

The Home Office and Immigration

In the 1980s and 1990s Ministers and officials in the Home Office administered a relatively successful Immigration Policy. It typically ran at 50,000 net migrants joining the UK population each year. It was never above 100,000, and was at 48,000 in 1997 when the Conservatives were replaced by Labour in government. This level enabled us to be generous over refugees, and to meet the business requirements for special skills or seasonal workers.

The new Labour government wanted policy change to boost numbers. The civil service and the EU were very helpful. It soon rose substantially. Between 2004 and 2007 it ran above 250,000 in each of the four years, some five times higher than the previous government's preferred level.

The newly elected Coalition government in 2010 appointed a Conservative Home Secretary who made clear her wish to bring numbers down from over 250,000 to below 100,000. Home Office officials were asked to work on various ways to help achieve this. After an early fall to 176,000 in 2012 it accelerated away again to well over 250,000 in each of the years 2015 to 2017.

In the 2017 election the former Home Secretary had her chance to review this policy and targets as Prime Minister. She reconfirmed them, stating in the Manifesto that "our objective (is) to reduce immigration to sustainable levels, by which we mean annual net migration in the tens of thousands rather than the hundreds of thousands we have seen over the last two decades". She also made clear she wished to control EU as well as non EU migration, thus ending freedom of movement.

We need to ask why was it that the Home Office did not implement policies that met these Manifesto pledges? They had shown how it was possible to run such a policy in the 1980s and 1990s. They could have been in no doubt about the wishes of their Home Secretary, nor of the new Prime Minister in 2017. This failure raises interesting questions about the relative responsibilities of senior officials and elected politicians. Whilst I of course defend the constitutional principle that the Home Secretary has to take the public blame for failing to implement her own policy, we do also need to ask about the wider departmental failure.

Today we read of problems for the current Home Secretary to get her policies implemented in a timely and helpful way. I would urge officials in the Home Office to see that they had had years to get ready to cut migrant numbers, and soon will have full powers over EU migrants as well as from the rest of the world. Surely they can draw on their experiences in recent years, and on the new powers they can create, to succeed this time round? If not the Prime Minister would be right to allow new senior officials who can.

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