

Two sides of Immigration: A comparison between Migration Watch UK and Migration Matters.

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Abstract: This paper discusses the creation of two think tanks in Britain exclusively dedicated to Migration. Migration Watch UK takes a negative view of migration, urging for 'control' of it, whereas Migration Matters, created a few years after aims to evidence how good migration is for British economy, and how much worse would be performing if immigrants are removed. Is migration necessarily a good or a bad thing? To what extent think tanks are enlightening for politicians, media and public policy? An analysis of these two Think Tanks aims to provide more insights to debate contemporary politics.

Resumo: Este artigo discute a criação de dois *Think Tanks* no Reino Unido exclusivamente dedicados a estudos de migração. Migration Watch UK toma uma posição negativa, clamando por mais controle e restrição. Já Migration Matters, criado alguns anos depois, tem como objetivo evidenciar os efeitos positivos do fluxo migratório recente para a economia britânica, e os eventuais impactos negativos que ocorreriam se essa população fosse retirada do país. Diante deste debate, procura-se compreender se imigração é um fenómeno exclusivamente bom ou ruim. Até que ponto tais Think Tanks são informativos para políticos, a mídia e políticas públicas? Uma análise de ambas pretende oferecer mais contribuições para o debate político contemporâneo.

I. Introduction

This paper looks at two different Think Tanks in the United Kingdom, both dedicated to migration. These organisations have quite distinct political profiles and present extensive academic material in their web-pages to substantiate their arguments. However, the question that arises is: is immigration intrinsically a good or a bad thing? When does it stop being good and starts being bad or the other way round? What solutions can be proposed in terms of public policy? What is the role of Think Tanks in public policies? Is it possible to promote all-positive immigration? The very existence of two contrasting Think Tanks is quite telling of the controversy and lack of consensus involving discussions of migration.

Migration Watch UK is a Think Tank formed in 2001 and chaired by Sir Andrew Green, a former Ambassador to Saudi Arabia. Known for his negative take on Immigration, he has been made a peer by David Cameron in 2014. The Advisory Council is also formed by academics, judges, diplomats, doctors and writers. The organisation approaches immigration as a problem and proposes a “balanced migration” that would not threaten Britain’s infrastructure and services. Quite interestingly, Migration Watch claims to have no political axis and to merely “present facts”. However, there has been criticism to the organisation’s lack of statistical accuracy in its forecasts.

In contrast, the Migration Matters Trust takes a more positive approach on immigration. The organisation was created in 2013, aiming to establish “an open and honest debate about the issues of migration”. The organisation is chaired by former MP Barbara Roche (previously Minister of State for Immigration and Asylum), and co-chaired by Lord Navnit Dholakia (President of the Lib Dems between 1999 and 2002) and Nadhim Zahawi (Conservative MP). Therefore, quite interestingly the organisation is chaired by three representatives of distinct political affiliations, consisting of Britain’s main three political parties: Labour, Conservative and Lib Dem.

This paper is divided in three parts. In the first I analyse the frameworks of Migration Matters and Migration Watch UK, discussing their views and proposals to control or encourage immigration. Then, I discuss what are Think Tanks and their distinctions from lobbyists and interest groups, with a brief background of British Think Tanks. Lastly, I

analyse their resonances in media, agenda-setting and politics, with a closer look at British political parties. Lastly, I discuss the approaches and limitations of public debate on migration and the difficulties and complexities of policymaking. Migration Matters and Migration Watch UK evidence how debates on topic end up polarized in yes or no.

II. The Organisations

II.I) Migration Watch UK

The organisation frames recent immigration into the UK as a problem. Presenting England as the second most crowded nation in Europe, it is claimed a house needs to be built every six minutes for the next twenty years to meet the demand (Migration Watch UK: *Six Key Facts*, 2014). This fast growth in immigration is attributed to policies during the Labour years. It is also estimated that the UK population will grow by 9.4 million in twenty-five years, of which two thirds would be migrants (Migration Watch UK: *Six Key Facts*, 2014). The proposition to keep Britain's population under 70 million inhabitants would be by cutting migration. Quite interestingly, it is England and not Britain that is considered by the organisation to be overcrowded. The centrality of London and the South West of England to the British economy, since its de-industrialization in the 1960s is not touched upon, though. Perhaps a more thorough discussion of the structure of the British economy and the centrality of London for it is needed to complement the debate on the overcrowding in England.

