

UK Prime Minister Cameron plays the anti-immigrant card

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Prime Minister David Cameron announced a raft of anti-immigrant measures this week in advance of new European Union rules coming into effect that will end restrictions on Bulgarians and Romanians entering the UK.

New migrants will not receive unemployment benefits for the first three months of their stay, and out-of-work welfare payments will end after six months, unless the claimant can prove he or she has a “genuine prospect” of a job.

New migrants will not be allowed to claim housing benefits immediately, and any migrant caught begging or sleeping rough will be deported and not allowed to return to the UK for a year.

Migrants wishing to claim benefits will be subjected to more restrictions, including a new minimum earnings threshold. Failure to meet the requirements will result in the removal of welfare benefits, including Income Support.

The Liberal Democrats, the coalition partners of the Conservatives, are signed up to Cameron’s proposals. Liberal leader and Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg said he was a “whole hearted supporter” of the measures. Clegg added that the freedom to move and work in the EU “isn’t a freedom to receive benefits, no questions asked.” He added, “The right to work is not an automatic right to claim [benefits].”

To coincide with his announcement, Cameron published an article in the *Financial Times* entitled “Free movement within Europe needs to be less free.” In the piece, he denounced the then-Labour government for committing a “monumental mistake” in 2004 by deciding that “the UK should opt out completely of transitional controls on the new EU member states.” He continued: “They had the right to impose a seven-year ban before new citizens could come and work here, but—almost alone in Europe—Labour refused it.”

Cameron is kicking at an open door. Jack Straw, Labour’s former home secretary, has already stated that his 1997-2010 government had made a “spectacular mistake” by allowing migrants into the UK from new EU countries such as Poland.

Cameron was also able to cynically exploit comments by another former Labour Party home secretary, David Blunkett, who stated: “We have got to change the behaviour and the culture of the incoming community, the Roma community, because there’s going to be an explosion otherwise. We all know that.”

In response to Cameron, Labour’s current shadow home secretary, Yvette Cooper, declared that the prime minister was merely “playing catch-up.”

“Why has it taken him eight months to copy Labour’s proposal to make the habitual residence test stronger and clearer,” she asked?

“After Labour proposed this change in March,” she continued, “the government said it was all fine and nothing needed to change. Yet now, rather than following a coherent plan, they are flailing around.”

Cameron suffered a mild rebuke from European Commission President José Manuel Barroso, who said the two had spoken by telephone. “I had the occasion to underline to [him] that free movement is a fundamental treaty principle that must be upheld,” he said.

However, Cameron was able to advance his proposals as a continuation and elaboration on measures carried out or proposed by other EU states. This week, Germany’s new Christian Democratic/Social Democratic coalition committed to a crackdown on migrants for “unjust claims of social security benefits.” The French Socialist Party government also called for tighter controls on temporary cross-border workers.

In his *Financial Times* article, Cameron declared, “It is time for a new settlement which recognises that free movement is a central principle of the EU, but it cannot

be a completely unqualified one. We are not the only country to see free movement as a qualified right: interior ministers from Austria, Germany and the Netherlands have also said this to the European Commission.”

“Britain is not acting alone in taking these steps,” he continued. “Other countries such as the Netherlands already impose a three-month residence requirement before you can access benefits such as job seekers’ allowance.”

Saying he would work with other EU states “to return the concept of free movement to a more sensible basis,” he added, “We need to do the same with welfare. For example, free movement should not be about exporting child benefit.”

Cameron’s measures were greeted with rapture by the most right-wing sections of the British media, with the *Daily Express* stating, “At last, David Cameron reveals a crackdown on new EU migrants.”

“Britain cannot take a new wave of EU immigration,” the newspaper declared, hailing the “excellent turnout of Conservative MPs who are backing our objective with an amendment to the Immigration Bill currently before the House of Commons. That amendment would ensure controls remain in place at least until 2018.”

United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage goaded Cameron, saying his proposals did not go far enough. “It doesn’t sound very tough to me,” he said. “Under his proposal somebody can come here on January 1 from Romania and within 12 weeks be entitled to unemployment benefit. I think that’s outrageous.”

Cameron’s announcements were in no small part aimed at appeasing supporters of the anti-immigrant, anti-European Union UKIP among Conservative backbenchers and the Tory Party at large. In recent elections, the Conservatives have haemorrhaged support to UKIP.

It is inevitable that further anti-immigrant measures will be announced. Following a government statement on immigration Thursday from Home Secretary Teresa May, a succession of Conservative MPs demanded that restrictions on immigration, as demanded by Farage, be imposed.

Tory MP Philip Hollobone stated, “This country is full,” adding, “Yes, this country will be taken to court, but it will be a signal of firm intent about our renegotiation of the EU treaties, and by the time it comes to court, hopefully, we will have had our referendum [on exiting the EU] and left this wretched organisation altogether.”

An amendment to extend the controls on Bulgarian and

Romanian entry to the UK has been put forward by Tory MP Peter Bone. Some 40 Tory MPs are estimated to be in favour of the measure. Bone said in the debate that followed May’s statement: “The only way you will deal with this problem of stopping thousands and thousands of people coming from Romania and Bulgaria is extended transitional arrangements.”

Another Tory, Charles Walker, demanded of May, “I ask you to find your inner lion or tiger and extend transitional controls until 2019. You should take the hit and not pay the EU fine.”

The pronouncements of the Tories, the Liberal Democrats and Labour, echoed in the front page and comment sections of an increasingly hysterical media, are designed to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment and foist the blame on them for the consequences of cuts that are destroying essential social services and welfare and driving millions into poverty.

The BBC published figures Thursday showing that of 5.5 million people who claimed out-of-work benefits this February, just 120,000 were nationals of other EU countries.

According to a *Guardian* report, between 2004 and 2011, 1.32 million migrants arrived in the UK, but 644,000 people who were born in the EU left in those years. In 2011, the UK took in 566,044 EU nationals, but 350,703 EU nationals emigrated.

There are almost twice as many migrants to the UK from non-EU countries as from the EU, and the vast majority of these work or study. Most migrants want to work and leave if they cannot find work.

In contrast to the claim that Britain will be flooded by migrants from Romania and Bulgaria, the Home Office predicts that just 5,000 to 13,000 nationals will arrive annually from all of the European Union’s new member-states after enlargement.



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