

Brexit Down, Migration Up

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One of the pitfalls of being a Brexit columnist is to be caught in an ever-rising crescendo of I told you so's. It's tempting but self-defeating, as there are so many other strands of magical-thinking to pluck at. The same type of having your cake and eat it populism that was behind Brexit is still now deployed on issues such as migration: the make-believe idea that we can reduce the number of migrants, whether in the UK or Europe, while at the same time adhering to all human rights agreements and growing our economies.

But back to Brexit for a moment, it cannot be ignored. Especially writing on this third anniversary of the UK striking out on its own towards its 'bright future' of 'sovereignty and independence', with increasing Brexit benefits promised from month to month. While the reality is now as we know it, the only major economy still not recovered from the pandemic and the only one for now facing a contraction in 2023. It's easy to gloat.

But that would be churlish. Who knows how the British economy will develop in the long run? If, in ten years' time, as is entirely plausible, the UK is once more cock-a-hoop about its growth rates, then surely Brexiteers will claim that as the natural outcome of all their predictions. And why not? They might now point at the US, once more the fastest growing western economy, with its freewheeling ways and minimal protection for workers and vulnerable groups.

The transformation from a European-type semi-welfare state to an even more capitalist-red-in-tooth-and-claw system can indeed take years. But at the moment it seems that there is no reason to think that the forces that drove Brexit, i.e. speculators, populists and opportunists, will not achieve their desired goal. The mask was ripped away by the Truss-Kwarteng shuffle and Sunak is only at pains to re-establish Tory 'integrity' because it's too soon to show voters the real face of Brexit Britain: a mini-US not being able to maintain even the level of welfare that their big example across the pond provides because it just doesn't have the economic wherewithal.

It's not as if an election is going to make any difference to that trajectory. Labour under Keir Starmer has all but fallen into line with this seemingly pre-ordained plan. The Labour leader appears more concerned with rooting out the Corbynite Left in his own party than with providing a credible alternative to the Brexit crowd. "Take back control" is actively leaning into the Brexit curve, rather than steering out of it. Labour is understandably focused on winning the next election but Starmer can argue that his line is playing well with the public, for now. But especially his anti-migration rhetoric, framed as intended to stamp out "cheap labour" veers dangerously towards the same populist territory claimed by the Brexiteers.

Migration remains the central case for Brexit, with the Conservative government at the time pledging to limit it to under 100,000 net arrivals per year. But last year broke all-time records, with more than half a million net arrivals, spurred admittedly by 'world events' such as the war in Ukraine and Afghanistan and Hong Kong 'resettlement' schemes. All this combined with the pent-up backlog of lockdown could explain most of it. But there's an obvious shift that is worth mentioning: Instead of the once ubiquitous East-European baristas and medical personnel, current arrivals are in large part well-paying Chinese and Indian students at the UK's institutions of higher education. Knuckling down at universities around the country, they are less visible and less of an issue to most voters, especially in former red wall constituencies. But this is merely a sleight of hand and it redirects the benefits of migration from one sector of the economy and society to another. Similarly, illegal arrivals, for example by the infamous 'small-boat crossing' across the Channel, have soared by some 60 percent

in 2022, to close to 50,000. This in spite of an increase in hostile environment type schemes such as the attempted deportations to Rwanda and chaos at arrival centres.

The UK is not the only country struggling with illegal migration. But it is by and large the only European country to still have an issue with legal arrivals. Ructions some ten years ago in some of the more westerly EU countries over the arrival of Eastern European migrants have largely died down. Shortages on the labour markets now trump concerns over newcomers taking away jobs and homes in most countries. Tensions, if there were any, have mostly ebbed and both COVID and the war in Ukraine have possibly created a new sense of everybody being in it together. The ire of the right-wing of politics in most EU country is now mainly aimed at two groups: asylum seekers, to which the Channel crossers also often belong, and mainly Muslim groups of migrant workers or former colonial subjects who mostly arrived decades ago, along with their descendants.

The integration of the latter is still not going swimmingly in a range of countries, with many of them being relegated to the lowest rungs of the economy and society due to a range of factors that include prejudice and racism in the dominant societies. But they are citizens of the countries they live in and as such any right-wing agitation is just that, meant mostly to stir up emotions and mobilise voters. It's the asylum seekers and new arrivals who cause most outrage even though their numbers across Europe as in the UK, are much smaller. They bear the brunt of push backs, dehumanising conditions in reception centres and ideas for draconian deportation schemes.

The persistence and manner of all forms of migration, legal, illegal as well as legitimate asylum seekers, together with the nasty counter measures on display, makes clear that an honest conversation needs to be had about this around the world. The kind of magical thinking and the having your cake and eat it attitude that brought about Brexit is actively damaging in this context. Whether we welcome or oppose migration, it is a fact of life, stopping it is impossible, even with draconian measures that have no place in European society, and in any case, halting it is most likely undesirable. It is time that the world had an honest conversation about this.