



Immigration under New Labour

Will Somerville

Preface: The Blair Years

In less than a decade, Britain has reinvented itself completely in terms of how it understands immigration's economic value to the country and, hence, how the government relates to the issue. As a result, from one of the many European laggards on immigration thinking and action – plodding, uncertain, backward-looking, and investing scarce administrative and political resources in micro-managing processes expressly intended to minimise immigration – the Blair government turned Britain into a veritable hotbed of policy innovation, extraordinary activism and a commitment to growth through immigration. The transformation has been massive, relentless and completely transparent – and hence available for everyone to agonise over, criticise and witness the bureaucratic struggles endemic to managing an activist immigration policy.

As a result, Britain today stands head and shoulders above the rest of Europe in how it conceives of immigration and its value to the country. It remains the only European country with a well-developed and flexibly administered points system and is a key magnet for international students. However, even the occasional review of the British media points to the strong and growing reaction to immigrants, the focal point of which has been the volume of immigration. With levels of net immigration nearly quadrupling under New Labour, a trend also reflected across Europe but mostly at sharply lower growth rates, the economic benefits of migration may be threatened by deep social and cultural unease.

Immigration under New Labour covers a decade of migration policy making in Britain. By the time it 'hits the shelves', Prime Minister Tony Blair will have left office, making the book the definitive statement on Mr Blair's immigration revolution. Indeed, an apt description of the book might be 'Immigration: the Blair years', as it covers the period from May 1997 to May 2007.

The book serves several purposes and will be useful to four main audiences. First, for the student of migration, whether serious or casual, the book is an excellent primer on British migration policy, providing a brief historical introduction and illuminating some of the key trends in migration policy under 'New Labour'. Second, the volume will be a useful reference book for scholars interested in contemporary migration. Britain under Blair has seemingly made policy experimentation on immigration both the highest form of art and a serious science. It has been unafraid to borrow concepts from other countries, adapt them to British policy priorities and objectives, apply them with nothing short of policy 'gusto', evaluate them closely, and change them, again and again, on the basis of evaluation results and experience. Will Somerville's

volume is the first book-length work to document this activism in a meaningful fashion.

The key point of the book, and one that has been painstakingly researched, is that there has been radical fundamental change in British migration policy in a decade. The development of economic migration, a more restrictive approach to asylum seekers, a set of new integration tools and an emphasis on security are recorded in detail. Institutional changes – all the way up to the new Border and Immigration Agency – are also covered. While preparing a work of what amounts to contemporary history cannot properly evaluate the effects of policy change, the extent of change is undeniable, and Will Somerville documents it thoroughly.

But the book is more than a reference tool. It also questions some of the fundamental tenets of the more pedestrian accounts of migration policy development in Britain. Specifically, *Immigration under New Labour* seeks to explore, albeit in rather tentative ways, how British immigration policy has been formulated in the more fragmented policy environment of the modern state. The book examines and attempts to marry the internal political factors, such as the networks of influences, with external factors, such as globalisation, that have led to changes in British economic migration policy. Similarly, it examines how Blair and the electorate have influenced asylum policy. Thus the book will also be of value to migration scholars who are theorising the dynamics of migration policy development.

The fourth audience for *Immigration under New Labour* is straightforward policy analysts. The final part evaluates migration policy using the government's own targets (so-called Public Sector Agreement targets, introduced by Labour to move attention to outcomes). In doing so, it reveals the gap between aspiration and reality as well as the progress that has been made. Most importantly, it points to the important finding that British policies and strategies are increasingly pro-active rather than simply reactions to events.

Will Somerville has had the 'perfect' vantage point to write this book. His varied career has encompassed the think tanks ippr and the Migration Policy Institute, the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit under Tony Blair, and the Commission for Racial Equality when it was chaired by Trevor Phillips. As a result, he has been able to meld an insider's perspective with that of an outsider, and he has done so in a fluid and highly readable way. *Immigration under New Labour* will be worthy reading for anyone interested in migration, regardless of their specialisation or country of interest.

Demetrios G. Papademetriou, PhD
President, Migration Policy Institute
14 May 2007