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**UK Immigration and Trade Policy Under
Starmer's Labour Party: Moving to Battle
Reform on its own Turf**

By

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Executive Summary

- ✦ As the UK seeks to reset its relationship with the EU post-Brexit and address rising right-wing populism, Labour has moved rightward in its approach to immigration and is pursuing a pragmatic trade deal with significant potential economic benefits. These seismic policy shifts are a direct response to mounting electoral pressures, with the aim of winning back working-class and Conservative-leaning voters who feel left behind by the status quo. The outcome of this strategy will have significant implications for Labour's political future, the UK's economic stability, and the broader Western political landscape.

Immigration Policy Shift

- ✦ Labour's rightward shift on immigration includes stricter work visa thresholds, longer residency requirements for settlement, and enhanced enforcement measures. These policies reflect Starmer's strategic response to the surge of right-wing populism, notably from Reform UK, and aim to appease a growing segment of the electorate concerned about immigration's impact on jobs, housing, and public services. While the uncharacteristic crackdown may stymie the rise of the Right, it also risks alienating Labour's progressive base.

The UK-EU Trade Deal

- ✦ While not reversing Brexit, the deal, signed in May 2025, seeks to address some of its economic drawbacks by reducing trade barriers in key sectors such as agrifood, fisheries, and defence. It represents a strategic reset in UK-EU relations, and is expected to provide significant economic benefits, particularly in industries most affected by Brexit. The agreement is a carefully negotiated step forward which evades the political hazards of reopening divisive debates on EU membership. This is a political win for Starmer, positioning Labour, ironically, as the party which can make Brexit work.

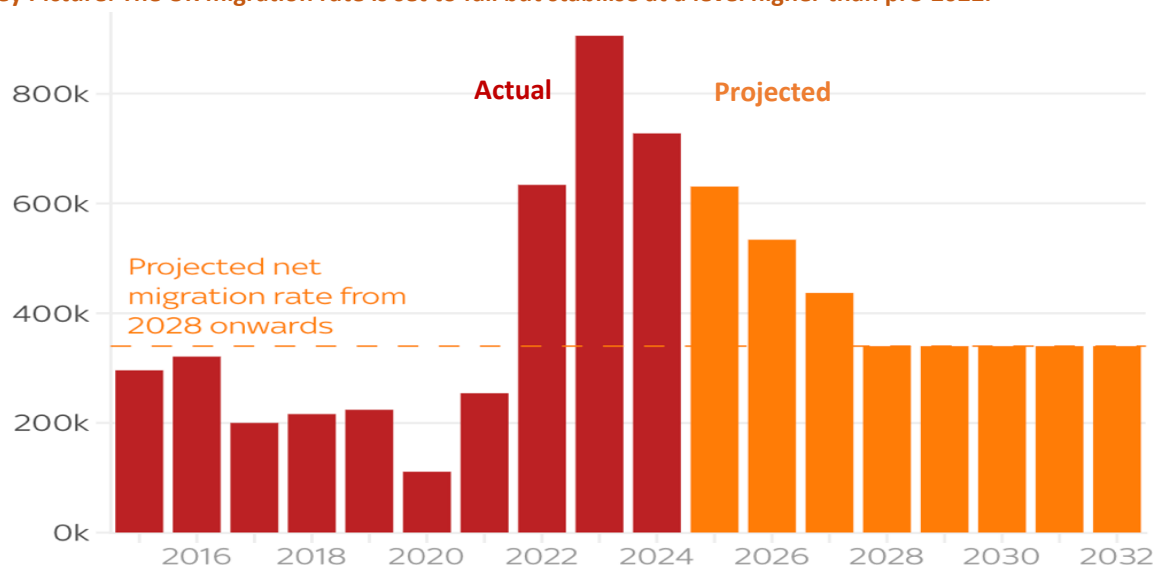
Political Implications

- ✦ The immigration policies and the UK-EU trade deal reflect Starmer's pragmatic and stability-oriented approach to governance after a long period of tumult in British politics. Domestically, Starmer faces mixed reactions, but internationally, his approach has been well received

Broader Context

- ✦ Starmer's policy shift is part of a broader trend where moderate parties are strategically recalibrating their positions on hot-button issues to counter rising far-right populism. The approach mimics that of both the centre-left and centre-right in EU countries such as Germany and Denmark.

Key Picture: The UK migration rate is set to fall but stabilise at a level higher than pre-2022.



Source: [ONS on Sky News \(January 2025\)](#) Note: Mid-year net migration.

