

Seven million immigrants can't be good for Britain

The Government has not considered how to fit enough new arrivals to create a city the size of London into the already over-crowded South East, says Alasdair Palmer.

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The UN predicted last week that the population of Britain would rise to 72 million by 2050. Actually, the increase will probably happen faster than that. According to the Government's own figures, Britain's population will reach 71 million not in 40 years, but in just over 20: its forecast is that we will get there in 2031, because it thinks the number of immigrants who will arrive here is going to be higher than the UN's prediction.

The rise will be almost entirely the result of immigration. If there were to be no immigration at all into Britain, the population would hover around its present figure of 61 million. But the Government predicts that net migration into Britain (that is, the total of those coming in minus the total number of people emigrating) will be around 190,000 a year for the foreseeable future.

The consequential population increase, which may be as high as 10 million, is enormously significant. It represents adding a city bigger than London (the population of which is now about seven and a half million). England, with a population density of 395 people per square kilometre, is already the most crowded country in Europe: we are packed more densely than the Dutch in Holland. There are nearly three times as many of us squashed into every square kilometre here as there are in every square kilometre of France.

Most of the new immigrants will gravitate towards the South East, because that's where the jobs and the money are. Suppose seven million migrants end up in the South: the existing infrastructure will have to be drastically overhauled. Already, there are acute shortages of housing, of school places and of doctors. Seven million extra people will mean several million more cars driving on roads which are already permanently congested. The provision even of such basics as water will have to be completely rethought.

Has the Government a plan for dealing with any of this? It has not. It has not seriously considered what needs to be done to supply an extra seven million people with the necessities of modern life, still less contemplated the impact it will have on the environment. The Government's only response has been to dismantle planning restrictions in order to allow private companies to build houses on every available piece of land, including public green spaces such as parks.

And yet the increase in population will be entirely the result of Labour's policy of encouraging immigration at historically unprecedented levels. In 1997, Labour abolished the "Primary Purpose Rule", which required immigrants to show that "marriage was not entered into primarily to obtain admission to the UK". Immigration by spouses increased by 50 per cent as a consequence, so that more than 40,000 arrived last year. Labour has also trebled the number of work permits granted since 1997: nearly 140,000 were issued in 2008, compared with around 47,000 in 1997. Whether deliberately or not, Labour also lost control of the asylum system after 1998, so that between 1999 and 2000 asylum seekers were, at over 80,000 a year, the largest category of immigrants to the UK.

The number of asylum seekers has now dropped to not much more than 20,000 a year. But net immigration is going to remain extremely high, in spite of the economic recession, for the simple reason that life in the UK is a hell of a lot better than it is in most developing countries. Relative stability, freedom from arbitrary violence and predatory government are as important as free education, medical care and benefits for your family if you are out of work. It makes life here far better than anything that could be reasonably expected in most developing countries. That is why the number of people who will do everything they can to ensure that they can immigrate to this country will remain very high.

Should we turn them away? There is a moral case for high levels of immigration, based on the view that we have an obligation to share our wealth with the less well-off, wherever they come from. That, however, is not the case for mass immigration that Labour has put to the electorate, perhaps because it is aware that not many people are persuaded by it. Labour's argument has been couched entirely in terms of economic self-interest – and that case is almost totally spurious.

Were either main party to propose bringing back serious and effective restrictions on immigration, they would gain significant electoral support, and not just from the white working class. Some of the strongest supporters of reducing immigration are recent immigrants, for they suffer most from the competition of newer arrivals who are willing to work for even less in even harsher conditions. The consensus among the *bien pensants* that immigration is an unalloyed benefit has been so strong for so long that it will take a great deal of political courage from either Labour or the Conservatives to oppose it. But does anyone seriously think that squashing in an extra seven million people over the next 20 years is going to make this country a better place in which to live?