

A vote to Leave is a vote to cut migration, no matter what liberal Brexiteers would like to think

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Last week on LSE BrexitVote, Chris Bickerton [argued](#) that a Brexit vote should not automatically mean that the UK closes its borders to most migration. **Dionyssis G Dimitrakopoulos** says this stance ignores the fact that the Conservative leader who would replace David Cameron after a vote to leave would have no truck with a more nuanced immigration policy. It is understandable that some Brexit supporters want to distance themselves from anti-immigration rhetoric, but unrealistic.



Having lost the economic argument, the Leave campaign is now trying to shift the debate towards immigration. This element of the EU referendum debate is as closely linked to the issue of sovereignty as is the management of the economy.

There are two arguments that the Leave side tend to emphasise in relation to immigration. The first relates to security. The most extreme version of this argument takes the form of the false claim that the UK cannot veto Turkey's accession to the EU and – as a consequence – the arrival of millions of Turks on this island is virtually unavoidable. A less extreme version of the same argument relates to the impact of migration from other EU member states on public services at the local level, including schools, hospitals etc., and ignores the contribution that these people make to the exchequer (and beyond). More recently, however, another argument has been made. Aware of the deleterious nature of the association of Brexit with anti-immigration rhetoric, Brexit supporters have argued that

“Brexit refers only to an exit from the EU and there are no specific policies of any kind tied to Brexit. What happens afterwards and how the UK chooses to manage its affairs in the light of an exit is up to the British government, which is ultimately answerable to its electorate. [...] [T]he fact remains that Brexit is compatible with both open and closed borders. Which it will be depends on decisions made by an elected government. [...] [W]e should use an exit from the EU as an opportunity to have a proper debate for the first time about whether we want the UK to be open to migration or not, and then base our laws on the outcome of that.” (Chris Bickerton)

Leaving aside the fact that the debate on immigration has been going on for many years in the UK, their central point is one that all *souverainistes* like to make: through an exit from the EU, the British people will reassert their sovereignty and that is what matters above all other considerations. The precise way in which it will be handled is a *separate* issue. However, nothing could be further from the truth.

For all its major faults (including the unedifying image of government ministers who lie live on TV), the referendum-related debate has highlighted the fact that membership of the EU involves a whole array of trade-offs, including those that relate to immigration. But this is precisely what the *souverainistes* see as a problem since sovereignty is, for them, a zero-sum game. You either have it, or you do not. So to achieve their main objective – Brexit – they appear to imply there will be no need for such trade-offs in the post-Brexit future. This is unrealistic to say the least, since – even if we ignore the cultural benefits of immigration – demographic conditions, the state of the economy, the domestic economy's relationship with its main partner, i.e. the rest of the European Union, will still need to be managed.

They also conveniently ignore two points that are directly linked to each other and show that the balance of forces is

likely to be conducive to a particular immigration policy if Brexit occurs. The first is the fact that historically this country is normally governed by the Conservative party, and the second relates to the domestic balance of power in the aftermath of Brexit.



Nigel Farage speaks at CPAC, 2015. Photo: [Gage Skidmore](#) via a [CC-BY-SA 2.0 licence](#)

Specifically, if Brexit begins to materialise on 24 June, it will not be on liberal terms. Rather, it will be on the terms used by the Daily Mail and the Daily Express – that is to say, immigration-phobia. In other words, it will be done in a way that will make openness not more but *less* likely. Even a cursory look at the statements made by Nigel Farage and his de facto allies within the Conservative party and beyond shows their overwhelming emphasis on numbers, not the need for a *more* liberal immigration regime. The use of the term “burdens” is indicative in that respect. In the event of Brexit, David Cameron’s successor will almost inevitably come from the Brexit-supporting side of the Conservative party and they will have virtually no room for manoeuvre on this issue, even if one naively assumed they would actually want to wiggle away from the extreme statements made in the run up to the referendum.

The haste to dissociate Brexit from the toxicity of many Brexit supporters’ anti-immigration rhetoric is understandable for another reason: [academic research](#) shows that ‘the effects of demographic change fade over time, probably because local white residents become accustomed to minority residents, have positive contact with them, or come to perceive minorities as legitimately belonging in the area.’ In that sense, those – like Simon Tilford of the Centre for European Reform – who rightly [claim](#) that EU membership is a way to preserve the UK’s openness and increasingly cosmopolitan nature have the wind in their sails.

This post represents the views of the author and not those of the BrexitVote blog, nor the LSE.

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