1 Hardening Immigration Stance: Policies and Motivations

1.1 The White Paper.

In May 2025, the Labour government unveiled a sweeping White Paper outlining an immigration policy which was a striking departure in both tone and substance from the party's traditional platform. "Restoring Control over the Immigration System" heavily promotes Prime Minister Kier Starmer's own talking points and reads as a strategic communications document, rather than a recitation of policy. In his forward, Starmer writes that "under the previous government, inward migration exploded to over a million people a year," and that his predecessors had turned Britain into "a one-nation experiment in open borders."¹ Yet the Conservative government which preceded him is not Starmer's real political target.

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Both Labour and the Conservative party (also known as Tories) have been dropping steadily in the polls since November 2024, while Reform UK has been on a continuous rise since Starmer took office in July of the same year, and has surpassed Labour to become the most popular party in the UK.² At the same time, Kier Starmer's own popularity has plummeted, with the most recent polls showing disapproval rates of approximately 70%.³

Now, Starmer is looking to tighten every major area of the immigration system – work, study, family, and asylum. The series of restrictive measures includes sharply raising the skill and salary thresholds for work visas and ending most low-skill routes. Industries which traditionally rely on medium-skilled foreign workers will only get time-limited visas in genuine shortage areas – and even then must show efforts to recruit and train British staff. The government plans to phase out overseas recruitment for care workers entirely, a bold move given the estimated 150,000 vacancies in the sector.⁴

Similarly, international students – who contribute an estimated £20 billion per year to the UK economy⁵ – are also targeted. Citing concerns around students which come to low-ranked colleges and then overstay, the White Paper tightens compliance rules on education providers and may restrict visas for short-term language courses. More generally, language tests for visas and extensions will be made more rigorous across the board. Family migration will now face stricter English language requirements: all adult dependants of workers or students must demonstrate basic English and improve over time.

In a particularly significant change, the path to settlement (indefinite leave to remain) will double in length. Migrants will now need 10 years' residence, up from 5, before they can settle permanently, creating one of the highest bars to permanent residence in the developed world. These rules aim to ensure integration and reduce abuse of student and family routes, though immigrant advocates worry they will be onerous for legitimate applicants.

Meanwhile, the government has stepped up enforcement and deportations.⁶ Currently, only those jailed for over a year are eligible for deportation, but under the new plan any criminal offense by a visa holder – even if minor – could trigger removal. Additionally, the government is now considering offshore "return hubs," in the Western Balkans,⁷ notably Kosovo,⁸ for deporting refused asylum seekers, echoing Australia's tactics.

1.2 Political Drivers.

The domestic political calculus behind this hard line is clear. Throughout the White Paper, the previous Tory stance is lambasted, and immigration becomes a catch-all culprit for issues such as strained public services. With Nigel Farage's Reform UK ascendant in the polls on the back of anti-immigrant sentiment, Labour is determined to win back working-class voters who fear wage competition and to neutralize a potent attack line from the party which is now arguably its main opposition.⁹

In a stroke of irony, it also seeks to deliver on the Brexit promise to "take back control"¹⁰ of the UK's borders. Recent local elections underscored the stakes: Farage's radical-right Reform party won 677 council seats and even flipped former Labour heartlands, while Labour suffered shocking losses.¹¹ Starmer noted that Reform offers "easy solutions" to frustrated voters, and vowed Labour "will go further and faster" to address public concerns in response.¹²

Starmer's own base is divided on the policy shift: business leaders and metropolitan voters generally favor a pragmatic approach welcoming skills and students, whereas ex-industrial towns demand stricter limits. Already, the language of an "island of strangers" has upset pro-immigration liberals, including many traditional Labour supporters.¹³ Some progressive voices caution that by echoing far-right talking points, Labour risks legitimizing anti-immigrant sentiment rather than quelling it.¹⁴ Furthermore, the sincerity of Labour's belief in the policy necessity of this gambit is questionable; early indicators suggest net migration has already nearly halved over the past year.¹⁵ It will likely take many more years to reveal whether this policy manages to deliver on its myriad promised benefits, or simply trades one set of challenges for another.

1.3 Socioeconomic Impacts.

Labour argues that curbing low-skilled migration will push employers to train UK workers and raise productivity. The government points to Britain's 1.5 million unemployed and 9 million economically inactive citizens as a talent pool that could fill jobs if given proper skills – an issue which was directly addressed in its November 2024 White Paper on the workforce.¹⁶ For example, by choking off the supply of cheap overseas care workers, ministers hope to force a long-delayed reckoning in the social care sector – raising wages and improving conditions to attract British staff into the tens of thousands of care vacancies. This could, in theory, improve labour standards and reduce exploitation. It is essentially a grand social experiment to test whether tighter immigration can jump-start domestic workforce participation in stagnant sectors.

