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WILLIAM HAGUE

Even rightwingers know we need migrants

This is only the start of the age of migration — parties from all sides must strive for new ideas or risk French-style chaos

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We are entering the age of migration. Measured in numbers of people, this is likely to be on a scale never known in human history. According to latest UN forecasts, the population of Africa and the Middle East is set to grow by

around 320 million by the end of this decade, and 1.17 billion by 2050. We should hope that those vast numbers of young, digitally connected people will prosper in strong economies and stable political systems. But it is only realistic to assume many will be driven by poverty, persecution and accelerating climate change to search for opportunity or safety elsewhere, particularly since they can research the countries that might provide that on their phones. If only one in twenty of the people of that region migrated by mid-century — surely a conservative estimate — there would be 140 million people on the move.

The much smaller numbers that have moved northwards in recent years are already transforming the politics of Europe. Last week, the [Dutch government fell](#), brought down by irreconcilable differences over migration policy. Hard-right parties have entered government in Italy, hold the balance of power in Sweden, and have just won a local election in Germany. Although the next presidential election in France is three years away, the prospect looms over Europe that it could be won by Marine Le Pen, fortified by the backlash against violent riots and a promise to pass strict laws limiting immigration.

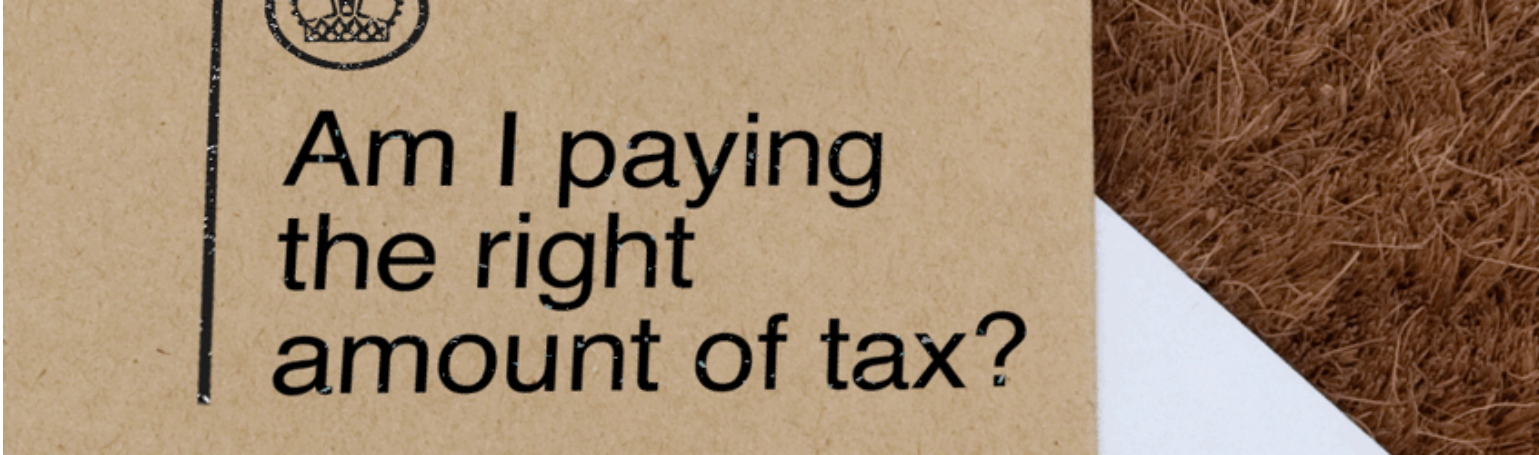
Here in Britain, migration played a key part in the vote to leave the EU, although immigration, expanded by people fleeing Ukraine, departing Hong Kong, seeking education and staffing our health services, is higher now than it was then. Peers and MPs are set to spend this week in acrimonious debates over the Illegal Migration Bill, as ministers attempt to deter migrants from crossing the channel with their [Rwanda relocation policy](#) while staying within international legal obligations.

If we are only in the early stages of the age of migration,

the intense divisions already aroused by it do not bode well for the future politics of this continent, already destabilised by anger on all sides. Voters are demanding governments show they are in control of their borders, and those demands are hurting many left-wing parties associated with greater openness to migration. Yet the response from the right cannot be so simple as preventing migration, because the second clear conclusion from population forecasts is that the need of European countries for migrants is inescapable.

The UN projections show 61 countries around the world can expect their populations to enter absolute decline before 2050, and most of those are in Europe. As their people become older and sicker, they need migrants. There can be no starker illustration of this than last Friday's announcement by the Italian government, led by the hard-right premier [Georgia Meloni](#). Elected on a stridently anti-immigration platform and battling to control illegal entry to Italy across the Mediterranean, her administration said it would nevertheless give 425,000 work permits to non-EU nationals to ease labour shortages in sectors such as tourism and construction.

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The ideas of the “New Conservatives”, a group of Tory

MPs calling for tougher immigration controls, come up against the same reality. The only way they could arrive at a plan to reduce numbers to about a quarter of a million a year was to stop visas being granted for care workers. But this would immediately produce an intensified crisis in social care. They also wanted a drastic reduction in student visas, but that would devastate the income of our universities.

This is the awkward reality for all of us on the right who have promised lower immigration in the past: unless you can magically create a younger, fitter, more willing and better trained population, you need migrants. There is a corresponding new reality for the left: an open-door policy towards migration will be inadequate for the new age, and incidentally will bring electoral annihilation. Hard-line Tories might be struggling to make their numbers add up, but their Labour equivalents, trying to weaken Rishi Sunak's clampdown on illegal migration this week, also need to prepare for the new age. Sir Keir Starmer's rhetoric has become tougher on immigration, but the detail of Labour policy still suggests a weaker approach.

Left and right, in Britain and across Europe, need to move on from long-established attitudes unless migration is to dominate and poison political debate. New policies, and even some common ground, could be found in three principles for the future: establishing control, creating opportunity, and promoting shared identity. Establishing control is the vital foundation of any sensible migration policy. This is why I personally sympathise with the government's approach to the criminal gangs fuelling illegal crossings of the Channel, despite all the costs, legal challenges and complexity of proposing deportation to

Rwanda. Critics need to show convincingly what they would do instead, for unless some such policy works a future government will be driven to withdraw from international legal frameworks such as the European Convention on Human Rights. In addition, for any government, the introduction of a digital identity system should be part of clarifying the right of an individual to live and work here.

Good policy, however, also involves creating opportunity for the migrants, including refugees, who bring great strengths to their new country. The US is the outstanding model of the crucial role of migration in bringing economic and technological pre-eminence. It is a powerful reason why America will ultimately see off the challenge of China, a much more closed society. In the UK we have key sectors for the future, such as artificial intelligence and quantum science, that are crying out for the most talented people in the world. We should not let an obsession with getting numbers down prevent us from attracting those people. We could introduce special visas for outstanding talent to bring the brightest minds to work and settle here.

If the future is one of continuing high levels of migration, the promotion of shared identity becomes even more important. Britain has done better on this than many of our neighbours — look at how many of our political leaders are children of immigrants. But we should not be complacent. The coming age of migration is another reason to ensure citizenship carries obligations as well as

rights. Labour's David Lammy put it well in advocating compulsory national service to "break down the divides that are becoming entrenched in modern society".

Such proposals for integration will be important. The age of migration is upon us. Political ideas need to be updated for it if deep polarisation and division are to be averted.

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