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Is there merit in Labour's asylum policies?

The Government's new policy proposals on asylum claimants and refugees have come under a lot of criticism. But Alan Manning argues that Labour's minister Shabana Mahmood has correctly identified that the current status quo of irregular migration is unsustainable. Whether Labour's policies will be effective in reducing the numbers of irregular migrants is very hard to tell given the available evidence, but unless the Government acts there will be further reduction in the public's support for humanitarian migration.

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Migration policy undoubtedly involves difficult and uncomfortable trade-offs, especially when it comes to asylum claimants and refugees. But as the [reaction](#) to the Government's proposals for change to [asylum and refugee policy](#) revealed, the conversation becomes a lot harder when it's framed in polarizing binaries (is immigration good or bad?)

In my recently published book [Why Immigration Policy Is Hard and How To Make it Better](#), I try to explain why governments have such a tough time with irregular immigration (for one, they have less control over these flows than the other main forms of immigration around work, study and family) and try to remove some of the hysteria around the discussion.

Evaluating the government's case for asylum reform

First, Shabana Mahmood says there is a problem to be solved – the number of asylum seekers arriving in the UK is too high. [Others](#) disagree arguing that the number of asylum-seekers and refugees in the UK is not high in absolute terms compared to Germany, France, Italy and Spain and

lower than in many countries when expressed as a share of population. Asylum-seekers are also sometimes argued to be a **small share** of total immigration so there is little to worry about here.

While there is too much discussion of **asylum-seekers** arriving in small boats, there is also a risk of trivializing the problem. Asylum-seekers may have been only 5 per cent of the immigration inflow a few years ago but they are over 10 per cent in the **latest** figures, higher if one adds in the family flows that follow refugees. Because refugees are more likely to remain in the UK, they are over 20 per cent of those getting **settlement**. We should care about numbers because the average **employment rates and earnings** of those who came to the UK as refugees are low. This is likely to mean that refugees, on average, receive more in benefits than they pay in taxes: we don't have good evidence on this for the UK, but **Australia** found that the lifetime fiscal cost of a humanitarian migrant was about £200k per person.



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If current levels of asylum claims continues, and the UK is similar to Australia, the cost of supporting refugees can be substantial. Given this, it is striking how little attention is paid in the public debate to the long-term cost of supporting refugees. Saying that the rights of refugees should not be changed as numbers rise is tantamount to saying we should have a blank cheque for the support of refugees, something we don't do in many other policy areas. While I think Shabana Mahmood exaggerates when she claims the UK is the “destination of choice in Europe” for asylum-seekers, I think she is right to say there is a problem needing action now. She would not want to end up like Joe Biden who **ignored** the numbers crossing the US southern border for too long.

Second, even if there is a problem with numbers, it is sometimes argued that there is little that can be done about flows as migrants are unaware of policies towards them so their decisions cannot be affected by policy. While it is true that numbers are greatly influenced by crises in the world and other factors, it is wrong to conclude that policy never has impacts. We have numerous examples (e.g. Australia, the EU-Turkey agreement of 2015, Biden-Trump policies at the US southern border) where flows like the small boats have stopped after the introduction of policies to ensure those

journeys are unsuccessful. **Academic research** consistently finds that that asylum seekers direct their claims towards countries where those claims are more likely to be accepted. I think Shabana Mahmood is right to believe that policy can affect flows, though some policies may be more effective than others and some even counter-productive. Which brings us to the question of, what policies are in fact effective.

Asylum policies from the opposition often don't withstand much scrutiny

Much of what passes for serious policy proposals on asylum seekers often lacks detail and does not withstand much scrutiny. On the one hand we have Reform UK who want to “**detain and deport**” and leave the ECHR (and perhaps other international human rights conventions), policies that are easy to say but are known to be hard to do. On the other side we have the Greens who argue that the policy we need is “safe and legal routes” and for asylum-seekers to be given the **right to work** to avoid the poor labour market outcomes we see at the moment.



