

Immigration Under New Labour

Will Somerville

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Review by Nissa Finney

In the past month Britain has been launched into a new political era. The coalition government of the Conservative Party with the Liberal Democrats has taken power after thirteen years of Labour government. Throughout the election campaign immigration was a prominent topic, featuring in the manifestos of the major parties and in the much publicised televised Party leader debates. What was clear throughout this period of heightened political interest was consensus on immigration; consensus that there is a need for restrictions on the number of immigrants and tighter controls on who those immigrants are. In none of the party political or popular debates did the argument ever stray close to the boundaries of this assumption.

What Somerville provides in *Immigration Under New Labour* is a comprehensive and detailed review of how the New Labour government (from 1997-2007) changed immigration policy, providing a clear context for the contemporary situation. As such, it is a valuable contribution to migration studies and essential reading for anyone wanting to learn about the context and details of immigration policy in Britain at the turn of the twenty first century. However, the commentary is couched within accepted political frameworks and in this sense, the author's 'insider status' (having worked for the Commission for Racial Equality, the UK Cabinet Office and leading think tanks) perhaps prevents a more critical appraisal of policy. The book has three distinct sections: the first discusses themes of New Labour immigration policy; the second considers the influences on policy themes and implementation; the third evaluates the success of Labour's policies.

Part 1 is structured around policy themes of managed migration, security, integration, asylum and policy delivery and gives a thorough account of policy changes through the period 1997 to 2001. Somerville characterises two periods of policy making: the first period (97-01) was an efficiency drive to clear the backlog in the system, particularly of asylum applications; the second period (01-07) saw pro-active policy-making, towards managed migration for economic benefit and continued restriction on asylum. Control was central to policy: "with its focus on points and sponsors...the evolution of managed migration

has moved away from an employer-led system to one that is government-led and more focused on control” (page 36). In Part 1 Somerville pays considerable attention to asylum, and rightly so given its prominence during the period considered. He emphasises the government’s role in the criminalisation of asylum: “there is something of a legislative ‘pattern’ between 1997 and 2007 where discrete portions of individual anti-terror legislation are devoted to asylum and immigration and vice-versa, entrenching the connection between the two in law” (page 41). For a comprehensive record of policy changes under New Labour, there’s no need to look further than Part 1 of this book.

However, what Somerville does not provide is a strong critique of the philosophies driving policies, or any explicit evaluation of how these philosophies are particular to New Labour. One example where the opportunity for critical discussion is not taken is the 2004 policy goal (which was reached) to reduce asylum applications by half within a year (page 65). Opportunity for critique is passed by again in the separate discussions of community cohesion and social exclusion which do not consider how the interconnections between ethnicity, religion and deprivation are conceived in policy. In general, there is little focus on how ‘race’ comes into policies. Although the book points out the move away from a laissez-faire approach for the purposes of cost efficiency and economic benefit, it does not discuss policy alternatives (e.g. open borders) and why these were not seen as policy options by the Labour administration. The descriptive nature of the book is illustrated by the quotation of numbers (e.g. on asylum on page 65; on A8 immigrants on page 102) without context (or as rates) making it very difficult to interpret their meaning.

The second part of the book considers influences on policy, namely globalisation, law, the European Union, networks of policy making, politicians and parties, public attitudes, the media, and policy officials. Chapter 10 on networks is particularly interesting, offering new perspectives on how migration policy is formed. It explores how networks of people, groups and organisations influenced policy; how differing motivations and standpoints were negotiated in the policy formation process. This approach could have been taken further; indeed, a networks approach could have usefully framed the whole of Part 2.

Part 2 also gives interesting comment on the strong influence of key individuals, particularly Tony Blair (then Prime Minister) and David Blunkett (then Home Secretary). Somerville’s ‘insider view’ provides a fascinating example of discrepancies in the approaches of visa-processing officials in Sofia and Bucharest and those in England during the accession of Bulgaria and Romania to the EU. This led to a

political row and resignation of the Immigration Minister Beverly Hughes. Somerville comments that “[t]his was not simply a case of ‘uncovering fraud’ or exposing weaknesses. This was about street level bureaucrats changing the delivery of policy laid down from above because they disagreed with it.” (page 142).

Somerville suggests that policy changes under New Labour were a result of “external ‘shocks’ of 2001” i.e. Bradford/Burnley/Oldham disturbances, the Sangatte refugee camp crisis, and the terrorist attacks on the USA in September 2001. However, he does not labour this point or make it central to the interpretations. Although some would no doubt like more comment on how the paradigm shifts brought about by these events were translated into immigration policy, the book enables us to consider more everyday and behind-the-scenes workings of policy making.

