORI Social Research Institute (2010) *The Leaders' Debates: The worms' final verdict – lessons to be learned*, London, Ipsos MORI, 30.04.2010.
- McKay, S. and Winkelmann-Gleed, A. (2005) *Migrant Workers in the East of England: Project Report*, East of England Development Agency.
- Prince, R. (2010) 'Vince Cable refuses to back down in immigration row', *The Daily Telegraph* 28.07.2010.
- SLIM (2007) *Migrant Workers in the South West*, South West Regional Development Agency and South West Regional Skills Partnership.
- Somerville, W. (2007) *Immigration under New Labour*, Bristol, Policy Press.
- Somerville, W. and Sumption, M. (2009) *Immigration and the Labour Market: Theory, Evidence and Policy*, London, Equality and Human Rights Commission.
- YouGov (2010) 'YouGov / The Sun Survey Results', available at <http://today.yougov.co.uk/sites/today.yougov.co.uk/files/YG-Archives-Pol-Suntrackers-100505.pdf>
- Umunna, C. and Nandy, L. (2010) 'Labour leadership battle gives time to create future agenda', *The Guardian* 25.05.2010.

## Notes

1. Brown limited himself to a single speech in West London in the twelve months prior to the 2010 election, for example. In it, he promised less immigration but significantly no 'cap' on migrant numbers.
2. For example, analysis on UKIP policies on *World at One* revealed that their 'cap' referred not to immigrants but grants of settlement to existing immigrants.
3. In addition to the three main debates, a specific debate on immigration was held on 4 May, two days before the Election. The *Daily Politics* show saw Damian Green, Phil Woolas, Tom Brake (Liberal Democrats), and Nigel Farage (UKIP) discuss immigration. Here the narratives were rather stronger on restricting immigration, with the exception of Tom Brake who stood firm on critiques of amnesty, but was deeply isolated. Under significant pressure, Damian Green remained sensitive and refused a populist stance, making future transition controls on European accession a key pledge, but came under sustained criticism on the specifics of the proposed immigration cap. Eventually the debate on numbers dissolved into unintelligibility, which benefited those without detailed or sound policies (such as UKIP). The questioning was focused, as always, on numbers, control, and illegal immigration. For example, we did not see a question on the impacts of greater controls and a cap on immigration – specifically on social care – until more than thirty minutes in.
4. 'Industrial heritage' voters are those who live on reasonable incomes in former manufacturing areas.
5. The academic literature on immigration impacts is clear (Somerville and Sumption, 2009). The effect on C2s of immigration is marginal, perhaps slightly negative *at worst*. This does not however mean that C2s are enjoying economic opportunity and prosperity. Technological change in particular is squeezing wages and prospects for advancement. Some may argue that the evidence is irrelevant. Instead it is the *perception* among voters

**RENEWAL** Vol 18 No. 3/4

that immigration is the cause of economic insecurity. Those making such an argument are on a better footing but the evidence is hardly overwhelming. The perception of competition from immigrants is certainly widespread but it is not overwhelming and is *not* correlated with left-leaning voters.

6. BBC news coverage, 7.05.2010.
8. The negative words were 'angry' (45 per cent of voters expressed this feeling about immigration), 'disgusted' (41 per cent), 'uneasy' (45 per cent) and 'afraid' (29 per cent).
8. Voters still do this to some extent, but this design helps reduce the effect.