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The problem here is how to define eligibility for the proposed safe and legal routes – make it restrictive and it is unlikely to deter many journeys but make the schemes more expansive and there is a risk that numbers would be even higher than now. There is an argument for the UK being more generous on giving asylum seekers the right to work – some **studies** find this improves outcomes – but the best solution would be to process claims faster. Giving day one work rights would create a strong incentive to claim asylum even if the claim is weak (when we gave students generous work rights after graduation there was a **big increase in numbers**); Sweden is currently considering moving away from this policy.

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that luxury – what they propose as policy has to be implemented and, if it does not work, we will find that out.

Will the Government's proposed asylum policies work?

So what policies are proposed and will they work? In a nutshell what is being proposed is initially giving recognised refugees temporary rather than permanent residence, making eligibility for permanent residence take longer and be more conditional (e.g. on work, what is known as earned settlement), restricting access to public funds and making family reunion harder.

The intention is to reduce the number of asylum claims (and subsequent family reunion) but also perhaps to try to improve labour market outcomes by making settlement and family reunion rights conditional on some measure of contribution. Will this work? A problem is that we do not have very much high-quality research so its quite easy for people with strong but fixed views to claim the evidence supports their position.

In 2013 Sweden went from offering temporary protection to Syrians to permanent protection – one **study** found this raised asylum claims in Sweden. That might suggest flows to the UK would be reduced somewhat by only offering temporary residence. And if you are concerned about the amount of welfare support for refugees and want to limit numbers, you might want to ensure those resources are spent on those currently in need of protection rather than those who were persecuted in the past but for whom it might now be safe to return. After all, when we give aid to victims of natural disasters, we do so temporarily not permanently.

There are examples of large-scale returns: in the early 1990s Germany offered protection to many fleeing conflict in the Balkans. Asylum-seekers were only ever given temporary sanctuary and, when peace returned to the region, the German government did not extend residence permits and required of the refugees to return to their countries of origin. This was controversial especially when it involved children, some of whom had been born in Germany, and there were exceptions in practice. Expect to see similar debates in the future in the UK, also about what should be done about Ukrainians currently in many other countries when the war in Ukraine ends. But many conflicts are very protracted so no time-scale can be put on when the need for protection ends, so the government might simply create more bureaucracy, renewing permits every few years, costing rather than saving the tax-payer money.



There are many risks with the government's proposals, but I don't think we know enough to say they will work or that they won't. But the status quo is not an option given rising numbers which may be eroding support for humanitarian migration.



Another concern is that those with only temporary residence have less incentive to integrate and improve their labour market prospects. There is mixed evidence here – one [study](#) of Denmark (an acknowledged inspiration for the UK government's proposals) found that giving temporary residence worsened outcomes, [another](#) that it made little difference, [another](#) study for Sweden found the opposite. Perhaps the conclusion is that incentives can work but only if the conditions set are realistic; otherwise people just give up. Given this, it is probably important not just to increase incentives to find work, but to provide people with the ability to achieve this. Yet [the refugee employability programme](#) ended in June 2025 even though the [evaluation](#) said it was quite effective (it was not however an especially high-quality evaluation in my view).

Migration policy is both hard and complicated. Alf Dubs, a deservedly well-respected campaigner for child refugees (who was once one himself) [criticised](#) the proposals to withdraw financial support for children whose families' asylum claim fails, something that ends up pushing more children into poverty. He may be right but we also have [claims](#) that there are more asylum seekers who are 17 than 18, suggesting the Government is also right when it argues that the current system provides an incentive to send children ahead of their parents.

There are many risks with the government's proposals, but I don't think we know enough to say they will work or that they won't. But the status quo is not an option given rising numbers which may be eroding support for humanitarian migration. [71 per cent of Britons](#) still say people should be able to take refuge in other countries to escape from war or persecution but this is down from 84 per cent in 2023. 49 per cent say that no more refugees can be accepted now up, up from 30 per cent in 2022. The government hopes that "by restoring order to our borders, can we be the open, tolerant and generous country that we know ourselves to be", an echo of the Labour government's strategy in the 1960s. Perhaps, but there is also a danger that harsh border controls could have the opposite effect. As I said, immigration policy is hard.

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