We are a haven for the persecuted, not a home to liars and cheats' ran the suitably blunt headline to Home Secretary, David Blunkett’s article in The Times in October 2002, announcing the latest raft of measures to tackle ‘asylum abuse’. The UK government is convinced that it must not only be tough but sound tough, if the public are to be reassured that it is bringing asylum claims under control. The lesson of history, Blunkett said, is that the Far Right succeed when the Centre-Left ignore the concerns of ‘the people we represent’. He is determined to defeat those on the Right who exploit people’s fears and insecurity about immigration, by ensuring that the system is not open to abuse.

With countries across Europe rejecting social democratic governments in favour of coalitions that include the Far Right, his claim has to be taken seriously. A MORI poll for Readers Digest in October 2002 found no less than 80 per cent of adults in Britain think asylum seekers come to Britain because it is a ‘soft touch’ and 63 per cent that too much is done to help them. However, is Blunkett adopting the right strategy to win public confidence in Britain’s migration system? Is he correct in thinking that highlighting measures to address abuse will provide the kind of reassurance that is needed? Moreover, given the competing pressures to open up new channels for labour migration, on which further measures were announced on the same day, is he in danger of confusing the public with inconsistent messages that will fail to secure the necessary support for his reforms?

Immigration and asylum are here to stay. Political instability and economic underdevelopment will continue to lead significant numbers of people to seek asylum abroad. Mobility for work is a central feature of the international economy and one remedy for shortages of skilled and low-skilled labour in some sectors of European labour markets. Moreover, the decline in the proportion of the population of working age may well increase these shortages, and migration, along with steps to raise participation rates among the existing population, is part of the answer.

“The UK government is convinced that it must not only be tough but sound tough, if the public are to be reassured that it is bringing asylum claims under control”
When labour migrants or refugees secure permission to stay, moreover, they necessarily have a right to be joined by their spouse and children. So migration will continue, bringing considerable benefits as well as challenges. It can be managed but not prevented.

Differing responses
Governments across Europe are responding to that reality in different ways, with no clear Left-Right divide. Britain’s Labour government has opened up labour migration channels with most enthusiasm, reflecting Blair’s business-friendly, cut red-tape rhetoric, while simultaneously taking a tough line on asylum. In contrast, the Centre-Left government in Sweden remains firmly opposed to labour migration. In Germany Schroder’s social democratic government has cautiously opened up labour migration but at the same time adopted one of the most severe restrictions on families, barring children over 12 from joining their migrant parents in Germany. Meanwhile, Austria’s Conservative/Right coalition is exploring new legal channels for temporary labour migration, Spain’s conservative government allowing a quota of high and low-skilled workers and even Italy’s Berlusconi, under pressure from employers, has cut back on labour migration less than expected.

Governments across Europe have stepped up measures to tackle illegal immigration, with stiff penalties for people smugglers and deployment of increasingly sophisticated technology to detect those attempting to elude controls. However, there are markedly differing approaches to internal controls – only some governments protect the right of illegal migrants to access health and education services; and sharply differing views on the merits of programmes to allow migrants to acquire legal status. Italy has had four amnesties since 1986, allowing 700,000 illegal migrants to regularise their status. Portugal has just determined never to do so again, convinced that this approach simply attracts more illegal migrants.

On asylum too, approaches differ, although across Europe there have been moves, like the use of carrier sanctions and visa controls, to prevent and deter asylum seekers from reaching national borders and thus acquiring the right to apply for refugee status. Once in a country, governments have denied asylum seekers the right to work and curtailed access to welfare benefits, while administrative delays in determining refugee status have meant applicants languishing for months waiting for a decision. The criteria for determining refugee status also differ, some being more restrictive than others, as do the conditions under which asylum seekers are expected to live. While all member-states accept the need for an EU-wide agreement on such matters, national priorities and traditions differ, as do their strategic interests. The principal that asylum seekers are the responsibility of the first safe country they enter understandably has somewhat less appeal for countries in the south of Europe than for those in the north.

Choices and trade-offs
Approaches differ across Europe because decisions on migration policy involve complex choices and trade-offs, involving winners and losers. However, these choices are not the subject of open debate because the success of the Far Right, with its simplistic, anti-migrant rhetoric, has polarised the discourse. The Far Right preclude debate by their unwillingness to acknowledge the importance of migrants to their country’s
economy or the humanitarian obligation to reunite families and protect those fleeing persecution. However, the Left also close down debate by their unwillingness to discuss the fears and resentment to which migration gives rise, for fear of pandering to racism.

There is as a result little political space for reasoned debate in which government can engage. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, it is rare for the key protagonists – employers, foreign governments, human rights NGOs, trade unions, local service providers – ever to meet to discuss the competing objectives of migration policy and the choices that have to be made. As a result, the debates – like that between the Home Office and the Department of Work and Pensions on whether to open up legal channels for low-skilled workers – take place behind closed doors. Key stakeholders, like health service and education providers, the Scottish Executive (concerned about Scotland’s declining population) or small employers, cannot raise their concerns. There is little transparency in the options considered, the trade-offs that have been made, on who will be the winners and losers.

