



Alan Manning

September 9th, 2025

The problems with Reform UK's immigration policy

Reform UK's policy on irregular immigration of "detect, detain, deport" has been widely criticised on legal and moral grounds. But Alan Manning looks at the practical difficulties with enacting this policy and finds that they will be highly costly, involve sending money to authoritarian regimes, and have uncertain results.

Enjoying this post? Then sign up to our [newsletter](#) and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.

Recently Nigel Farage outlined Reform UK's policies for "deporting all illegal migrants and securing the UK's borders", titled "[Operation Restoring Justice](#)". The policies can be summarized as "detect, detain, deport".

A main – though not the only – target of these policies is those crossing the Channel in small boats who, while their entry to the UK is unauthorized, almost all currently claim asylum when current laws give them protection against immediate detention and deportation. Under Reform UK's proposals those crossing will not be allowed to settle in Britain and will be removed asap, perhaps to their own countries or perhaps to third countries. For this to be legal, laws need to be changed and the proposals suggest an emergency 5-year suspension of a variety of human rights laws and international obligations, including the Refugee Convention and the European Court of Human Rights. The right to claim asylum would be removed and with it the right not to be imprisoned and to avoid non-refoulement (removal to unsafe countries). Nigel Farage explicitly [said](#) that he is prepared to negotiate a returns agreement with the Taliban in Afghanistan. Asylum might still be offered by the UK to some groups but who and in what numbers would be determined by the UK government, not who manages to arrive in the UK.



Almost certainly Reform UK are under-estimating the difficult of the “detect” part of their proposal.



A lot of objections to these proposals have been on **legal** and **ethical** grounds. I am neither a lawyer nor a philosopher so will not primarily comment on these aspects. Instead, what would this strategy mean in practice, and would it work?

The practical difficulties of detecting and detaining asylum seekers

First, consider the “detect” part. At the moment those arriving in small boats are not worried about being detected as almost all claim asylum. But, if the consequence of detection was detention and deportation, those entering the country would seek ways to enter without detection. Smugglers’ strategies would evolve. And many illegal migrants in the UK are visa over-stayers or who arrived by other means. To find them is a difficult and costly exercise. In the US Donald Trump has **tripled** the budget for ICE. Inevitably some of the accused of being illegally in the UK will claim they are legal (and some will be, and minorities will be more likely to be victims) so it is hard to avoid some type of due process to determine legality which takes time and costs money. Almost certainly Reform UK are under-estimating the difficult of the “detect” part of their proposal.

What about “detention”. If detention (potentially of unlimited and indeterminate duration) is deemed legal, problems are likely if the numbers being held are large as there are likely to be allegations of ill-treatment and self-harm (there always have been in **other countries**) and it can be expensive. If most in detention are quickly deported then the policy may be effective in reducing the numbers of unauthorized border crossings as the threat of deportation will be credible; numbers detained will then be small. But if deportation is harder than anticipated then not only will the outflow from detention be lower but the absence of a credible threat to deport means that fewer unauthorized migrants are deterred so the inflow into detention would also be higher. The numbers liable to detention could grow fast, proving difficult for the government to maintain the policy at all.

Making deals with unpleasant regimes

So the success of the policy (in its own terms) depends on how easy deportation is. Deportation can only proceed with the agreement of a receiving country. The receiving country might be the

country of origin of a third country. Third-party agreements may make striking headlines (think of Donald Trump sending handfuls of migrants to **Eswatini** and South Sudan) but are small-scale. The doomed Rwanda scheme of the previous government had a capacity of at most 200 people, and would quickly have been at capacity at which point it would be unlikely to have any deterrent effect.

So agreements with origin countries would be needed for large-scale deportations and the proposal is explicit about being prepared to negotiate agreements some unpleasant regimes, specifically the Taliban in Afghanistan, currently the most common nationality crossing in small boats. In these negotiations all countries will see the possibility for advantage. Sometimes it is argued that the UK should use the threat of lower aid or harder trade or fewer visas. But the countries with the most citizens crossing are not countries where there is much scope for this. Aid to places like Afghanistan and Eritrea are largely routed through humanitarian NGOs rather directly to the government. The UK government could threaten the Taliban with reducing support to women there but it is hard to imagine them caring very much.

