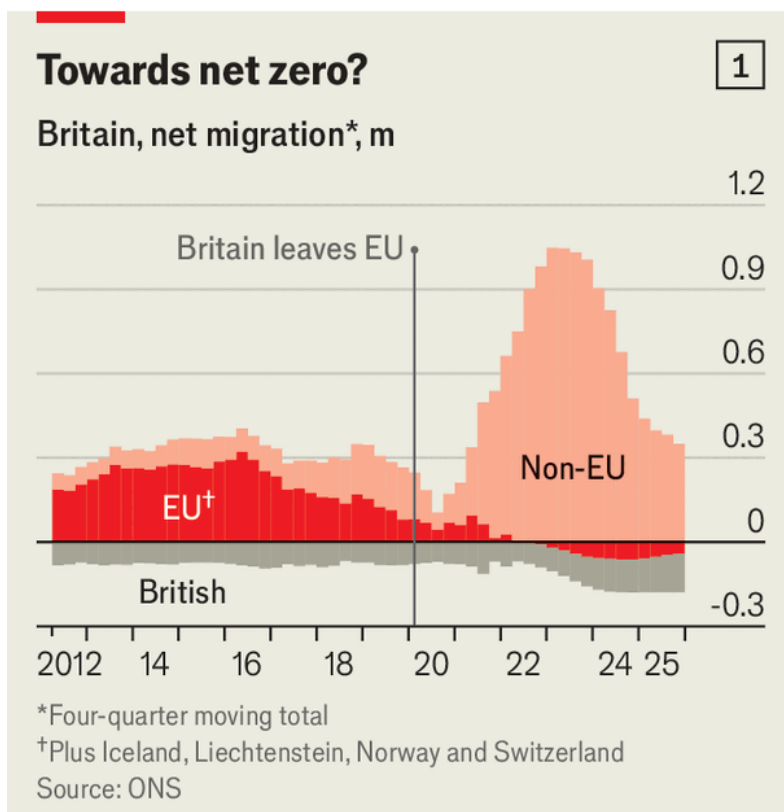


Britain has crushed immigration, and harmed itself

A few years ago Britain's door was wide open to immigrants. It was possible to hire foreign workers "from the other side of the world" and pay them just £26,000 (\$35,000) a year, marvels Dawood Ibtehsam, who owns a McDonald's restaurant franchise in Warwick, a county town in the West Midlands.

Huge numbers of people arrived in the country between 2021 and 2024, an unprecedented surge that Reform UK, a right-wing populist party, calls "the Boriswave" (see chart 1). At the peak, the year to March 2023, almost 1.5m immigrants came. The Office for National Statistics thinks that far fewer people left, so net migration amounted to 944,000. Many of the migrants were workers drawn by a newly liberalised visa regime. Others were students, who had recently been permitted to work after graduating. Still others were Hong Kongers and Ukrainians fleeing oppression and invasion.



How much has changed. Net migration to Britain last year amounted to 171,000—the lowest level since 2012, if the pandemic years are excluded. The human haul will probably be even lower this year, largely because the number of economic migrants continues to fall fast. Between January and March just 5,900 people applied for skilled-worker visas, down from 19,100 two years ago. Applications for student visas are also declining. James Bowes of Warwick University thinks net migration might even turn negative in 2026.

In a few years Britain has gone from a remarkably open country to a remarkably closed one: a considerable achievement, though not a commendable one. Under public pressure, successive governments have slashed every kind of immigration that they can. They have stanching the flow not just of low earners, such as care workers, but high earners too. They have not yet seen a political benefit. Half of Britons still think immigration is growing, perhaps because they focus on asylum-seekers, whose numbers have recently been steady at about 100,000 per year.

Madeleine Sumption, the author of a new book, “What is Immigration Policy For?”, says that Britain is drawn to tough measures. The country is globally attractive, partly because it uses English, partly because it has a (deserved) reputation as a good place to be an immigrant. To achieve a given level of migration, Britain will probably require tighter restrictions than, say, Portugal or Sweden.

