

The pace of migration

When income per head is \$63,543 in the USA, around \$40,000 in the richer European countries and under \$6,000 a head in poorer countries it is no wonder that many people want to be economic migrants. The USA is the most popular destination for migrants, followed by Germany, Saudi Arabia and the UK. Millions of Indians, Mexicans, Syrians, Bangladeshis and others have made the often arduous journeys to new lands in search of a better life.

These strong patterns of economic migration have been reinforced by waves of migration as people flee authoritarian regimes, civil wars and individual threats to their lives. The West struggles to distinguish between economic migrants and refugees fleeing genuine threats of persecution and violence. The difference is fundamental to policy, as the need of the refugee is greater than that of the economic migrant, and the numbers should be much smaller and more manageable .

There are three broad views over how we should react and respond to these impulses. One group including Labour and the Lib Dems thinks the west should be even more welcoming of any kind of migrant. It is to them our duty to be generous and kind. One group thinks it best to concentrate our policy efforts on aid and trade to try to create better circumstances in the poorer countries so people there can seize more opportunities and enjoy some hope of a better future. Our generosity should be limited to defined groups and individuals who face persecution, with the west sharing the responsibility by taking manageable numbers of people from crisis areas. Some targeted economic migration should be allowed where we need the people and skills concerned. A third group thinks we take too many migrants with stresses on our housing and public service provision and wishes to see numbers reduced in the best way possible.

The UK debate has not been helped by poor and misleading official statistics. The argument was intensified by the arrival of a large number of people under EU freedom of movement rules. The official figures told us EU migration was lower than non EU migration, and the Blair government gave a very low figure for eastern European migration which was soon proved to be massively wrong. More recently the ONS has apologised for the large errors and produced new figures showing EU migration did run consistently at higher levels than non EU migration over the last decade, that EU migration was under recorded and non EU migration was overstated. The revised figures are still problematic as they do not include children and have to be adjusted for students that do not also get some part time work. The dodgy numbers have led opponents of the current pace of migration to think this was more than an embarrassing error.

Many countries in Europe, the Middle East and the Americas have put up border walls and fences to try to stem the flows of economic migrants. Some countries like Turkey and Pakistan shelter large number of migrants from broken states near their borders. International aid is often directed to camps established near to a country people have left in the hope that some order can be restored and they can in due course make their way back to their homeland.

The UK according to the latest revised figures was welcoming at least 300,000 additional people every year up to 2018. In 2015 and 2016 EU net migration hit 282,000 a year with another around 100,000 from non EU. These numbers of non EU migrants are a small proportion of those who would like to come, but they are large numbers when it comes to finding new homes, school places, doctors surgeries and transport capacity so they can enjoy a decent lifestyle. Given the magnitude of the problem and the persistence of low incomes in too many populous countries in the world, more of the answer must lie with helping those countries to succeed rather than with helping drain them of talent by fostering more migration.

The UK now has more control over how many people to welcome. With a new borders Bill going through the Commons the government should be able to be more precise over how many each year it wishes to help and accommodate. What would you like to see them do? I think the totals of economic migrants in recent years have been too high.