The plan runs the obvious risk of short-term economic pain and skill gaps. Sectors like social care, hospitality, agriculture and parts of manufacturing depend heavily on migrant labour. An abrupt cut-off in work visas for roles below degree-level could exacerbate staff shortages and drive up costs for employers (and by extension, consumers). The NHS and elder care might suffer if Britons do not swiftly fill the gap to staff care homes. Likewise, tighter student and post-study visa rules could hit universities, potentially impacting UK higher education's global competitiveness.

Sudden large swings in migration levels can create economic volatility, and fly in the face of Labour's previous approach,¹⁷ but the economic literature is unclear on the precise impacts of immigration of the type and volume which Britain has experienced.¹⁸ The socioeconomic impact of the new policies will ultimately depend on factors beyond Labour's control. On one hand, reducing inflows could ease pressure on housing, schools and the NHS, all of which have demonstrably struggled in recent years. Furthermore, if domestic workers step up to fill vacancies, low-end wages could rise, reducing inequality. On the other hand, while fewer people means less strain on some services, it also means fewer workers in growth sectors (given that migrants tend to be of working age) and possibly harm the government fiscally in the long-term.¹⁹

2. A New Chapter in UK-EU Relations: The 2025 Trade Deal

In Starmer's words, "Britain is back on the world stage."²⁰ Starmer's government has reached a wide-ranging "Common Understanding" with the European Union, billed as the most significant reset of UK–EU relations since Brexit.²¹ The agreement covers trade, agriculture, fisheries, defence, security, and mobility, and the government claims that it will offer tangible gains such as cheaper food and energy for British people. It does not reverse key elements of Brexit – the UK stays outside the EU single market and customs union – but it significantly aligns British regulations with EU standards in key sectors to remove trade frictions.

2.1 Mobility.

In a highly visible impact of the deal, the EU has signalled that British passport holders will be allowed to use EU e-gates at airports, cutting out the long "Rest of World" queues that Brits have endured since Brexit.²² Additionally, talks will begin on facilitating business travel and work visas, addressing corporate demands to ease mobility of professionals. While the UK stays outside the customs union – meaning customs declarations still apply – this deal goes as far as politically feasible to mend the Brexit rupture.

In a surprise to many, the reset even proposes a new youth mobility scheme which would allow limited numbers of young people to live, work, travel or study in each other's territories for a fixed period.²³ Starmer, mindful of domestic politics, insists any scheme will have "time limits, caps, and visa requirements" to avoid a backdoor to mass migration.²⁴ Additionally, the deal opens the door to the UK rejoining the Erasmus+ student exchange programme, which it exited in 2020.²⁵

2.2 Defence and Security.

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A cornerstone of the deal is a new UK–EU defence and security pact, underscoring the geopolitical rationale for rapprochement. The agreement lets the UK formally associate with the EU's "SAFE" defense procurement programme, a €150 bn fund to rearm Europe, meaning that British defense firms like BAE Systems and Rolls-Royce may become eligible to bid on joint projects to bolster European military capacity.²⁶ This not only opens significant industrial opportunities for the UK, but also cements Britain's role in European security apart from NATO. As von der Leyen noted, this defense integration is just a "first step" – further UK participation in EU defense initiatives is envisaged.²⁷

The pact also enhances intelligence and cyber cooperation, coordination on hybrid threats, and joint efforts on emergency response.²⁸ The UK will regain access to EU policing databases via Europol, retrieving real-time data on suspects, DNA, fingerprints, vehicle information and more. This is congruent with Starmer's new immigration policy, as by deepening information-sharing with EU countries on asylum seekers and smugglers, the UK is contributing to a continental effort to manage irregular migration flows.

2.3 Agrifood.

The centrepiece of the economic deal is an accord on sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) rules – essentially aligning food safety and animal health standards. Under the agreement, health and veterinary checks on agrifood products moving between the UK and EU will be removed or dramatically reduced. This means British exporters of meat, dairy, fish, produce and other farm goods will no longer face burdensome certification to sell into Europe, potentially reviving businesses which had withered in the aftermath of Brexit. It will also eliminate many border checks that had been required under the Northern Ireland Protocol.

On fisheries – one of Brexit's most emotive issues – Starmer made a major concession by extending EU fleets' access to British waters for 12 more years, essentially rolling over the quota sharing of the original Brexit deal.²⁹ In exchange, the EU agreed to permanently streamline export procedures for UK fish products and allow previously banned imports. This is critical for coastal communities: roughly 70% of seafood caught by UK fishers is sold in the EU. To address domestic concerns, Starmer announced a £360mn investment package for the UK fishing industry to modernize fleets and ports.³⁰ Nevertheless, the issue of fisheries has been a target for the opposition.

