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# Brexit-like rhetoric on immigration no longer works

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*The Government's rhetoric on curbing immigration, and "stopping the small boats" in particular, has strong echoes of the Brexit campaign. As Matilde Rosina and Cristina Juverdeanu point out, the same themes, keywords, and even graphics are being used by the Government that were originally used by Brexit campaigners. The only difference is, this time the campaign doesn't seem to be working.*

"Stopping small boats" has been one of Prime Minister Rishi Sunak's **top five priorities**. This is of course part of the Government's objective of deterring immigration via irregular routes. As is the recent **Safety of Rwanda Bill**, an attempt to overcome the obstacles stalling the Rwanda plan. In its updated form, the bill declares Rwanda a safe country, mandating all policymakers and courts to recognise it as such, thus preventing legal challenges to the transfer of asylum seekers to the African country.

At the same time, the Government has put forward plans to **curb legal migration**. The proposed legislation involves preventing care workers from bringing dependants on their visa, increasing the minimum salary needed by most overseas workers to obtain a visa, from £26,200 to £38,700; and making the latter sum the minimum income normally required to sponsor a **spouse/partner visa**.

As the Government advances its plans to curb migration, one cannot help but notice the revamping of old Brexit themes. The Brexit campaign slogan 'take back control' had a clear reference to laws and borders. These themes of sovereignty and border control are very much reused in today's debates, in a clear attempt to re-animate the divisive sentiments that dominated the Brexit discussions. This tactic, however, is not working. Immigration no longer features as a top priority of citizens, as other issues have taken its place. Ironically, Brexit itself contributed to this shift.

The **Prime Minister's** tweets echo the tone and language of the Brexit era.



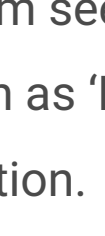
The claim about "our" patience having run out bears strong resemblance to the **"BREAKING POINT"** Brexit poster. Both statements evoke the point of no return and signal urgency and the need for swift and firm action.



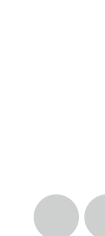
Other key words used to introduce immigration policies recall the Brexit rhetoric in three further ways. First, the emphasis on parliamentary sovereignty, one of the foundational principles of the **UK constitution**. Parliamentary sovereignty was a key theme during the Brexit campaign, used to argue that EU law shouldn't be able to constrain Parliament. Indeed, British parliamentary sovereignty sat uneasy with the **'independent'**, self-regulating supranational nature of the EU'. Despite Brexit and the UK's power to repeal EU law (and choice to **retain** most of it), according to the Government, the UK Parliament and its sovereignty are yet again to be safeguarded. This time the threats come from the courts.

Indeed, the second theme that the Government's rhetoric shares with the Brexit campaign concerns the courts. The main difference is that while the Brexit campaign targeted the EU Court of Justice, the focus is now the European Court of Human Rights as well as national courts that are to be stopped from undoing the Parliament's decisions (in this case, to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda). Interestingly, while the European Court of Human Rights is *not* an EU institution, the **'Europeanness'** of the Court is regularly overemphasised, recalling once more Brexit-like rhetoric.

Most of all, however, the current discourse draws on the winning Brexit theme of the control of borders. During the Brexit campaign, legal free movement was conflated with the 'threat' of irregular immigration, including that of asylum seekers. Today, migrants legally entitled to be in the UK are being associated with words such as 'Banning' and 'Stopping', recalling the long-standing debate on 'flows' of irregular migration.



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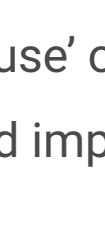
The Prime Minister's tweet announcing the restrictions on legal migration reads in big letters 'BANNING' overseas students from bringing their families. In a similar vein, it aims at 'STOPPING' migrants from undermining British workers. On the flipside, all the routes for irregular migrants to stay in the UK are said to be 'BLOCKED'.

Not only do we see similarities in the Prime Minister's use of language and the Brexit campaign, but there are visual parallels too. Existing research highlights the power of **maps and images** in projecting a certain idea of migration. In particular, the **red/blue opposition** is often employed to signal antagonism: while red is linked to danger and warning, blue is associated with peace and openness. These are precisely the colours the Government has opted for, in presenting its announcements on both regular and irregular migration, signalling a sense of urgency. Interestingly, these colours were often featured in the pro-**Brexit campaign** too.



*The rhetoric on regular and irregular migration is increasingly conflated.*

The Government may be relying on the old Brexit themes of urgency, sovereignty, and control of borders, but these are no longer the winning cards they once were. Today's context is significantly transformed. According to the Office for National Statistics, in the year ending in December 2022, net migration was the **highest** on record, standing at 745,000. Quite paradoxically, the numbers of migrants that need to be curbed, and the 'abuse' of the visa system that is to be stopped, are the result of **new policies** that were designed and implemented after Brexit.



*It is precisely inflation and the economy that have taken the spotlight in voters' top concerns today, leaving immigration well behind.*



Brexit has also contributed to the rising of inflation in recent years, as proven by **research** conducted at the LSE. While the War in Ukraine and the Covid-19 pandemic have played a crucial **role** in making inflation spiral globally, Brexit worsened it in the British case by introducing new hurdles to trade.

It is precisely inflation and the economy that have taken the spotlight in voters' top concerns today, leaving immigration well behind. In January 2016, 46 per cent of British voters listed **immigration as their main concern**, with economic issues following at 26 per cent. In contrast, **immigration concerns dropped** to 29 per cent in December 2023, with economic issues, and particularly inflation, taking the priority.

The Government is using the same strategy on immigration that was employed by the Brexit campaign in 2016, but the issue is no longer the priority it was back then. Furthermore, while during the Brexit campaign, immigration concerns were shared by both Labour and Conservative voters, an analysis by the Financial Times reveals that today this is no longer the case, with **Labour voters** showing little interest in the topic. The Conservatives' position on immigration is leaving the average voter behind and moving further right. While this may be done in response to the party falling behind in electoral polls, it does not seem to have significantly improved the **party's position**, which stands at only 23 per cent at the end of January 2024.

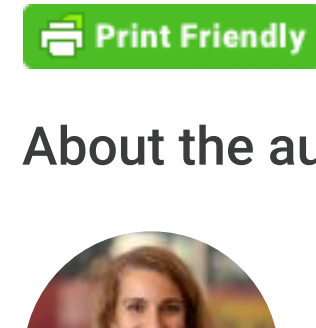
In emphasising urgency, sovereignty and the control of borders, the Government is once again employing the themes that the Brexit campaign relied on. Only this time, that strategy looks like it's failing.

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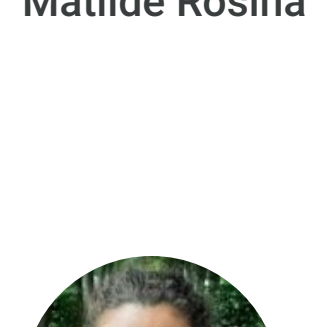
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