Immigration Under New Labor: The Global Race For Talent  
Afternoon Briefing  
December 11, 2007

On December 11, 2007, the Migration Policy Institute (MPI) hosted a discussion on immigration policy in Britain under Tony Blair. The discussion was focused on how the policies in Britain (as well as in the United States, and the European Union) have led to increasing competition for highly skilled workers. Speakers included: John Burgess, Deputy Foreign Editor, The Washington Post; Martin Davidson, Chief Executive, the British Council; Frank Schmiedel, First Secretary, European Union’s Delegation to the United States; and Will Somerville, Senior Policy Analyst, MPI. Demetrios G. Papademetriou, President of MPI, served as the moderator for the event. The discussion accompanied the release of the book Immigration Under New Labour, written by MPI’s Will Somerville.

Presentation

MPI’s Demetrios Papademetriou began the discussion by introducing the speakers and emphasizing the uniqueness of the British New Labour government’s stance on immigration. He highlighted the fact that Tony Blair became Prime Minister of Britain at the end of a thirty-year period during which members of both major political parties in Britain repeatedly emphasized how tough they were on immigration. In contrast, almost as soon as Mr. Blair became the British Prime Minister, he began to talk about reforming Britain’s immigration system, and encouraging the immigration of student and highly skilled workers.

Will Somerville began his portion of the presentation by pointing out that immigration policy has recently received a great deal of attention in Britain, and that various strategies, laws, and policies have been discussed in hopes of improving the current immigration system. He then highlighted two key points to keep in mind when discussing Britain’s immigration policy. The first point was that immigration to Britain has increased dramatically in the past decade. Currently, the annual net inflow of permanent migrants to Britain is about 185,000 people, quadruple the net inflow of permanent migrants in 1997, when Tony Blair and New Labour were first elected. The second point was that from 2000 on, the majority of British residents have viewed immigration as a top political issue. Currently, approximately four out of five people in the United Kingdom feel that immigration should be reduced.

Mr. Somerville went on to trace through the history of immigration policy in the United Kingdom. The key immigration policy model in the United Kingdom was established during the 1960s and 1970s and based around two goals—the integration of immigrants who were already in the United Kingdom (a goal that was influenced by the US civil rights movement), and the restriction of immigrants coming into the United Kingdom, with an aim of zero (net) migration. The Blair government completely changed this policy. While Tony Blair’s government continued to promote strong integration measures (such as citizenship tests, language requirements, etc), the government embraced the concept of skilled immigration as an economic advantage, and welcomed...
skilled workers and international students. In part, these goals were accomplished through the use of a new points system to attract the most skilled migrants.

Mr. Somerville then stated that the British government has instituted policies that encouraged skilled labor mainly because the government has “essentially embraced globalization.” Specifically, competition for highly-skilled workers and the desire to expand the British economy led the Blair government to seek out ways to attract desired workers to the United Kingdom, while at the same time cut back on asylum-based immigration and promote integration strategies that emphasized “shared values.” Gordon Brown, Britain’s new Prime Minister, is expected to continue to promote these types of policies with a new gloss around promoting shared “Britishness.”

**Frank Schmiedel** of the European Commission commented on the fact that we need to change the tone of the migration debate, and stop characterizing migration exclusively as a threat. Toward that end, the European Commission has introduced a number of measures designed to better manage immigration. Recently, the Commission proposed introducing a “blue card” for highly-skilled migrants, and created a fast track immigration procedure for migrants who earn three times the minimum wage. The Commission also advocates sanctioning employers who hire unauthorized immigrants, and engaging in ethical recruiting practices in order to prevent a “brain drain” of highly educated immigrants coming from the third world.

**John Burgess**, Deputy Foreign Editor at the *Washington Post*, spoke about the fact that while European countries are gradually moving away from the idea that their country is “One nation, One language, One race,” many Europeans still see immigration as a threat. Despite this, the recent movements of immigrants within Europe since the formation of the European Union (from Eastern Europe to Britain, for example), have been relatively smooth.

**Martin Davidson**, of the British Council, pointed out that the British Council is extremely interested in studying migration because the British Council promotes cultural awareness and understanding of UK culture, and immigration to the United Kingdom has enhanced this cultural dynamic. Mr. Davidson stated that currently, 40% of post-graduate students in the United Kingdom come from overseas, and 80% of the students taking finance courses are international students. In recent surveys, the majority of British respondents have stated that diversity adds to the cultural life of the country, and that discrimination is widespread and needs to be remedied. This highlights the fact that the United Kingdom needs to do more in order to promote immigrant integration and manage immigration flows.

**Question and Answer Session**
One participant stated that coming to the event had made him feel like he was witnessing the death of family-based immigration to the United Kingdom (and, by extension, to the United States). He asked what implications this would have for African migration.
Both Demetrios Papademetriou and Will Somerville pointed out that while there has been a push in the United Kingdom and in the United States toward more employment-based (rather than family-based) immigration, family-based immigration remains an important component of the inflow — and the majority of immigration, in the case of the United States. Mr. Somerville also pointed out that if you look at asylum-based petitions in the United Kingdom, and their related family reunification petitions, a significant percentage of these petitions are from Africa. Frank Schmiedel added that the European Commission is trying to set up “mobility partnerships” with interested countries, which would set up a “comprehensive package of migration management” between the European Union and traditional sending countries, easing the “brain drain” effects of skilled workers emigrating from the third world.

Another participant asked the panelists to comment on how immigrants were being recruited from abroad—how they were identified, what kinds of skills they needed to have, etc.

Mr. Somerville responded by explaining that while the British economy has basically experienced uninterrupted growth since the early 1990s, changes in the economy have led to changes in the kinds of skilled workers that have been recruited. Between 1997 and 2000, for example, there were more work permits given for managerial/business related work. Now, more have been granted in the fields of health and finance. Martin Davidson and Demetrios Papademetriou also noted that the United Kingdom has been motivated to recruit a skilled labor force from abroad in light of growing competition for skilled labor from the United States, Australia, Canada, etc. In addition, the United Kingdom’s recruitment of skilled immigrants was partially a response to the United States’ “shutting down” of opportunities for skilled immigrants in the wake of 9/11.

Finally, the panel took a series of questions from the audience to answer in turn. The questions focused on the role that the United Kingdom was taking to prevent “brain drain” from third world countries, and on responses in Europe to undocumented or “illegal” immigrants.

Frank Schmiedel stated that while the European Union can try and regulate the number of people who come in “illegally,” it is never going to be able to end illegal immigration altogether. At the moment, the European Union’s main concern is making sure that all the borders into Europe are secure and that there is no “weak link” among the Schengen states. In response to the “brain drain” questions, Martin Davidson stated that one of the responsibilities of the European Union is to focus on development assistance, expanding the pool of people who could constitute “skilled workers,” rather than accepting the argument that there is a limited number of skilled workers to be fought over by first world countries. Mr. Somerville commented that while the United Kingdom has tried to avoid the “brain drain” from third world countries, efforts to do so have not always been successful. In 2002, for example, the United Kingdom introduced a voluntary code which stated that it would no longer recruit teachers and doctors from Africa. Most people now agree, however, that this was a complete failure, as economic markets continue to dictate immigration patterns.