# Keir Starmer faces backlash over immigration U-turn and heated PMQs clash



In the heart of a politically charged Prime Minister's Questions session, Keir Starmer faced fierce criticism from Plaid Cymru leader Liz Saville Roberts. During this exchange, Saville Roberts accused the Prime Minister of abandoning his principles concerning immigration. She highlighted his shifting stance, from espousing dignity and compassion for migrants during his 2020 campaign to a more hardened rhetoric characterised by phrases like “islands of strangers.” Her assertions pointed to a growing discontent with Starmer's current policies, which many believe echo populist fears surrounding immigration.

Starmer's vehement denial—calling his opponent’s remarks "rubbish"—provoked a backlash, with social media users and political commentators labelling his response as “rude” and “ungracious.” Critics noted that such personal attacks, rather than measured responses, reflected a leader under pressure, struggling to maintain composure in the face of justified scrutiny. This interaction serves as a microcosm of a larger debate enveloping the Prime Minister's new immigration policies, which have garnered considerable backlash from various quarters.

In recent weeks, Starmer unveiled a suite of stringent immigration reforms aimed at addressing both public concerns and the rising popularity of Nigel Farage's Reform UK party. This initiative, pragmatically driven by the staggering peak of net migration—reaching 906,000 in the year leading up to June 2023—aims to reduce annual net arrivals by 100,000. Critics of the proposed measures argue that such policies could hinder essential sectors like healthcare and academia, particularly the decision to close visa routes for care workers.

The Prime Minister has not shied away from promoting a narrative of controlled immigration, insisting that the UK must move towards a more selective and fair system. Measures include increasing the residency period for immigrants seeking citizenship—from five years to ten—except for fast-tracked highly skilled workers, and raising English proficiency requirements for various visa categories. The rationale behind these reforms is not merely electoral strategy; Starmer aims to present a vision of a cohesive society where migration is perceived as a privilege rather than a right.

Even as Starmer delineates this approach, he is met with a chorus of dissent. Employers and service providers warn that such restrictive measures could exacerbate labour shortages and stifle economic growth. As highlighted in various discussions, the existing skills gaps within the German economy coupled with public sentiment against high migration levels could undermine the UK’s global investment appeal. Some Labour MPs, including senior figures, have expressed discomfort with rhetoric reminiscent of more extreme anti-immigration sentiments, drawing comparisons to historical figures and speeches that have left indelible marks on British politics.

Amid this backdrop, Starmer’s official response to Saville Roberts’ allegations underscores the fragile balancing act he is attempting. While he professes to appreciate the contributions migrants have made historically, his government's tightening measures signal a pivot to appease a constituency increasingly aligned with anti-immigrant views. The implications of such a strategy go beyond immediate political gain, raising questions about the long-term cohesiveness and morality of migration discourse within the UK.

The fallout from Starmer's confrontational exchange with Saville Roberts illustrates the mounting pressure on his administration to accurately address immigration while remaining sensitive to public fears. With the subtle undertones of populism weaving through current policy discussions, it remains to be seen whether Starmer can navigate these turbulent waters without sacrificing his broader vision for a united Britain.