In broad terms, the conflict that the government must reconcile is familiar: the pressure to allow immigration for work and humanitarian reasons, while reassuring the public that migration does not represent a threat – whether to their jobs, their child’s education, or their national identity. However, the range of the choices now faced is, in reality, far more complex.

**Labour migration**

Governments have to decide just how generous they should be in allowing employers to have as many overseas workers as they want, for as long as they want, regardless of the potential or perceived impact on wages or unemployment and regardless of the possible impact on public services and on public opinion. To the extent that they limit entry, should they do so with quotas, by requiring that employers ‘test the labour market’ by advertising each job, or by limiting length of stay? And should they allow spouses and children to accompany the worker, and the spouse to work?

For skilled migrants, David Blunkett has overseen the transformation of Britain’s cumbersome, unpredictable work permit system into an efficient, streamlined process that makes 90 per cent of decisions within 24 hours. A list of shortage occupations precludes the need to test the labour market, permit holders can often stay long enough to apply for permanent residence, and their spouse can work. In addition, a new Highly Skilled Workers Programme allows individuals with skills and experience to enter Britain to look for work, prior to any job offer. These decisions have had to be taken with relatively little knowledge of the economic or social impacts of labour migration as the previous government funded no research in this area. Blunkett, to his credit, has supported a growing research programme designed to provide evidence on impacts, to inform future decisions.

Britain’s skilled labour shortages are highly selective. Nevertheless, in the sectors where the shortages are experienced, the ability of employers to access the workers they need is crucial. Whether it be IT specialists for the private sector, or nurses and teachers in the public sector, the government felt it necessary to bow to demand. Each worker under the work permit system is recruited for a specific job for which the employer is unable to secure a suitable UK or EU worker.

Meanwhile, difficult decisions have to be made on whether, and to what extent, to open up low-skilled labour migration channels. Few would deny that some of those entering the asylum queue are primarily motivated by the desire to work and, along with those
working illegally, are constrained by the absence of legal channels to access the available jobs. There is less consensus on whether opening up those channels will in practice reduce the numbers claiming asylum or working illegally. And the Department for Work and Pensions, with targets to reduce unemployment, has concerns that a ready supply of mobile, motivated and probably well-educated migrants would out-compete the hard-to-place unemployed. Moreover, a long-term low-skilled scheme would raise difficult questions about family reunion and the potential costs for public services that would ensue. The compromise is a the new seasonal scheme for the hospitality and food processing sectors, increasing the quota of agricultural workers, and relaxation of restrictions on the Commonwealth Working Holiday Scheme under which an additional 46,000 young people already come to the UK to work each year.

Home Office research recently established that migrants contribute £2.5 billion more to the public purse each year than they consume in public services and welfare benefits. While this fiscal gain may be modest, it is of considerable political benefit. ‘Migrants subsidised by taxpayer’ is a headline the Cabinet wants to avoid. However, there is a competing objective. Public services to migrants can play a considerable role in their successful integration. The UK government wants new migrants to learn English, and prospective citizens to have English classes. The new Dutch government, faced with the same challenge, has decided that each migrant should pay 7,000 Euros for a 500-hour language and culture course, a payment beyond the purse of most migrants. However free English classes for all migrants to the UK would be a substantial public investment.

Labour migration poses further choices. Our selection of skilled migrants from overseas can be at the expense of a developing country that has educated and trained those individuals and now needs their skills. This is not always the case. India produces IT specialists ‘for export’. The Philippines does likewise with nurses. But the Department for International Development is rightly concerned to ensure that developing countries’ interests are taken into account and steps taken to ensure that they benefit from their citizens’ emigration to Britain. As a result, the Department of Health, for instance, has a code of practice on selection of health professionals from abroad. However, where the employer is not the department itself but numerous health trusts and authorities up and down the country, and demand is acute, it may not always be effective.

Illegal immigration and asylum

Managing illegal immigration requires its own trade-offs on which, once again, there has been scant debate. We know little about the numbers living without permission in the UK, where they work, whether they are paying taxes and living normal lives or living on the margins of society. Yet their existence undermines the integrity of the immigration system, feeds public concern that the system is out of control, and undoubtedly lays the individuals open to exploitation and abuse. The government’s strategy is two-fold: to step up controls to detect and detain (hence, for instance, the proposals to introduce a national ID card); and the opening up of alternative legal channels of entry.
There is, however, a potential downside to stepping up enforcement. If the legal channels do not provide enough workers, firms that cannot get staff will retreat into a deregulated labour market. There is then a danger that they will operate outside other regulations, such as health and safety and the minimum wage. Alternatively, if legal channels do provide enough workers, displacing those working illegally, they may remain in the country unable to obtain legal employment. Controls on access to health care and education for children would further remove illegal immigrants from the basic necessities of life. Moreover, involving local authorities and local police forces in detecting and removing illegal workers would fracture the trust and positive community relations which may have been built up painstakingly over many years. There are clearly choices to be made about where to draw the line in enforcement so that it does not become counterproductive.

