

We need to make the case for *both* immigration *and* investment in home-grown talent

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I'm a huge fan of Wight Shipyard – the one with the vast Union Jack on the shed doors which both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Hunt were so keen to pose in front of during their recent campaigns. When Wight Shipyard won an order to build two fast ferries for Thames Clippers that was a great win for UK plc because the two previous ferries had come all the way from Australia. It was simple import substitution: a British business got a good contract which might otherwise have gone abroad, creating and sustaining jobs on the Isle of Wight, and putting money into our economy. What's not to like? Import substitution is a straight win for the UK.

But that's *not* the case when it comes to people. The argument is more complex. The case for protecting, even enhancing, our ability to employ overseas talent is strong. And the need to argue that case is pressing, given the politics of Brexit. What's all too often missing, rather oddly, is the equally compelling argument in favour of investing in our own people – the 'import substitution' counter-balance, if you like, to the case for protecting overseas recruitment.

The difference came through to me rather starkly in a recent consultation paper from the Scottish Government. With fishermen so keen to point to the bright future which Brexit presents, I looked at the "Future of Fisheries Management in Scotland" eagerly to see what the Scottish Government had to say about increased opportunities for young Scots to get into fishing. Complete silence. Nothing at all. That can't be right.

So in our response to the consultation, the MSA said this:

The fishing industry offers good jobs, with good prospects, particularly outside the Central Belt and in the Highlands and islands. The MSA is keen to ensure that young Scots know about those opportunities, and get the chance to train for them, through Modern Apprenticeships and other programmes. Promoting jobs and careers in fishing to Scots should be as important a part of Scotland's long-term plan for the fishing industry as securing continued access to overseas labour.

Of course there's politics in the Scottish Government's emphasis, and tactics, and a campaign to be waged to protect opportunities to recruit foreign labour in the light of much-talked-about-but-still-hard-to-pin-down changes to immigration rules round Brexit. (Our new PM's tone is quite different from his predecessor's, but we still need to nail down the detail). But we need both, don't we? Both intelligently-managed immigration, and investment in our home-grown labour force.

Our emphasis on apprenticeships in our response to the Scottish Government is no accident. For any employer which wants to invest in home-grown talent, to invest in Brits¹, apprenticeships are an excellent tool. You can go out of your way to advertise abroad if you really want to, but the practical reality is that apprenticeships are taken up by Brits.

The maritime industry has invested a good deal of effort to design the right apprenticeships so companies can confidently invest in home-grown talent. And it's working: the number of apprentices has doubled in recent years, and that growth looks set to continue. As Churchillian phrases are much in vogue this week, we have the tools to finish the job.

To want *both* what I think of as "intelligent overseas recruitment", *and* proper investment in home-grown talent, isn't the much-derided "cakeism". It's exactly the balanced approach to building talented teams which we need for long-term success.

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¹ I'm using "Brits" as a shorthand. I mean by it simply "domiciled in the UK"; what passport they hold is neither here nor there.