It acquired new restrictions when it abolished free movement in January 2021, having left the European Union. Immigration from Europe, which had exceeded immigration from farther afield for much of the 2010s, fell sharply. But at the same time, to compensate, the government introduced a more liberal regime for non-Europeans, letting in many workers on modest salaries. Africans and Asians leapt at the opportunity. The number of work and study visas given to Indians—the biggest migrant group in recent years—tripled between 2019 and 2022. The number given to Nigerians rose tenfold.

Britain has reversed course ever since. In 2024 it raised salary thresholds for companies that wanted to employ skilled migrants, and charged immigrants a higher premium for using the National Health Service (in effect taxing them twice, since immigrant workers pay income tax). Care workers were barred from bringing dependants. The

amount of money that people must earn in order to bring a foreign spouse to Britain jumped by 55%.

The squeeze has continued under Labour. Salary thresholds rose again in 2025. Long-term work visas are normally given only to people whose work is deemed to be highly skilled. In December 2025 the fee that companies must pay the government to employ them was raised by a third, to £1,320 per year. Language requirements have been tightened. Foreign students are still allowed to work in Britain after graduating, but from next January the sojourn will be cut from two years to 18 months.

Out of control

Meanwhile the Home Office is cracking down on employers. Some 124,000 have licences to sponsor skilled workers from overseas. In the past year the government has revoked 4,369 licences, more than it had cancelled in the previous eight years put together. It boasts of cracking down on unscrupulous firms, but hits honest ones too. Chetal Patel of Bates Wells, a legal firm, says that companies are pulled up for small infractions such as not disclosing that foreign workers are on maternity leave, which can look to the government like salaries are falling below the thresholds it has set.

If ordinary people have not yet noticed the squeeze, businesses have. Jarmila Entezari at imd Solicitors observes that fewer companies are applying for licences to sponsor migrant workers. “It’s really costly to sponsor anyone,” she says. She is busy anyway, thanks to a rise in inquiries from companies that have been threatened with the removal of their licences.

From an economic point of view, restricting immigration to the highly skilled and highly paid seems wise. It is better than carving out exemptions for industries that claim they cannot survive without immigrants—something that just encourages lobbying. Yet the government’s approach is odd. Because it applies job-specific salary thresholds as well as a general one, a marketing director who has been offered a job at £87,000 a year might be barred from working in Britain, whereas a sports scientist might get in with a salary of £42,000.

The government’s attempt to filter for highly desirable immigrants is not working in practice. As expected, the number of visas given to care workers has plunged. But the number of visas given to it professionals has also fallen, from about 28,000 in 2022 to

10,000 last year. Some skilled workers might be falling short of higher salary and language bars. Or they might have ears. Sir Keir Starmer, the prime minister, has complained that too many visas are being given to engineers.

The many African and Asian immigrants who have arrived in Britain since the early 2020s are routinely called unskilled and unproductive. Sir Keir argued last year that some industries had become “almost addicted to importing cheap labour”. “We have never, in the history of this country, had so much low-skilled migration in so little time,” the home secretary, Shabana Mahmood, added in March.

Not all migrants are cheap or low-skilled, though. Regardless of whether he or she arrived with a work visa or by other means, the average India-born employee in Britain earns £32,400 a year, whereas the average Nigeria-born employee earns £34,000. British-born people lag behind both, with average earnings of £30,900. Although not all migrants work, the adults among them are slightly more likely to work than adult natives.



