

Year in a Word: Migration

By Professor Alex de Ruyter, Director, Centre for Brexit Studies.

As we approach the end (of the year), I also considered what the word that came to mind most when one mentioned Brexit. For me this word was “migration”. As a migrant to this country myself, the issue clearly has some traction to me.

Indeed, it was the overarching theme of the 2016 referendum and when Leave campaigners spoke of “taking back control” this was the context that they emphasised. Indeed, PM Theresa May has endeavoured to stress the element of “taking back control of our borders” and “setting our own immigration policy” – a stance which is consistent with her time at the Home Office and the “hostile environment” migration policy she enacted. As such, this is set to feature prominently with the upcoming release of the Government’s White Paper on post-Brexit migration policy.

The White Paper is expected to more-or-less adopt the recommendations of the Migration Advisory Committee’s report into the matter, released in September of this year. For Theresa May this is coterminous with ending Freedom of Movement for EU nationals, so as to pursue a migration policy that does not depend upon whether you come from an EU country or not. Also expected to feature is a consultation over whether those who wish to settle in the UK will have to earn at least £30,000 in their job in order to qualify for permanent residency after 5 years.

For the PM, such measures should serve to encourage UK-based businesses to train up “British workers” instead of having recourse to immigrant labour. Notable however, is that no mention has been made of reducing net migration to below 100,000 p.a., which was an element of the 2017 Conservative Party election Manifesto.

Suffice to say, some things need to be said about the proposed approach to migration policy post-Brexit. First, is that contra to the PMs oft-repeated mantra of a “deal” (the other over-used word this year – see David Hearne’s blog on the topic [here](#)) allowing the UK to set its own migration policy, the Withdrawal Agreement with the EU

will commit the UK to a minimum of 21 months transition period (and possibly an unspecified extension – most likely to the end of 2022) where the status quo ante of continued free movement of EU nationals (with settlement rights after 5 years) will continue to apply.

Beyond this, whether the UK does end up ending Freedom of Movement will depend upon whether it ultimately wishes to stay in the Single Market (or not). EU negotiators have been consistent in regards to the UK not being able to “cherry-pick” bits of the Single Market that it likes and excluding others. These issues will remain pivotal to the negotiation of any new trade relationship post-Brexit (assuming that the UK doesn’t end up with “no deal”).

Given the deep integration of our manufacturing supply chains into Europe, the loss of frictionless trade guaranteed by membership of the Single Market may yet prove a price that the UK is unable to pay in order for Mrs May to pursue her controlled migration dream.

We should also note that migrants make a net financial contribution to the UK, paying in more than they take in the form of benefits. The UK is also an ageing society, and excluding migrants from low-paid occupations will exacerbate shortages in key sectors such as elderly care. Even skilled jobs such as nursing and teaching have starting salaries below the purported threshold of £30,000 p.a. and clamping down here will only exacerbate the recruitment difficulties experienced by the NHS for example.

Finally, we should note that a net migration target of less than 100,000 p.a. would only be possible if international students who come to study in the UK (and are treated as “migrants” for statistics purposes) were excluded from the figures (in 2017 alone some 196,000 EU/international students arrived to study in the UK during this period).[\[1\]](#) Unless the Government is seriously considering reducing these numbers and hence threatening the viability of one of the UK’s most successful “export” industries in the form of Higher Education.

Whilst the prospect of “training up” UK nationals to address skills gaps in the current climate should be welcomed, this would need to be resourced properly (ideally at regional level), and given the dearth of STEM graduates would take a good ten years to reach fruition if

increased investment in provision in secondary schools were to commence now.

In short, despite the rhetoric of controlling migration and securing our borders, the UK will continue to have significant need of migrants for the foreseeable future, and whatever Brexit outcome we end up with will not change that.