2.4 Energy and Chemicals.

The UK and EU will explore the UK re-joining the EU's electricity market and linking carbon emission trading systems, which could enhance energy security and potentially lower bills.³¹ The parties will also work toward deals on industrial standards, chemicals, and conformity assessments to avoid duplicate testing.³²

2.5 Impacts of the UK–EU Agreement.

The reset deal is almost certain to be a net positive economically, if only a partial remedy for Brexit's impact. The UK government estimates that by 2040 the agreement will add nearly £9 billion to the country's GDP (a roughly 0.3% increase).³³ This gain, though modest in percentage terms, is significant given the UK's sluggish growth since leaving the EU. Crucially, many of the benefits will be concentrated in the sectors hit hardest by Brexit: agri-food, fisheries, and small manufacturers.

Beyond direct trade effects, the deal could bolster investor confidence. Starmer hopes to signal that Britain is stable, pragmatic, and open for business. The government had already struck new trade agreements with

the U.S. and India in the same month, and the EU pact completes a trifecta which could cumulatively improve the UK's anaemic growth forecast (recently cut below 1%).³⁴ The inclusion of defence and energy cooperation may also yield long-term dividends.

3. Political Strategy

3.1 Domestic Political Calculus.

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While they may seem ideologically incoherent, electoral strategy explains both the hardline immigration stance and the EU trade deal. The rightward shift on immigration seeks to reassure socially conservative, working-class voters (especially in England's Midlands and North) that Labour will prevent undue competition for jobs and housing. Starmer is determined to prevent the UK from ending up like Germany, where mainstream parties lost ground to the far-right AfD due to voter anger over migration and other polarising issues.³⁵ His immigration crackdown is thus a pre-emptive strike to neutralize Reform's core issue.

The EU trade deal is a key issue for a different constituency: moderate pro-Europeans, businesses, and younger, urban voters who want pragmatic competence, not ideology. After years of Brexit-related instability, there is a public hunger for normalcy and economic improvement.

Yet by repairing EU ties, Starmer can also claim to "make Brexit work" without reopening the divisive question of EU membership.³⁶ In that sense, it's a play for middle-ground voters – including some former Conservative professionals – who yearn for economic growth and international cooperation. Notably, the deal's popular consumer benefits (cheaper food, easier travel) give Labour a positive selling point on Europe, instead of the usual defensive posture.

Early reactions suggest a mixed but manageable public response. Many Britons welcome the end of Brexit bickering – even among Reform voters, polls indicate support for closer cooperation with the EU.³⁷ The immigration measures, though controversial among liberal circles, likely also resonate with a broad swath of voters as UK and European constituencies are increasingly nonplussed by immigration.³⁸ To minimise blowback, Starmer may be seeking to leverage his background as a former human-rights lawyer, and make meaningful concessions on issues such as the Chagos Islands dispute³⁹ to garner goodwill, in addition to seeking ways to expedite removals without formally withdrawing from the European Convention on Human Rights.⁴⁰

3.2 International Parallels.

Starmer's policy pivot offers a noteworthy case study in managing a far-right populist threat. Moderate parties across Europe have struggled with how to respond to the rise of nationalist, anti-immigrant movements. In seeking to cast Labour as tough-but-fair (as opposed to outright xenophobic), Starmer mimics the positioning of Denmark's centre-left, whereby the Danish Social Democrats won on a restrictive immigration platform. In contrast, Germany's SPD under Olaf Scholz stuck to a more traditional liberal stance and saw support erode as the far-right Alternative für Deutschland surged. As in Starmer's case, parties may increasingly decide to co-opt certain hard-right issues such as immigration control and 'law-and-order' rhetoric to outflank the right-wing opposition, even at the risk of legitimising the far-right's agenda and alienating the progressive base.

Conclusion

Facing a surge in right-wing populism and the aftershocks of Brexit, Sir Keir Starmer's Labour government has moved unexpectedly to the right on immigration while pursuing a landmark UK–EU trade deal. These policies fit into Starmer's strategy to secure broad electoral support, the success or failure of which holds lessons for moderate parties in Europe in confronting far-right challengers. Starmer's approach reflects a broader trend of pragmatic recalibration among moderate parties in Western democracies.

Confronted with a resurgent far-right, moderates seem to be testing how far they can go in adjusting their positions on immigration, trade, and national identity without separating from their base. Starmer's Labour is arguably at the forefront of this experiment – cracking down on immigration to "take back control" while seeking

to secure economic stability and international clout. The coming years will reveal whether this strategy succeeds in securing Labour's dominance and containing the far-right in Britain. European neighbours and U.S. observers alike will be watching the outcome closely.

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