

'Labour and Tory ex-ministers feeding xenophobia'

A cross-party group of British MPs was accused of feeding "xenophobic sentiments" Monday after it said non-European migrants should be allowed to stay in Britain for only four years.

Showing a degree of camaraderie rare among political foes, former ministers Frank Field of the Labour Party and Nicholas Soames, a Conservative, said that after migrants had stayed in Britain for four years there should be a "competition" for the award of citizenship.

Backed by some church and business leaders, the group wants to bring immigration to a level where the number of those coming into Britain balances out with those leaving the country.

Government statistics show in the past decade 2.5 million people have arrived in Britain, while only about 750,000 have left.

The group said there should be no limit on numbers of foreign nationals entering Britain to work temporarily but suggested an annual cap of 20,000 non-EU foreigners allowed the right to settle.

While opposition Conservative Party leaders favour such limits, the Labour party has traditionally opposed placing a cap.

Jill Rutter of the Institute for Public Policy Research, a pro-Labour think tank, rejected the call, saying: 'The proposal that migrant workers should leave the UK after a four-year period of work would mean that employers could not retain the hard-working migrants they want to keep. For example, football clubs would have to lose talent such as Kanu, Viduka and Drogba. We need to make migration work for Britain, rather than play to xenophobic sentiments.'

The Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, a non-government group, said: "If skilled migrants stay on after four years, it's because an employer wants them and because they have put down roots and are paying their taxes, national insurance and council tax.'

"So, why shouldn't they benefit from the public services they have helped to pay for? Many of the health professionals [in Britain] are from non-EEA (European Economic Area) countries, and it couldn't work without them. Denying migrants a stake in society isn't a route to social cohesion - it's divisive and wasteful of talent," it added,

Immigration Minister Liam Byrne said Britain's points-based system of immigration meant "only the migrants with the skills Britain needs can come - and no more. Unlike made-up quotas, this stops government cutting business off from the skills it needs when they need them.'

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