Migration Watch UK seems to very much echo the Conservative discourse on migration, or perhaps the other way round. It praises the government's commitment to cut migration by tens of thousands and praises the end of the point-based system (implemented in the Labour years), responsible for a reduction of non-EU immigration by a third. EU (European Union) migration has increased dramatically and by now it is nearly the size of non-EU migration, leading the organisation to claim for a renegotiation of free movement of people within the European Union. So far so similar to Tories' political agenda. The claim for cutting immigration is to alleviate the burden it creates on transport, health, education and housing. It is also claimed that both EU and non-EU migrants have both no positive fiscal

impact on the economy whatsoever, receiving more in services and benefits than actually contributing. We could then resume their view of immigration as putting pressure on public services without generating a positive economic effect on GDP and economic growth.

The organisation praises Tories' measures to curb migration and proposes further actions such as: resident labour market test for students wishing to work in the UK after completing their studies, separation of student visas into graduate, further education and language studies, that would be "tightened or relaxed as necessary" (Migration Watch UK, *What Can be Done?*, 2014); a minimum income for British nationals wishing to bring a spouse into the UK, which could not be extended to EU citizens due to EU law. However, the organisation proposes that government requires EU nationals to be able to support their spouses before visas are granted; enforcement or removal of people who come on student visas; renegotiation of control of EU-movement of people.

II.II) Migration Matters Trust

Considering the creation of Migration Watch UK in 2001 as a reaction to the huge growth of immigration into the UK, Migration Matters is a reactive Think Tank, with a political agenda contrary to the first organisation. Its board of directors is also quite revealing of how immigration is a subject that does not meet consensus even within political parties, with components of the three main parties in Britain, as described above.

The Trust frames its agenda against:

A new anti-immigration consensus has formed in politics over the last decade. Public polling consistently shows unprecedented levels of hostility to immigration. In both cases, evidence has been replaced by perception when discussing migration." (Migration Matters – *The Issue*, no date).

The response defines as myths the impact of migration on population growth, economic burden and labour market, presenting statistical evidence from Offices for Budget Responsibility and for National Statistics. The organisation argues that public debt would rise from 74 to 187% of GDP if net migration ceased. Therefore, if the UK stopped being an immigration country now, it would probably need to increase taxes and cut spending. The figures are taken from the Government's Office for Budget Responsibility. Perhaps due to its

much shorter existence, Migration Matters' website is shorter in publications and briefings, but already provides enough evidence against those presented by Migration Watch UK, which then leads to a discussion about the role of Think Tanks and what political implications they can have in topics as complex as migration.

III. What are Think Tanks?

The question of ideological bias behind Think Tanks is central to understand Migration Watch and Migration Matters. But first it is important to define a Think Tank and understand its differences from lobbyists and interest groups. Think Tanks are understood here as “non-profit, research and educational organisations” (Leeson *et al*, 2011), involving scientific research and analysis, being either within government (as in Russia and China) or acting as non-profit organisations.

The main distinction between Think Tanks and interest groups is that the latter are not legally barred from lobbying policymakers, as the former are. So, one could argue that Think Tanks involve debate of ideas based on empirical evidence that could operate a change in public opinion and policies in the future. Lobbying seems to have more practical and immediate effects in terms of current policy outcomes, as Leeson *et al* (2011) point out. However, dividing lines become more blurred when one looks at the wide range of Think Tanks created since the 1990s, with very distinct profiles. Think Tanks also do not engage in public demonstrations, like pressure groups do.

Agreeing with Stone (2004), I consider the difference between financial independence and scholarly independence a fundamental issue to Think Tanks in general. To what extent their research and analysis is scientific is an ongoing issue. So the inherent tension amongst these organisations seems to float between agenda-setting and policy-innovation versus intellectual authorities legitimizing “policy prejudices and political causes” (Stone, 2004).