The main weakness of Part 2 is that it is not as bold as it could have been. The chapters are based on interviews with experts involved in some capacity in immigration policy making but it is not always evident how the interviews inform the commentary. No quotes are used and only occasionally is it directly evident that the discussion is informed by the primary research. Resultantly, there is not as much ‘insider perspective’ as would be hoped and the causal link between key actors and policy are only discussed in a general sense. Little attempt is made at explanation, meaning the discussion stops short of the more interesting aspects of debate. For example, Chapter 8 demonstrates how law influences policy but does not go as far as discussing *why* policymakers are opposed to more fully incorporating human rights into immigration policy.

Although the discussion of policy networks is interesting, there is no comment on the relative power and influence of different parts of the networks. Also, there is little discussion on what viewpoints and groups do not influence policy and why (such as migrants and academics i.e. those outside the ‘policy community’; those with alternative ideologies). The chapters on the roles of attitudes and the media in influencing policy (chapters 12 and 13) are rather superficial overviews.

The summary of Part 2 interprets influences on policy on three levels: macro, meso and micro. This is a helpful interpretive framework and the chapters would have been more critical if this framework had been used to structure the section rather than to conclude it.

Part 3 of the book aims to evaluate New Labour’s immigration policy. This section is problematic in that it sets out to evaluate the success of government reforms by the extent to which these were practically achieved without a critical assessment of the reforms themselves from

a theoretical perspective. Evaluating whether or not aims are met seems empty without a critique of the aims themselves. However, the section is more critical than its self-stated aim suggests, though more in terms of discussing problems of Public Service Agreements (PSAs) and Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) as evaluation procedures rather than critiquing the underlying philosophies of the policies or their impact for different sectors of society. For example, (page 161) Somerville discusses PSA Target 5 to “reduce unfounded asylum claims” but incorporates no discussion of why this is, or is not, a valid target or its contradiction with legal and humanitarian rights to claim asylum. Somerville does acknowledge that “the existence of a performance measure and the fact that it is met should not automatically mean that performance is excellent or the policy itself is good” (page 163) but then goes on to base his commentary on performance measures, skirting the potentially more interesting discussion. Overall the aim of the chapters in Part 3 is not clear as Somerville appears to be caught in a dilemma between critiquing policy and critiquing evaluation methodology.

What Part 3 does raise, however, is the interesting issue that there are no specific targets or strategies for immigrant integration (e.g. in employment) and that migrants are vulnerable to social exclusion. Somerville highlights the contradiction here between (economic) migration policy and employment and social inclusion policies.

Overall this book is a careful, detailed description of immigration policy changes in Britain between 1997 and 2007. It provides a broad, comprehensive overview of an important period in British immigration policy. The book raises many important issues and contradictions. For example, “[o]n the one hand policymakers have acknowledged and strengthened the connection between human rights and migration policy, but on the other they have legislated for restrictions in the rights of migrants” (Page 61).

However, the book does not build to a central argument and it lacks critical perspective. This is emphasised by there being no concluding chapter drawing out key themes and implications of the book. The breadth rather than depth can leave the reader frustrated for a fuller critique (e.g. the section on Muslims page 59; the section on the ‘outsider group strategy’ taken by MigrationWatch page 110). Somerville treads the difficult line of assessing policy with an ‘insider perspective’ without wanting to compromise his own position.

So, what messages from the book are pertinent to the current political situation? There are two issues in particular that those interested in monitoring immigration policy can bear in mind. First, that “the 1971 Immigration Act gave the Home Secretary extensive and flexible rule-making powers regarding immigration regulations. Indeed, so regular

are these changes that many are not even press-released by the Home Office” (page 29). These powers remain, so to keep track of how migration is being managed, it is necessary to scrutinise decisions made by Home Secretary Theresa May. In theory this should not be difficult given the Prime Minister David Cameron’s commitment to transparent government.

Second, a clear message from this book is the consensus on immigration policy across political parties since the 1940s. It seems that this consensus is stronger than ever. Somerville predicts that “David Cameron may, in the future, prove to be the most influential of all conservative leaders in this period, as he represents a change in Conservative Party thinking on immigration. While the substance of this change is unclear, the tenor of debate is important and his period of leadership may come to be viewed as a rapprochement of party positions that could entrench a new ‘immigration settlement’.” (page 125). Although little party difference was evident in the 2000s (New Labour’s disposal of the Conservative’s asylum White List in 2007 but then readopting it later is just one example of policy shifts towards consensus), the current debate is even more narrow. Somerville’s comment that “[m]ainstream political parties do not seem to have ‘co-opted’ the positions of the BNP [British National Party]” (page 126) is, sadly, now inaccurate as demonstrated by the intention of the incoming Conservative-Liberal coalition to cap numbers of immigrants. The book, in this sense, is a warning of a political consensus capable of stultifying debate on immigration to the detriment of human rights.

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