### Reference Map

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2. <https://www.ft.com/content/92070e36-921a-458d-ab37-6c682b9da645> - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has unveiled a stricter immigration policy in response to growing public concern and the surging popularity of Nigel Farage's Reform UK party. While aiming to control net legal migration—which peaked at 906,000 in the year to June 2023—Starmer's rhetoric and proposed measures closely mirror populist narratives, reflecting pressure from both public sentiment and his own MPs. Labour's plan includes reducing net arrivals by 100,000 annually, promoting English proficiency among migrants, and closing abused visa routes such as those for care workers. However, critics warn that these measures may impair key sectors like healthcare and academia and fail to address the politically sensitive issue of small boat crossings. The strategy also shifts focus towards attracting high-skilled migrants while delaying settlement and citizenship opportunities, potentially deterring talent. Analysts argue that to truly reduce immigration, the government must tackle underlying issues such as skills shortages and economic inactivity among the UK workforce. Without substantial investment in education and training, the reforms may hinder Labour’s goals of revitalizing public services and economic growth.
3. <https://apnews.com/article/d83661777617aae46a5cb6942f544e54> - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has announced a new initiative to significantly reduce immigration numbers and make it more difficult to settle in the country, in response to increasing public concern and the electoral rise of the anti-immigrant Reform UK party. Speaking in Downing Street, Starmer pledged to tighten all areas of the immigration system—work, family, and study—emphasizing a controlled, selective, and fair approach. These measures include raising salary thresholds and English language requirements for employment visas, ending overseas recruitment for care home jobs, and requiring 10 years of residency for citizenship. Migration has long been a contentious issue in the UK, especially post-Brexit, with net migration reaching 900,000 in the year to mid-2023. Despite past Conservative efforts to curb immigration, numbers have remained high, fueled by international crises in Ukraine and Hong Kong and dangerous Channel crossings by small boats. Critics argue that eliminating low-skilled visas risks harming essential services like care homes, while refugee advocates and some Labour members caution against adopting rhetoric and policies resembling those of the far-right. Conservatives claim Labour’s proposals are insufficient and demand a binding annual cap on immigration.
4. <https://www.reuters.com/world/uk/uks-starmer-under-pressure-farage-tightens-migration-rules-2025-05-11/> - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has announced new, stricter immigration policies in response to growing support for Nigel Farage's anti-immigration Reform UK party. Set to be detailed in forthcoming legislation, the measures include increasing the residency period needed for immigrants to qualify for settlement and citizenship from five to ten years, except for highly skilled workers who will be fast-tracked. Additional restrictions include limiting skilled worker visas to graduate-level applicants, stopping care sector firms from recruiting internationally, and raising English language requirements for adult dependents. These steps aim to reduce net migration and enhance migrant integration. Starmer emphasized making settlement a privilege rather than a right and ensuring migrants commit to learning English. The UK has seen a sharp rise in net migration, reaching 906,000 in the year to June 2023. Employers groups, however, express concern that these restrictions may hinder business efforts to fill labor shortages and could deter investment in the UK. The government insists these reforms will deliver greater control and tougher enforcement across the immigration system.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2> - Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer faced criticism after delivering a speech advocating for stricter immigration controls, in which he warned that the UK "risk[s] becoming an island of strangers" without reform. Critics, including several senior Labour figures, noted that his language echoed Enoch Powell's 1968 "rivers of blood" speech, infamous for its anti-immigration sentiment. However, Downing Street strongly rejected any comparison, emphasizing that Starmer entirely disavows Powell's rhetoric. A spokesperson reaffirmed that Starmer supports immigration and acknowledges its positive contributions, but insists that migration should be regulated fairly as public services face mounting pressure. The government cited record-high immigration levels under previous Conservative leadership and pledged to reduce net migration through measures such as tightening English language requirements for visas, extending citizenship eligibility timelines, and raising skill criteria for foreign workers. While some Labour members, including MP Sarah Owen and London Mayor Sadiq Khan, criticized the phrasing, Home Secretary Yvette Cooper defended Starmer, stressing the distinction between his balanced approach and Powell’s divisive message.
6. <https://www.ft.com/content/55bcac8b-6430-4040-b005-6cc24325dc71> - UK Prime Minister Keir Starmer has announced significant curbs on legal migration, prompting backlash from businesses, care providers, and universities. The reforms include requiring migrants to wait ten years before applying for settlement unless they contribute substantially to the economy or society, abolishing the social care visa route, reducing post-study visa durations for international students, and imposing a 6% fee levy on universities’ international tuition income. These changes aim to reduce net migration by 98,000 annually, bringing it down to 240,000 by 2029-30 from its peak of 906,000 in 2023. Critics, including business leaders and Labour MPs, warn the measures will exacerbate labor shortages, particularly in healthcare and education, and damage the UK’s economic growth and global appeal. Despite the criticism, Starmer insists the measures are necessary and fair, distancing the reforms from political motivations. He has not set a migration cap but promises significant reductions. Economists dispute Starmer’s claim that migration has not contributed to growth, highlighting other factors like Brexit and energy costs as impediments to economic performance. The reforms reflect a broader political shift in response to gains by the anti-immigration Reform UK party in local elections.
7. <https://apnews.com/article/a9c8ef1b39a24cf68aac873ff45ab8b8> - El Primer Ministro del Reino Unido, Keir Starmer, ha señalado la falta de coordinación entre la policía británica y las agencias de inteligencia como una de las causas del auge en el número de migrantes que llegan a través del Canal de la Mancha. Durante una reunión internacional dirigida a mejorar la seguridad fronteriza y combatir el tráfico de personas, Starmer expresó su frustración ante la dificultad de frenar el peligroso cruce marítimo desde Francia. Desde que fue elegido hace nueve meses, su gobierno ha tratado de abordar este problema persistente heredado de sus predecesores conservadores. Más de 6,600 migrantes cruzaron el canal en los primeros tres meses del año, el número más alto registrado. La oposición conservadora criticó la cancelación del plan del gobierno anterior de enviar solicitantes de asilo a Ruanda, calificándolo de "gimmick". Starmer también abogó por tratar a los traficantes de personas de la misma manera que a las bandas terroristas y enfatizó la necesidad de colaboración internacional y el intercambio de inteligencia para abordar la ruta del tráfico de personas.