# Keir Starmer faces backlash over immigration speech echoing Enoch Powell’s rhetoric



In a week marked by harsh political scrutiny, Prime Minister Keir Starmer has found himself ensnared in controversy after a speech that evoked Enoch Powell’s notorious "rivers of blood" rhetoric. During a No 10 press conference, he referred to the UK potentially becoming an "island of strangers" if immigration reforms are not enacted. This phrase has drawn ire not only from political opponents but also from within the Labour Party itself, with some senior figures deeming it insensitive. Nonetheless, Downing Street has hastily clarified that Starmer does not endorse Powell’s divisive views. A spokesperson reiterated that while Starmer explicitly supports immigration and celebrates its contributions, he believes that regulation is necessary to alleviate pressures on public services.

Starmer’s immigration policy, which has been labelled as “immoral and stupid” by critics, marks a significant pivot that many perceive as a response to the populist currents sweeping through British politics. The reforms include stringent measures such as significantly extending the period migrants must wait for settlement eligibility and an increase in skills criteria for foreign workers. This approach is resonant with societal anxieties regarding immigration levels, which soared under the previous Conservative administration, prompting Labour’s leadership to adopt a more assertive stance. Yet it raises questions about the ramifications for key sectors like healthcare and education, where labour shortages are already palpable.

The impact of these reforms is underscored by Simon Cowell’s recent comments on the issue. The television judge, speaking on Elizabeth Day’s podcast, expressed a belief that public understanding of the 2016 Brexit referendum was limited and called for a new vote, contending that the country might opt to rejoin the EU if given the opportunity. Cowell’s suggestion of a televised debate titled "You The Jury" aims to present both sides of the argument in a format that could engage the public more constructively. His perspective illustrates a growing sentiment that the consequences of Brexit may deserve reevaluation amidst changing economic conditions.

Critics of Starmer’s immigration strategy, encompassing voices from the left and right, argue that it fails to adequately address the realities of an ageing population and the pressing demand for labour across various sectors. This is compounded by recent polling that indicates most Britons still support immigration while simultaneously calling for stronger controls. In this politically charged environment, Starmer’s government must navigate the alarmist tone of its rhetoric while also striving to maintain a balance with economic growth.

The political landscape demands that Labour remedy its image as it seeks to articulate a coherent response to immigration—a topic that has increasingly become a focal point of discontent. As illustrated by sharp criticisms from business leaders, care providers, and universities about the curbs being implemented, there is an emerging consensus that these changes could undermine service quality and economic output. These concerns, if left unaddressed, may alienate a public that feels increasingly disconnected from political leadership.

Thus, as Starmer prepares to engage with prominent EU figures regarding future relations, he faces the daunting task of reconciling public sentiment with pragmatic policy-making. The spectre of overhauling immigration could stoke further dissatisfaction not just with his party but also with the broader governance model, as voters grapple with the complexities of a post-Brexit Britain and its implications for everyday life.

Navigating these waters will require more than just rhetorical assurances; it necessitates substantive solutions that directly address the anxieties of a public longing for clarity and reassurance in uncertain times. Without this, the spectre of becoming an "island of strangers" may end up feeling more relevant than anyone would care to admit.

### Reference Map

1. Paragraph 1: [[1]](https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/steve-anglesey-the-prime-minister-appears-to-know-less-about-brexit-than-simon-cowell/), [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2)
2. Paragraph 2: [[2]](https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2), [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/55bcac8b-6430-4040-b005-6cc24325dc71), [[7]](https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2)
3. Paragraph 3: [[1]](https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/steve-anglesey-the-prime-minister-appears-to-know-less-about-brexit-than-simon-cowell/), [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/3daf7366-fe7f-4b6b-9e23-652499082b34)
4. Paragraph 4: [[3]](https://www.ft.com/content/3daf7366-fe7f-4b6b-9e23-652499082b34), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/ee91cad6-c5f2-4a95-8fee-937e1ec10df6), [[6]](https://www.ft.com/content/3daf7366-fe7f-4b6b-9e23-652499082b34)
5. Paragraph 5: [[4]](https://www.ft.com/content/55bcac8b-6430-4040-b005-6cc24325dc71), [[5]](https://www.ft.com/content/ee91cad6-c5f2-4a95-8fee-937e1ec10df6)
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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.theneweuropean.co.uk/steve-anglesey-the-prime-minister-appears-to-know-less-about-brexit-than-simon-cowell/> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/f9b2cf94-a4f0-4d32-94f2-5fe274f764b2> - In May 2025, UK Prime Minister 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.
3. <https://www.ft.com/content/3daf7366-fe7f-4b6b-9e23-652499082b34> - An opinion piece critiques UK Labour leader Keir Starmer’s new immigration policy, arguing that it satisfies neither the political right nor the left. While right-wing commentators see it as ineffective in limiting arrivals and tackling small-boat asylum seekers, liberals criticize the strategy's tone and potential harm. Despite the UK's aging population and labor shortages, the curbs negatively impact sectors like universities and social care. Though polls indicate that Britons still support immigration, there is heightened demand for stronger control and integration. Starmer’s policy reflects an effort to acknowledge voter concerns after years of perceived political failure and populist gains. The broader issue, the author contends, is a breakdown in the democratic contract, with successive leaders making unrealistic promises to win votes. Starmer, like his Conservative predecessors, must balance competing needs: addressing immigration concerns pragmatically without undermining economic goals or further eroding public trust. The article concludes that leaning into voter concerns with practical solutions is the only viable path for moderates, though success remains uncertain.
4. <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.
5. <https://www.ft.com/content/ee91cad6-c5f2-4a95-8fee-937e1ec10df6> - The UK Labour government's recent white paper on immigration proposes significant curbs, particularly affecting the care sector. By eliminating the existing social care visa without introducing a viable alternative, the country risks exacerbating its growing care-dependency crisis due to an aging population. Though the original visa route was flawed, the UK still faces genuine labour shortages in the care industry. Without foreign workers or substantial tax hikes to fund social care, public services may deteriorate, increasing the burden on local governments and potentially diminishing the quality of public life. Past attempts to reform social care financing, such as the 'death tax' and 'dementia tax,' failed due to public resistance. While the government’s anti-immigration stance may appeal rhetorically, it risks political backlash if service standards fall and taxes rise. Meanwhile, Labour's broader strategy of imposing more burdens on businesses could further complicate economic recovery and public service reliability. Public dissatisfaction is growing not over net immigration numbers, but due to declining service quality and under-resourced local councils, as highlighted in recent surveys. This disconnect could prove politically costly if not adequately addressed.
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