III.I) A brief background of Think Tanks in the UK

Think Tanks were originally created in the US, where philanthropic culture is much more developed than in Europe. Despite the debate of when these organisations appeared as we currently define them, Abelson (2004) finds that there is some consensus it was in the first

two decades of the 20th century, when Russel Sage Foundation (1910), the Institute for Government Research (1916), amongst others, were created. After World War II Think Tanks could then be called a booming industry in the US, with direct consequences in the policy-making process.

Ullrich (2004, p.57) defined British Think Tanks as less academic and younger and more dynamic, in comparison to continental ones. Although inspired by American Think Tanks (where it was originally created), British tradition of philanthropy is not as strong. The creation of a Think Tank as a modern concept happened in 1971, with the creation of the Central Policy Review Staff (CPRS). This institute was strongly related to the New Right of the late 1970s (Denham and Garnett, 2004). In the late 1980s, the creation of the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) was then closely linked to the Labour Party.

Denham and Garnett (2004) describe British Think Tanks as a race for newspaper headlines without much actual analytical content in it. Perhaps the combination of relatively (at least compared to the USA) scarce philanthropic funding and the tabloid culture of British media was not healthy for British Think Tanks, described by the authors as “hollowed out” (Ibid, p.242). Quite interestingly, the authors use Migration Watch as a critical example of sensationalist organisation that promotes appealing headlines and is referred to as a Think Tank. Therefore, the British Think Tank tradition indicates how the lines between Think Tanks, advocacy coalitions and lobbyists can become increasingly blurred.

IV) Think Tanks, Public Opinion and Policies

Knowing Think Tanks cannot exert direct pressure in politics, such as lobbyists can, then what do they exist for and why are they mainly funded? As factories of ideas, their implications are much more felt in the long term. Think Tanks are likely to change attitudes and public opinion in the long run, which then will probably affect politics and policymaking. In an empirical study of state-based free-market Think Tanks (SBFM) in the US, Leeson *et al* find that the relation between SBFM Think Tank’s spendings and economic policy is significantly weaker than the relation of such economic policy with lobby groups. However, as the authors argue, this probably suggests the immediate effect of lobbyist groups versus the long term effect of Think Tanks. Looking at attitudes, they find that states with higher SBFM Think Tank spending coincide with average citizen opinion as more “pro-market”

than those with lower spending. Therefore, Think Tanks, the authors suggest, have a more short-term impact in terms of attitudes and public opinion, which then will likely affect policymaking.

This is quite revealing, taking into consideration the two immigration “Think Tanks” based in Britain. Migration Watch UK was created in 2001. In the 2009 elections it is evident the echoes of immigration as a problem to be managed, which then led to election of Conservatives. As Migration Matters was only created in 2013, it is perhaps rather soon to actually feel echoes of their views in public opinion and even sooner in policymaking.

Balch (2009) describes the Labour years (1997-2007) as an attempt to test new ideas, with particular attention to immigration policy, changed to attract labour migration to the UK. Considering net (legal) migration tripled in those years from 100,000 to 300,000, it is easy to understand the context of immigration as a hot topic in the elections. But then why did the Labour decide to change migration policies? This goes back, as Balch (2009) argues, to seven years earlier, when Sarah Spencer introduced ideas of the positive economic effects of immigration at the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), a Think Tank, as described above, created in the late 1980s, with close ties to the labour party. This idea of positive immigration was used by the then Home Office Minister Barbara Roche (currently chair of Migration Matters), in view of the ‘huge benefits’ it could bring to British economy, taking into account the labour shortages in some areas (IT, Health and Construction) created by the economic growth in those years. This could be attributed to political lobby from businesses.

