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Opinion Scottish elections 2026

Reform's toxic thinking has infected
Scottish politics – this week's Holyrood
elections will tell us how badly

Jasmeen Kanwal



For so long, the Scottish government has made a point of welcoming migrants. But I now see troubling changes in my country

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📷 Nigel Farage with Reform Scotland leader Malcolm Offord (left) and party chairman David Bull (right) in Aberdeen, 13 April 2026. Photograph: Paul Reid/Getty Images

As Scotland prepares to [elect a new parliament](#) on 7 May, immigration is dominating the political discourse as never before. Reform UK, a party whose [top three policies](#) are “stop the boats”, “secure and defend our borders” and “deport illegal migrants” is now polling in second place behind the SNP in many recent surveys. Its success here seems illogical. Immigration, after all, is not devolved to the Scottish parliament. But as I’ve learned from my experience as an immigrant in Scotland, Holyrood’s position on immigration matters.

In Westminster, the Labour government’s approach to Reform’s toxic, distorted narrative on immigration has been not to challenge it but instead to accept it as the starting point for its own [hardline anti-immigrant](#) agenda. If this thinking were to infect Holyrood, it would be disastrous for Scotland.

With an ageing, shrinking workforce, Scotland desperately needs immigrants for its social security system to function. Without more workers, tax revenue will decline while demand for health and social care rises, squeezing us at both ends, according to [Skills Development Scotland](#). A [2025 Improvement Service report](#) on projected population change suggests the problem is more acute in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK, due to lower birthrates. Given Westminster’s “hostile environment” policies to discourage immigration, the report recommends focusing on creative local initiatives to attract and retain the people Scotland needs.

During its past two decades in power, the SNP government seems to have understood this. Motivated by the desire to show [Scotland](#) could succeed as an independent nation, or by wanting to appear progressive, it made trying to attract immigrants a core policy.

Brexit intensified this. I’ll never forget the way my Italian friend joyfully brandished her letter from the then first minister, Nicola Sturgeon, in the devastating aftermath of the referendum. [The letter told European immigrants](#) that they were “welcome here”, and that she thanked them for their contribution. My friend stuck the letter on her wall. (I didn’t get one, being from outside the EU - a missed opportunity, given the inherent racism driving the anti-immigrant sentiment behind Brexit.)

Policies such as the [Stay in Scotland](#) scheme and the founding of [Scotland’s Migration Service](#) followed. Both devoted Scottish government funds to providing current or would-be “New Scots” with practical advice on navigating the convoluted UK immigration system. New Scots itself is a lovely, welcoming term that immediately bestows Scottishness on new arrivals. In 2020, non-UK citizens resident in Scotland were given the right to vote in local and Holyrood elections, taking its embrace of immigrants beyond mere symbolism and giving us a real stake in the governance of our adopted home.



Farage, wearing saltire flag socks, at a press conference in London on 13 April. Photograph: Andy Rain/EPA

Holyrood's prevailing attitude was also reflected in the interactions I had with individual border officers every time I flew back into Edinburgh after a trip abroad. I was always greeted with the soul-warming words: "Welcome home." By contrast, returning from a holiday in France through a ferry port in England, I was questioned so aggressively by a border officer that I was left in tears. After that, I carefully planned travel to avoid re-entering the UK via England.

However, things are now shifting north of the border, too. The far-right's racist dog-whistling has spread rapidly, thanks to [social media algorithms](#) designed to push people towards increasingly extreme, click-inducing content. In recent months, Scotland has seen “anti-migrant agitators” protesting outside hotels and barracks housing asylum-seekers, and [spreading disinformation](#) about immigrants committing crimes.

Worryingly, this goes beyond just a few attention-grabbing incidents. Data from [Migration Policy Scotland](#) shows that overall, Scottish public attitudes towards immigration have cooled in the last three years, with 45% of respondents now saying they would prefer a net reduction in immigration, up from only 28% in 2023.

The question is, how will the next Holyrood government respond to this? It would be a mistake to take this as a sign to dial back pro-immigrant initiatives in Scotland. What's needed, actually, is to ramp them up.

The first step is to explicitly call out Reform's tired old "scapegoating" narrative for what it is - a classic manipulation tactic that works by deflecting the blame for economic problems from the ruling class to an already marginalised group. To their credit, the **SNP** and **Scottish Greens** have done this in their campaign materials, while the Scottish Labour and Lib Dem leaders have called it out during debates. Only the Scottish Conservatives side with Reform on this.

But to better equip people to resist such tactics, there is more Holyrood must do. [Research](#) shows that “prebunking” - educating people beforehand about common disinformation tactics - works better than *debunking*. Finland, which has long [invested in media and data literacy](#), ranks among the [top countries in the world](#) for public resilience to disinformation. Holyrood should follow this example.

There is no question that the underlying issues that are drawing some people to Reform in the first place, such as Scotland's [housing crisis](#), must also be addressed as a priority. But there must also be proper investment in integration and community engagement programmes, which are proved to address racism and xenophobia far better than closing down borders.

Scotland has long tried to forge a reputation as a friendly, forward-looking country. At a time when anti-immigrant rhetoric - and policy - is becoming increasingly normalised across the UK, it's imperative that the next Scottish government upholds this reputation with concrete action. Only then is there hope for a future that works for all Scots, both Old and New.

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