

[Break that promise, Mr Cameron](#) [1]

Written by [Jan Boucek](#) [2] | Monday 22 November 2010



A good government knows when to break a bad promise. If the Liberal Democrats can break their pledge on university tuition fees, their Conservative bedfellows can break theirs on immigration. The Tories' campaign promise to put a cap on non-EU immigration was one of those populist panderings that doesn't address the root problem.

To be sure, there are many people who simply dislike foreigners for being, well, foreign and there's not much any government can do about that. Others think immigrants take jobs away from locals, but most such jobs are those the locals refuse to do or aren't qualified to do.

Probably what riles most anti-immigration sentiment is a sense that, in recent years, too many immigrants with no skills, no income and no assets have moved to the UK for its seemingly generous but inefficient benefits system, not to mention free health care and education for their children. But the fundamental problem here isn't immigration, it's the benefits system and the universal access to health and education.

The downside of the immigration cap is clear. In the first instance, it sends the new government slogging through the swamp of discredited target-setting. The immigration cap for next year is supposed to be 196,000 - not 195,000, not 197,000, but precisely 196,000. Where do these people get the chutzpah to set such an exact number? That's Gordon Brown-style thinking, through and through.

Businesses have already made clear how the immigration cap is gumming up their competitiveness. Promises to cut red tape are proving to be a sham as a result of the new immigration cap. Global mobility for any global company is critical to success.

Now, this week, the education sector has weighed in with its objections to the immigration cap. The Migration Advisory Service reckons that up to 88,000 foreign students will need to be chopped away if the government is to meet its immigration cap. That would certainly put a big hole in the government's plans for funding higher education. Meanwhile, one education specialist says education and training exports are worth some £40 billion a year to the UK economy, second only to financial services.

Then there's those elusive benefits from the free-flow of labour into and out of any country - flexibility, creativity, imagination, competitiveness and ambition.

The immigration cap is a bad idea that's going to tie up the new government in knots with an ever-more complex regulatory response to an unworkable objective. Come the next election, this government will be judged on whether it has put the nation's finances in order and whether the economy is healthy. An immigration cap is more likely to damage both objectives.

So, go on, break that promise.

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