Therefore, we witnessed the role of IPPR researches in the development of labour migration policies, and subsequently the echoes of Migration Watch UK in the Conservative government since 2009. This obviously reflects the lack of consensus or definite conclusions amongst academia as to whether migration is necessarily a good or a bad thing. Or when does it stop being one and becomes the other. Think Tanks reflect the mixed findings in terms of economic gains and costs of migration, as Orrenius and Zavodny (2012) indicate. Perhaps it is hard to create consensus because it is hard for everyone to gain at the same time with migration. Greater labour market flexibility and more demand for housing are potentially good for employers and businesses, but could be adverse for those more vulnerable in society, pushing their wages down and increasing rent and property prices. Therefore, mixed academic findings reflect the difficulty of creating policies in terms of migration that could

benefit everyone. The rise of migration as an electoral hot topic in the past ten years could in part explain the crisis of Labour. Barbara Roche's 'managed migration' policies were a result of the positive academic findings of migration, along with pressure from business lobbyists. This may have cost part of its constituency, less-educated and more vulnerable working-class people who perhaps did not exactly witness these positive effects. As Fetzer (2012, p.3) finds when he describes variables of attitudes toward immigration, education increases tolerance and belonging to a labour union increases rejection of immigrants.

Therefore, the combination of poor economic performance and substantial increase in net migration into the UK has definitely had an electoral cost to the Labour party, despite its positive findings of the results of migration. The Conservatives were elected promising a cut in half on these figures, which then proved unachievable. Non-European migration was reduced by a third, as Migration Watch UK indicates. However, the increase in immigration from other European states has created a problem for the Conservative party to be re-elected, and promoted the sudden rise of UKIP.

IV.I) The Rise of UKIP

The phenomenon of extreme-right parties in Europe (xenophobia is a common trace) dates back to the 1980s, when the British National Party was founded. In 1993, UKIP was founded with the main goal of withdrawing from EU. The economic goal was then subsequently expanded to a ban of EU nationals moving to the UK, following the increase in net immigration from the EU. This has definitely put pressure on the Conservative Party, as it does support withdrawal from EU, but aims at cutting net migration, which clashes with EU premise of free movement of people. The UKIP went from a 1 percent of votes in its first 1994 election to 17 percent in 2004 for the European Parliament (Givens, 2009). In 2009, UKIP's 16 percent of votes for British Parliament against Labour's 15 percent evidenced how Conservative (winners) and UKIP parties made good electoral use of anti-immigration feelings, also evidencing how this may have cost Labour's some of its constituency. However, opinion polls for 2015 elections show Labour party leading again, with 34 percent, and UKIP consolidated in the third place, with 14 percent. UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage, has been clearly targeting at less educated working-class voters, promising also cutting taxes on tobacco and alcohol, as well as cutting EU migration (something the Conservatives are not being able to renegotiate with the EU), a clear sign of its electoral target. This is not exclusive

to Britain, but the creation and relative success of right wing anti-immigrant party has been a political phenomenon in Europe over the past twenty years or so.

V) Conclusions

The complexity and multi-dimensionality of migration academic research has found echo in Think Tanks. But can ideological prior commitments blur the scientific quality of some so-called Think Tanks?

The evidence from Migration Watch and Migration Matters shows how uni-dimensional and partial the public debate has become, let alone the utilitarian perspective of good or bad, obscuring sometimes humanitarian issues. As academic studies of migration point out, it becomes difficult to debate immigration as a yes or no topic, because it does not affect everybody in a country the same way, and even so, because it can provide simultaneously good and bad consequences.

Barbara Roche's proposed managed migration also shows how difficult it is to actually manage it. Perhaps because one attracts the other, and when a government wishes to encourage legal labour migration it is also simultaneously pulling irregular migration. So, the British (as well as the German and American cases) example of attracting and managing foreign labour migration as a policy has proved to be completely unrealistic, which can in part explain the creation of Migration Watch UK in 2001, proposing measures to contain migration, viewed as an out-of-control problem.

It also evidences the limits of Think Tanks and the scope for their proposals in terms of policymaking. If their main drive is to influence public opinion by proving their previously stated agenda, then it becomes more a matter of opinion than of research. This is dangerous for public opinion as it dresses journalism as science, and opinions as facts. The vast academic findings for the economic consequences of migration are mixed and vary through countries and time, evidencing the difficulty and limitation of drawing definite conclusions when it comes to discussing migration.

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