So there will be payments from the UK to some unpleasant governments – Farage has made no secret that he is prepared to strike such deals. But they are likely to be subject to protracted negotiations; meanwhile the numbers in detention may rack up. In July 2025 Germany **returned** 81 failed Afghan asylum-seekers with criminal convictions but in a deal brokered by Qatar in the absence of direct links with the Taliban and with little indication of what the Taliban received in return. The Taliban probably know that Nigel Farage wants this deal much more than them, so will negotiate hard if the aim is to deport thousands. It is also not hard to imagine governments undermining the agreements in plausibly deniable ways – perhaps surreptitiously encouraging emigrants and then arguing more money is needed to take back more people.



There are many ways in which Reform UK's policy could end in failure, even on its own terms.



I suspect that Nigel Farage might want the message “I don’t like the Taliban any more than you but the fact that I am prepared to strike a deal with them shows how serious a problem this is for the UK”. Whether that message could survive the reality is debatable. Some sent back would very likely be persecuted, tortured or killed leading to scandals. Some in the UK may not care but most will think it wrong. Within a few days of the policy being launched Nigel Farage has said that women and children would not be sent back, then said they would, and it’s not hard to envisage carve-outs

(perhaps Afghans claiming they served with the British there) from what was initially billed as a “no exceptions” policy. And a possible exception means a process to determine whether someone should be returned and a weakening of the deterrent.

Brexit has made things harder, not easier

There are many ways in which Reform UK’s policy could end in failure, even on its own terms. Nevertheless, some voters may think it worth a shot as nothing else has worked. But, from previous similar episodes we actually know what works. It’s not been the “safe and legal” routes one often hears mentioned as an alternative – those ideas have their own problems.

Let’s give some examples. Australia has managed to end maritime arrivals, through a range of international **cooperative agreements** notably an agreement to return those who try to Indonesia, something Nigel Farage **mentioned** as working but does not seem to have understood the implication. The US has reduced encounters at its Southern border from a peak of 360 thousand in December 2023 to a level of **4,600** in July 2025. This has not mostly happened because of high-profile stunts like deporting migrants to third countries but through a policy (starting under Biden but continued under Trump) of expediting removals through agreements with countries to return illegal migrants home or to remain in Mexico. In these and other examples, it is agreement with the countries of departure which has worked; think of the **EU’s agreement with Turkey** in 2016. For Channel crossings that means cooperation with Europe, or at the very least France. That is probably anathema to Nigel Farage and he cheerfully discusses negotiations with the Taliban but not with the French.

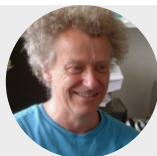
Brexit made it easier to control managed migration even if Boris Johnson’s government did not exercise much control. But Brexit made it harder to manage unauthorized migration – a loss of access to European databases and the disappearance of returns agreements. Brexit has made the UK an appeal court for failed asylum seekers from the EU. But it’s through working primarily with Europe not Afghanistan, Eritrea and Iran that the solution to the small boat crossings will be found if it is found at all. That is basically the strategy of the current government.

*Enjoyed this post? Sign up to our **newsletter** and receive a weekly roundup of all our articles.*

All articles posted on this blog give the views of the author(s), and not the position of LSE British Politics and Policy, nor of the London School of Economics and Political Science.

*Image credit: **ComposedPix** on Shutterstock*

About the author



Alan Manning is Professor of Economics in the Department of Economics at LSE, and co-director of the community wellbeing programme at LSE Centre for Economic Performance. His research generally covers labour markets, with a focus on imperfect competition (monopsony), minimum wages, job polarisation, immigration, and gender.

Posted In: Brexit | Immigration | LSE Comment



© LSE 2025