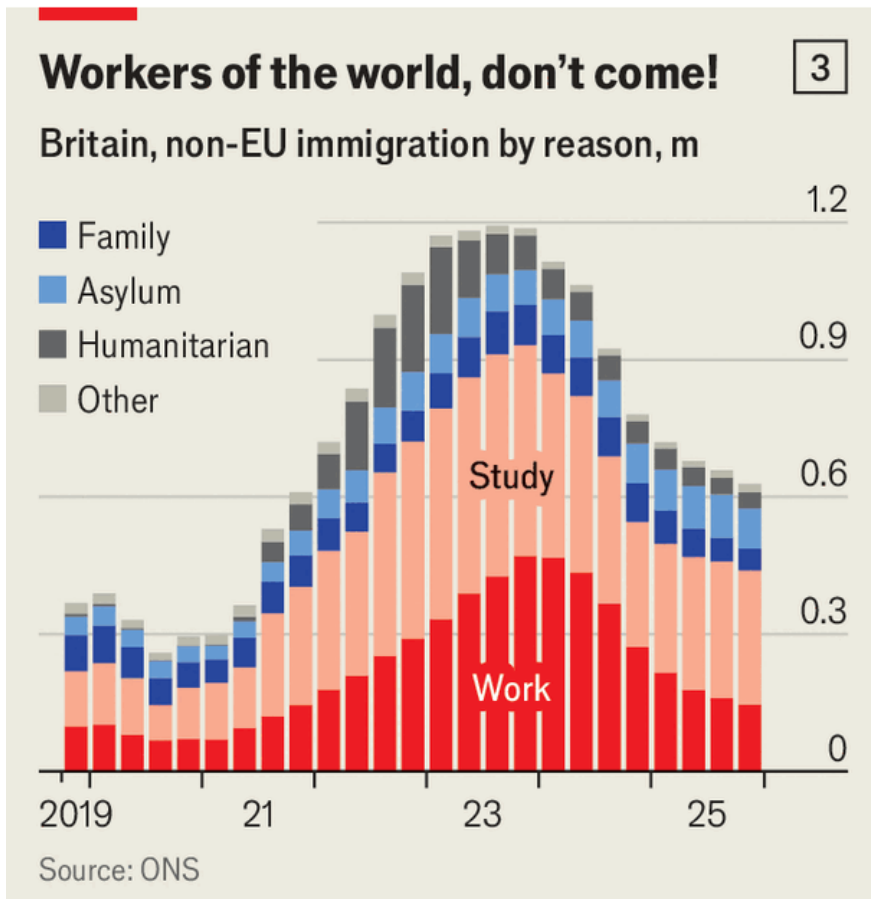
The Migration Observatory, a think-tank, has shown that people who arrive from outside the EU often earn little at first. Yet the wages of recent migrants have quickly exceeded the national average (see chart 2). The rise could be caused partly by low

earners, such as foreign students who wait tables in the evenings, leaving the country earlier than others. It could also reflect rapid progress among migrants, who are often a determined lot. Mr Ibtehsam, who arrived in Britain from Pakistan, began as a delivery driver and warehouse worker. He now employs 77 people.

The government's latest scheme to cut net migration involves making permanent residence, and thus citizenship, harder to obtain. The Home Office is considering changes that would lengthen the standard qualifying period from five to ten years. Low earners would have to wait far longer. It might not come to pass. Labour figures including Angela Rayner, a formidable mp from the left of the party, have called the proposals "un-British" because they would affect people already in the country.

Not just a numbers game

Migrants having to linger in an extended legal purgatory can look attractive to the Treasury because they and their employers must keep paying fees and health surcharges, while they remain ineligible for benefits. But they also remain bound to specific employers, which almost certainly makes them less productive. Preventing workers from changing jobs is as bad for migrants as it is for everyone else.



Citizenship has repeatedly been shown to benefit people economically—which is rather surprising, because it confers few economic rights over permanent residency. One study of the Netherlands by Floris Peters, Maarten Vink and Hans Schmeets not only estimated that naturalisation boosts employment rates by 12% among men and 13% among women. It also found that migrants moved more rapidly into work in the run-up to citizenship.

Successive governments have succeeded in making Britain less attractive to immigrants. Unfortunately, they may also have made the immigrants who arrive less attractive to Britons. As the number of migrant workers has collapsed, asylum-seekers have become a bigger part of the mix (see chart 3). The proposed changes to settlement and citizenship could make those who still arrive for work less successful, and thus less appealing. Numbers aren't everything.