On asylum too, there are hard choices. The Left castigates the British government for the poor living conditions of asylum seekers, surviving on 70 per cent of Income Support and often in sub-standard housing in a hostile environment. It is pressed to provide conditions which mitigate the suffering which many asylum seekers have experienced and to ensure that they have the full protection of the law, and legal representation, in evaluating refugee status. Recognising that asylum seekers invariably want to work to support themselves and to begin the process of integration into British society, migrant advocates urge that they be allowed to work and not remain dependent on the taxpayer. Leaving aside the potential fiscal impact of providing greater support, and the impact on public opinion, this humanitarian option is deeply unattractive for a government determined to reduce the number of asylum seekers, and which is blamed by France for providing conditions that make asylum seekers determined to get here. It has, however, reversed the error it made in 1997 when it failed to invest sufficient resources in the asylum determination system to speed it up. Over the first two years, the backlog in undecided cases it inherited from the previous government grew to over 100,000, a problem exacerbated by a failed computer system. Now the majority of new cases are given a decision within two months – a very significant improvement. However, that goal has been achieved in part by excluding many cases on technicalities and there appears little confidence outside of government in the fairness of the decisions. As a result, the government does not have the political support it needs to effect the removal of those whose claim is rejected.

Central-local divide
Central government and the courts decide who is entitled to enter Britain and to stay. However, local authorities, health authorities and education providers are responsible for providing the services that migrants subsequently need. There is an obvious conflict of interest over who pays. There is an even more fundamental conflict between the Home Office’s rules limiting migrants’ access to services – designed to protect the public purse – and the responsibility which local service providers effectively have for the people in their area, whatever their immigration status. Thus local service providers can find that they are providing a service to a family that has been denied the right to stay in the UK but not removed from the country, or that they are unable to provide a service that they can see is needed. Learning and Skills Councils, for instance, may find themselves having to advise local colleges not to admit young asylum seekers because they are not entitled to post-16 education. Schools, moreover, find pupils in whom they have invested time and
commitment removed without notice to another part of the country; and local housing authorities experiencing shortages in temporary accommodation find it taken up by asylum seekers dispersed by the National Asylum Support Service.

A borough like Haringey in north London, the 20th most deprived district in England, can find itself accommodating 19 per cent of the asylum seekers supported by NASS. Twenty per cent of Haringey’s pupils are from refugee or asylum seeking households, with children entering and leaving the school continually throughout the year. Yet the national funding formulae for schools provides funding only for each school place, with no account taken of how many children fill that place during one year.

**Conclusion**

Decisions on the future of migration policy mean reconciling competing objectives and making difficult choices. The current government has shown itself far readier than its predecessors to research and make public the evidence which will inform future decisions, to relax the Home Office’s control over migration policy within government (creating inter-departmental arrangements for contributing to policy discussions), and to take difficult decisions on opening up new channels for labour migrants. It needs to go further if it is to make the public aware of the real choices that need to be made, and win public support for its managed migration policy.

The public are remarkably ignorant about the true position. The MORI poll in October found respondents thought 20 per cent of the population are immigrants, when the true figure is less than four per cent; that 26 per cent of the population are ethnic minorities when the actual figure is seven per cent; and that an asylum seeker is given £113 a week when the actual amount is £36.54. This can be no surprise given the tone of the regular press coverage on asylum exemplified in the *Birmingham Evening Mail*’s ‘Refugees are living in luxury flats in the Midlands at Taxpayers’ expense’ in March 2002. Such distortion requires a concerted and consistent communications strategy to put accurate information into the public domain. But this government, and its predecessor, have effectively reinforced public suspicions that the system is open to abuse when justifying their tough approach.

The Government needs to lead a more open and honest debate, informing the public about the role of migration and engaging citizens in the choices to be made. The Canadian Immigration Minister has a statutory duty to do this before introducing policy reforms. The exercise is a blend of informing, explaining and persuading. The British Government equally needs to have the confidence to engage the public in this debate. Migration is part of our future. We need to adapt and engage in the decisions that need to be taken: on who comes, who stays, and who becomes a citizen. David Blunkett is absolutely right when he says the public need to be reassured that migration is not a threat to our lifechances and way of life. However, he needs to reconsider the impact of the particular messages he is putting across if he is to achieve that objective.

The IPPR hosted a seminar series during 2001-2 to explore competing objectives in migration policy.