

The SEI ran a one-day workshop on September 18th 2015 on the theme *Britain at a crossroads: the politics of asylum, immigration and Europe*. The workshop was run by Dr Erica Consterdine, and included external speakers from across the UK. Immigration has become an increasingly politically salient issue in Britain, rising up the agenda for the last 15 years as an issue of voting importance. In turn, the newly elected Conservative Government faces a number of major migration challenges over the course of the next term. We felt it was thus timely to be discussing the politics of immigration in Britain.

The biggest challenge for the Conservative government is how to cooperate and reconcile the EU Mediterranean and related Calais crises, and in turn establish a coherent EU wide asylum policy. Relatedly our morning session focused on the challenges of building a comprehensive asylum integration policy, including Dr Lucy Mayblin from the University of Sheffield who presented her research on asylum policy and the right to work. Whilst the vast majority of asylum seekers in the UK are forbidden from working, based on the orthodoxy of the pull factor thesis –the idea that more asylum seekers will come to the country if permission to work is granted – Dr Mayblin’s research challenges such assumptions and identifies barriers to political change. Drawing on Bob Jessop’s work on the existential necessity for complexity reduction, Dr Mayblin described the ways in which asylum policy is built on ‘imaginaries’ that shape policy making.

Whilst Prime Minister Cameron faces the challenge of building a coherent EU wide asylum policy, promised further devolution to Scotland post 2014 referendum also bring with it issues surrounding asylum policy. Dr Gareth Mulvey from the University of Glasgow spoke to the issues, and examined the development of refugee integration policy at both the UK and Scottish levels of governments. He argued that the relatively informal and fluid nature of intergovernmental relations has opened up the space for policy discretion, particularly in the way of greater autonomy for Scotland leading to a type of ‘venue shift’ in the area.

Whilst the Scottish referendum caused political stir in 2014, perhaps the greatest challenge for the Conservative government is appeasing public concerns over immigration. Yet what is in many ways unique about current public concerns over immigration is that this immigration is in fact EU mobility, and such concerns have been propelled by the representation and coverage of free movement by the press. Dr Alex Balch from the University of Liverpool explored these issues in his research on media depictions and framings of EU migrants. Dr Balch demonstrated that the way the UK media reported the immigration debate has shifted over time and is becoming increasingly “dehumanised” – dominated by a narrow range of negative arguments with less coverage of any positive aspects. He found that the balance shifts away from economic nationalism (immigration controls aimed at benefiting the UK economy) towards welfare chauvinism (immigration controls aimed at protecting public goods).

Whilst public opinion has long been hostile towards increased immigration, the notion of it being a significant problem is far more recent, gravitating from low to high politics. As a result, immigration featured heavily in both the 2010 and 2015 campaigns for all parties to an unprecedented degree. Dr Consterdine from the University of Sussex spoke about feedback effects of the Labour government’s managed migration policy and the way in which these reforms have contributed

towards the politicization of migration. She argued that Labour's reforms have had generated three feedback effects on politics and policymaking in Britain, including changes to policy implementation practices, an indirect corporatist agreement built between government and interests groups, and ideational lock in effects on the immigration debate.

Whilst immigration has dogged Labour's time in opposition, the issue also generates problems for the Conservative Party. Rebecca Partos, a PhD student at the University of Sussex, presented her research on the Conservative Party's immigration policy change both in power and opposition. She found that of the possible influences on policymaking, the personal convictions and managerial style of the leadership of the Party have the greatest impact on policymaking; that electoral calculations relating to elections in the recent past or near future are critical, and that there is little evidence that changes to the factions of the Party have had an impact on immigration policy.

Our discussions focused on these issues, and the day was a great success!