

# Labour Party (UK): Starmer, migration and the economy

Friday 16 December 2022, by [KELLAWAY Dave](#) (Date first published: 7 December 2022).

## Dave Kellaway on Starmer's cynicism.

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Leader of the Opposition's offices, mid-morning, November 22... Two special advisors are on their feet, high-fiving and screaming 'Yessh'. They have that day's Daily Telegraph in their hands. The headline reads; 'Starmer: UK must wean itself off migrant labour'. One aide adds that this is exactly what the focus group in Sunderland wanted to hear: "We nailed it; we are taking back the Red Wall from the Tories." 'Right', says another, 'we need to move on to make sure Keir is fully onside with Brexit and let's set up some shots of him and Lisa cheering on an England win at the World Cup. Get Lisa to wear a jumper with I love Britain or something.'

Fantasy? Not really. The *Financial Times* on the 23<sup>rd</sup> reports a senior Labour figure saying that Starmer's comments in his speech to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) the day before about ending Britain's reliance on immigration were aimed at reassuring voters in Brexit-backing "Red Wall" seats. The cynicism is quite blatant:

*It's very important for us to improve Britain's productivity and the easiest way to do that would be to join the EU and increase immigration — which business would love — but there's no way politically we can do that,*

In other words, they do not really believe in the economics of it at all but want to send out the dog-whistle line that Labour is not soft on migrants.

## Broken pledges

Starmer, in the post-Corbyn leadership contest, actually won the overwhelmingly pro-Remain, pro-EU free movement membership majority through ten pledges that largely endorsed most of Corbyn's progressive policies. They included free movement within the EU.

Ironically, as the Bank of England, the Office for Budget Responsibility and many economists use economic data to show the negative effect on growth and living standards due to Brexit, Starmer is rejecting any notion of a softer Brexit, of re-joining the single market. At the same time public opinion polls show an increasing majority, even among leave voters, who think that Brexit is going badly.

In his speech to the CBI, Starmer identified the reliance on migrant labour as maintaining a “low wage” economy, which prevented the development of a higher-skilled, better-trained, and higher-wage economy. By talking about higher skills, training, and regulating collective bargaining rights, Starmer wants to dress up his policy of restricting migration with a progressive veneer.

No progressive or socialist is against higher skills, better training, and trade union rights, but is this the key message the mass media have taken from his speech? What Starmer is really doing is echoing the false argument that it is migrants who create the low-wage economy. This is a little different from the arguments of the Brexiteers and the racist Nigel Farage. You just have to Google to find a host of articles from mainstream economists and academics proving that migrants have no or very little influence on lower wages.

Older workers with memories of the economy when there were fewer migrants will tell you that the bosses have no need for migrants to keep wages as low as possible. I am sure if you compared wages between areas where there are few migrants and other places where there are many, you would not find any variation due to migrant density. Surely there are some intelligent people in the LOTO office who know about this evidence and are deliberately ignoring it for cynical political reasons.

### **Pro-business points based system**

As an [article](#) at the Open Democracy website explains, the Tories’ points-based migration system that is today more or less embraced by Starmer is not that effective in organising migrant labour even when you accept its discriminatory framework:

The new system offers very little flexibility in how people can qualify for a work visa and applicants cannot qualify without a job offer.

In fact, if you look below the surface it becomes clear that the UK’s most recent points-based system is actually just a conventional employer-led system, where applicants must have a job offer and meet certain other criteria. An arbitrary number of purely cosmetic points are attached to these requirements.

A points-based system is a step backward from the free movement we benefited from within the EU. It allows the state and the employers to pick and choose which workers they require based on the posts they have to fill. Deciding who can come in will be assigned to a new body called “Skills England,” but the assessment criteria are very vague, as Nils Pratley points out in this article. By supporting a points-based system, Labour is treating workers like any other commodity rather than supporting the right of workers to freely move in the same way as capital does, across all borders.

Even in terms of the “needs” of British business today, it is questionable that the greatest lack is for highly skilled workers—look at the mess there is today with the seasonal farm workers. Presumably, Starmer is okay with government migrant systems that stop EU workers but import Indonesian fruit pickers who are indebted to gangmasters. These workers are limited to working in the one workplace they are assigned and are not allowed to do any other sort of work. Labour has been silent on this scandal, as it has been on most issues where defending migrants’ rights is at stake.

Accepting the points-based system also effectively accepts the capitalist notion of high and low skill, correlating that with high and low pay. Is a paid caregiver less skilled than a hedge fund trader?

Does remuneration today have much connection either to skills or social usefulness? If the Labour leadership had any grain left of socialist antagonism toward the system, it would question this framework.

Labour's response to the drama of the small boats carrying migrants across the channel has never been based on a clear defence of asylum seekers or the rights of migrants not to be drowned at sea. Instead, it echoes the focus on the evil people smugglers, with Starmer lending his prosecutor-in-chief experience to the cause. People smugglers exist because the government hasn't set up safe and easy ways for people to seek asylum.

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*"Labour are now to the right of the Tories on immigration".*

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Even the Tory MP, Tim Loughton, at the committee hearings with Braverman, raised this issue more forcefully than Labour. The Home Secretary could not answer his simple questions about how an asylum seeker from an African country went about trying to get to Britain, which has signed up to international agreements about accepting refugees. Braverman had to turn to an aide, who bumbled on about how the UNHCR (United Nations High Commission on Refugees) could help out. This was totally inaccurate, as was pointed out officially by the UNCHR. Would Starmer ever use just one of his questions at PMQs to raise such a question? Don't hold your breath.

### **Competency not compassion**

Just like during the depths of the COVID crisis, Starmer and Labour leaders only focus on competency when dealing with the migrant issue, such as the huge delays in processing claims. He wants the message to be not that we support asylum seekers' rights or support migrant workers but rather that we will be more competent in controlling and restricting them. His latest CBI speech attempts to avoid the bluntness of Miliband's "controls on immigration" mugs, but covering it up with dubious economics on a highly skilled economy amounts to the same thing.

Starmer is pushing out a negative migrant message just when public opinion has changed on this issue, as shown in an Institute of Public Policy survey, quoted in the [Guardian](#):

*The IPPR report, which focuses on swing voters most likely to switch parties, shows that Labour could attract 5% of the public and only repel 2% by signalling a more open approach to immigration. Only 1% of the general public would be attracted to Labour if it adopted a restrictive stance on immigration, the paper said, and 11% would be repelled.*

No surprise who was one of the first to praise Starmer's speech: Nigel Farage stated that "Labour are now to the right of the Tories on immigration".

*No one is illegal!*

Stop Rwanda operation!

Solidarity with migrant workers!

**Dave Kellaway**

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**P.S.**

• Anti\*Capitalist Resistance. 07 Dec 2022:

<https://anticapitalistresistance.org/starmer-migration-and-the-economy>

• Dave Kellaway is on the Editorial Board of Anti\*Capitalist Resistance, a member of Socialist Resistance, and Hackney and Stoke Newington Labour Party, a contributor to International Viewpoint and Europe Solidaire Sans Frontieres.