

Who's next? Cuts to welfare often target immigrants first but then move to nationals

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David Cameron's deal to cut social benefits for EU citizens may in part be a ploy in the internal politics of the Conservative Party. But it's also the latest push in a long drive by UK governments to squeeze a once universalist welfare regime into a system of discrimination. Here, analysts from [MigrationWork](#) describe how the idea of '(un)deservingness' has been applied since Thatcher and the miner's strike to subvert the principle of universal entitlement, in parallel on two fronts: class and nationality.

The term 'welfare chauvinism' centres on the political project of reserving welfare for national citizens and withholding it from non-nationals, regardless of need, and even when they contribute to the economy on an identical basis to citizens. In the most hard-line interpretation, this can even apply if they eventually become national citizens.

Our [recent research](#) engages with and criticises this project. In essence, chauvinism says your nation is better than others, asserting moral or social superiority over other ethnic groups, usually reflecting imperial ideology. Clearly crude xenophobia plays its part in eroding universal welfare. It's less clear that chauvinism best represents the insertion of anti-immigrant politics into a complex structure like a welfare system. But while migrants are a major target of welfare restrictions in the UK, they are often only the first one, used experimentally to prepare harsh welfare cuts later extended to national citizens as well.

Local authority housing is one of the key sites for this process which we trace in a review of successive curbs on access to such homes. Imposing 'residence tests' to control it, for example, governments and local councils have often sold them essentially as anti-migrant measures. Continuing this tradition, the [February 2016 White Paper](#) setting out the Government's 'offer' for the EU referendum promised 'changes to the allocation of social housing' even though this formed no part of any negotiations with the EU. Instead of the current recommended criterion for access to such housing – two years' residence in the relevant locality – the new government proposal ramps up this residence test to four years, to ensure:

'affordable housing ... for those amongst the local population who are on low incomes or otherwise disadvantaged and who would find it particularly difficult to find a home on the open market'.

Even if poor and disadvantaged, migrants (whether from abroad or UK-born applicants moving within the country) would be defined as people who do not 'deserve' social housing for at least four years.

Other restrictions illustrate the way measures can be trialled on migrants before being applied to other 'less deserving' groups. For example, the redefinition of homelessness for asylum seekers in 1993 was later briefly applied to all applicants for help as homeless (though it was then withdrawn as unfeasible). The same process is seen in the treatment of 'mixed' homeless households, where parents and children have different immigration statuses. Responding in 2009 to a court ruling on discrimination against such households, the [government responded](#) by amending the law to enable them to access services – but unequally.

While other applicants for homelessness services had a very good chance of rehousing into secure, affordable social housing after a period in temporary accommodation, these mixed families ended up with a single offer of (insecure and expensive) private rented accommodation. In 2011 the [Localism Act](#) applied the same provisions to *all* homelessness applicants, so extending the hostile environment deliberately created for migrants to other

groups who were perceived as ‘undeserving’.

Increasingly this bureaucratic device of redefining categories – citizenship, workers, habitual residence – is used to remove ‘insider’ status from a target group, inserting a border between them and access to the welfare state. The miners’ strike of 1984-85 in defence of jobs first showed how this [device could be used explicitly](#) on a group of (almost all) white, British-born working class citizens. In 1984, in terms evoking old-style chauvinism and Churchill’s language of national mobilisation, Thatcher denounced the striking miners as ‘the enemy within’.

Efforts to invent new categories of non-citizen and semi-citizen to signal entitlements or ‘deservingness’ have proceeded [steadily since then](#), reaching beyond migrants demarcated by legal residence or nationality to categories like the unemployed, single mothers or benefit claimants. This rhetorical method of promoting social division by invoking national myths and symbols, whilst targeted initially at immigrants, was never specific to them. Pillorying the white British miner or single parent has been as important as denouncing migrant spouses or [‘bogus’ asylum seekers](#).

Our analysis shows how UK national and local authorities have on several occasions stepped outside domestic, European, and international legal obligations to strip the ‘undeserving’ of social rights. It demonstrates factors helping to drive this process: the primacy of the drive to cut public services, and curbs on legal aid which enables individual and collective challenges to unlawful decisions. The government has tried to deny legal aid to migrants (unless they can prove one year of lawful residence in the UK) and vigorously defended this when challenged in the courts, arguing that it needs to control the legal aid budget by cutting it “whether on the grounds of need or otherwise”. The Law Society, representing English and Welsh solicitors, [considers](#) this to represent a threat to the continued viability of legal aid.

Rationalised as a response to public attitudes that are themselves encouraged by political rhetoric and welfare policy, measures imposed on migrants frequently serve as a de facto pilot for sanctions deployed in due course against ‘undeserving’ British nationals. In this perspective, what looks simply like chauvinism against migrants emerges as a pathfinder for a wider strategy of social bordering.

This article is based on the [paper](#) ‘Bordering practices in the UK welfare system’ recently published in [Critical Social Policy](#)

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