History of Immigration and Border Controls
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Public debate on immigration lurches from one moment to the next. There is scant recognition that the present is the outcome of a process that extends back in time beyond the day before yesterday.

In 2014 13 per cent of the resident population of the UK was born abroad. This figure is unprecedentedly high: a century ago it stood at just 1 per cent. Even in the middle of the twentieth century the 2 percent of the population had not been born in the UK.   Yet if the total number and percentage of immigrants in the country is at a new high, the rate of change is not. Between 1951 and 1971 the proportion of the population made up of immigrants more than doubled, just as it did between 1991 and 2011. It is easy enough to suggest a connection between this rapid rate of change and the flurry of administrative and legislative measures designed to control immigration in the 1960s, culminating in the swingeing 1971 Immigration Act, and the parade of immigration bills that have received the royal assent in the last twenty years.

Numbers do not tell their own story, however. They take on meanings as we place them within narratives. Politicians and the press address immigration not only as an issue in its own right but also as a metonym for a wider set of unwelcome or discomfiting changes. In recent years unwanted immigration and the nation's apparent incapacity to police its borders effectively have been presented not only as practical concerns but also encapsulate diminished national sovereignty, alienation from the political system and the malign impact of globalization.

In understanding this development the processes of structural, institutional and cultural change are undeniably significant. However, we should also attend to the history of policy. Exclusive focus on the recent past can suggest an earlier period during which immigration was under control and the nation's borders were policed effectively, or effectively enough. The idea that there was a time when immigration policy worked as its architects intended is seriously misleading. Although we can safely say that the rate of immigration to the United Kingdom would have been higher had there been no legislation to prevent it, judged by the goals of its proponents the results of legislation have been disappointing. The 1971 Immigration Act was supposed to introduce an era of zero-immigration. Yet from 1964 to 1994 the flow of long-term international migrants to the UK proceeded at a broadly constant level, fluctuating below 200,000 per annum in the 1970s and above it in the following decade but always returning to that figure.[1] It is not surprising, therefore, in view of the expectations that had been held before them in 1971, that the majority of the British public continued to believe the rate of immigration was too high or that there were too many immigrants in the country.[2] Addressing this well of opinion, in 1978 Margaret Thatcher famously remarked 'that people are rather afraid that this country might be rather swamped by people with a different culture.' According to the future Prime Minister, 'we must hold out the clear prospect of an end to

[1] http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/research/briefing-papers/SN06077/migration-statistics:
These figures are for the flow of immigrants not for the stock at any one moment.
[2] Scott, Blinder, 'UK Public Opinion toward Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern', Migration Observatory Briefing, COMPAS, University of Oxford, July 2014

immigration.'[3] But despite new legislation, Conservative governments during in the 1980s and 1990s drifted ever further from realising this goal.

In the face of calls for tougher measures against immigration, articulated not only by UKIP but also by the coalition government and the Labour Party, we should consider why immigration policy has such a poor record. In part, this has been a matter of financial constraint and technological incapacity. In 1994 the Conservative government abolished exits controls on 40 per cent of travellers leaving the country. The remaining controls were removed by Labour in 1998. The justification was economic: the checks on outgoing passengers were not cost effective. However, the upshot was that the state could not keep track of who was in the country and who was not. It became easier for legal migrants whose visa had expired to overstay and for those whose applications for asylum had been refused to slip into an undocumented nether world. In 2005 the Labour government announced its intention to introduce an electronic - eBorder - system to keep track of departures. The project was taken over by the coalition government but its implementation remains nowhere in sight.

The reasons for weak immigration control are also normative. There are some things governments have not been prepared to do, values they have unwilling to transgress (or have been prepared to transgress only up to a point) and political costs they have been unwilling to bear, in order to restrict and regulate immigration. If we look at the recent past we can point to the failure to introduce identity cards and to the obligations created by membership of the EU. These compromises and contradictions have a long history. The 1971 Immigration Act did not introduce a new age of 'zero immigration' because settlement continued as part of processes of family reunification. In other words, commitment to the family as a fundamental social unit compromised the desire to control immigration. Moreover in 1985 these exemptions were radically extended when the European Court of Human Rights ruled that the right of husbands to bring in wives was discriminatory if wives were not also allowed to bring in husbands. This opening was utilised not only by first generation immigrants but also by their children born in the UK: immigration became part of family formation as well as family reunification. Other normative influences have also been at work, not least the moral and legal claims of refugees. In 1972 the UK accepted 27,000 Ugandans of Asian descent even though most had no legal right to enter the UK. The fact that they were British passport holders and were about to become stateless over-rode the terms of the immigration act that had passed into law only a year earlier. Indeed refugees and 'asylum seekers' dominated the immigration debate in the decade before EU enlargement. Moral and legal obligations alongside the state's powerlessness to remove more than a small minority of applicants, whose claims for asylum or leave to remain had been refused, all conspired to mock the tough-talk that characterised ministerial statements.

Ever since the Labour Party abandoned its opposition to the 1962 Commonwealth Immigrants Act, the electorate has been told that immigration restriction is not only desirable but also possible. In face of this unanimity, the failure of successive laws and administrative measures to stem the flow of immigrants contributes to a political dynamic. In the face of the unpopularity of immigration, unlike in the 1960s and 1970s the main political parties now compete to satisfy voters and so reinforce the legitimacy of anti-immigrant sentiment. Yet successive governments have neither willed the means nor been open about the obstacles in their way to attaining this goal. Disappointing results generate

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[3] http://www.margaretthatcher.org/document/103485

disillusion with the political system and the ground on which UKIP has prospered. The parties respond by further competing over immigration policy. And so the spiral continues.