



70 MILLION : MYTH OR NOT?

Summary

1. Some responses to the ONS population projections published on 21 October^[1] have been to claim that there are reasons to believe that 70 million will not, in practice, happen. This note examines some of the arguments.

Projections are not predictions

2. The ONS say explicitly that their projections do not take account of future changes in circumstances or significant changes in government policy. This, of course, is correct. However, what they do show is what is very likely to happen unless there are significant changes in either circumstances or policy.

Immigration from East Europe has passed its peak

3. This is true. There are good reasons for expecting net migration from Eastern Europe to decline. The fall in sterling has reduced the incentive to come to Britain, other EU countries will have to open their borders in May 2011 and the birth rate in the main sending countries has fallen very sharply. For example, the number of Poles reaching the age of 18 will fall by about 30% in the next 10 years. Furthermore, some of the very large number of East Europeans will begin to return home, counterbalancing new arrivals. However, these factors have already been taken into account in the ONS projections which assume that net migration from Eastern Europe will fall to zero in the next five years.

Immigration is already falling

4. The Minister for Immigration has claimed that last year saw a 44% fall in net migration. He is confusing the International Passenger Survey with net migration. The Passenger Survey numbers are always adjusted for asylum seekers, flows from Ireland, visitor switches etc. That normally involves an addition of about 35,000. When the international migration figures for 2008 are released on 26 November, they are likely to be about 150,000. This represents a 37% fall on 2007. However, it is also likely that these figures will show that there has been no significant reduction in the rate of migration from the third world.

The effect of the Points Based System

5. We do not yet have a full year's results. The government have claimed that, had it been in effect last year, immigration would have been reduced by 20,000^[2]. However, the population projections show that, in order to stabilise the population below 70 million, it will be necessary to

reduce net immigration to about 50,000 from the probable 2008 level of 150,000. It is obvious that present policies will not achieve that.

The economic recession will reduce immigration

6. Past experience indicates that a recession reduces immigration for two or three years but it resumes its upward trend thereafter[3].

The projections assume that past patterns will continue

7. On the contrary, the past pattern is of a rapidly climbing rate of immigration in the past ten years [4]. These projections assume that net immigration will fall by 25% from their peak and remain flat thereafter.

The track record of ONS projections

8. It is fair to say that the ONS make a serious and detailed effort to reach the most plausible assumptions possible as explained in a further Migrationwatch paper no 9.24.[5] In 2007 the ONS published a study of the accuracy of their population projections over the past 50 years. At the 20 year range the average error was about 2.5%[6].

Immigration is necessary to cope with an ageing population

9. Immigration can only postpone the effect of an ageing population for the obvious reason that immigrants themselves grow older. Unless there is to be a very large and continuing inflow, this is no solution. A series of major reports have dismissed the idea. The most recent is the Turner Commission on Pensions[7], reporting in 2007, which concluded that "only high immigration can produce more than a trivial reduction in the projected dependency ratio over the next 50 years... but it is important to realise that this would only be a temporary effect unless still higher levels of immigration continued in later years...."

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NOTES

- 1 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/pprojr1009.pdf>
- 2 <http://www.bia.homeoffice.gov.uk/sitecontent/newsarticles/newpointssystem?area=allNews>
- 3 <http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefingPaper/document/23>
- 4 <http://www.statistics.gov.uk/statbase/prep/507.asp>
- 5 <http://www.migrationwatchuk.org/briefingPaper/document/164>
- 6 [Population Trends 128 Summer 2007 "Fifty years of UK national population projections." Page 14](#)
- 7 Pensions: Challenges and Choices. The First Report of the Pensions Commission.