There’s been a lot of hot air this week about what the government and Labour are calling Britain’s dependency on migrant labour. But if there is a dependency it’s one of their own making. Chronic under investment in training and skills, lags in technological advancements, declining apprenticeships along with poor pay and working conditions means that employers have had little incentive to invest in skills and training. The result is that there are many jobs that Brits are unwilling or unable to do, and migrants have long been filling the gaps.

The bedrock of the UK’s liberal market economy is labour market flexibility, and the successive governments have used migrant labour to provide this. New Labour created a monster and it’s one the Conservatives have happily fed since.

What to do about this conundrum? Both Labour and the Conservatives are saying that businesses need to look elsewhere for their workers. For Starmer it’s about shedding the New Labour pro-business persona by expecting businesses to provide training and writing trade unions back into the playbook by bringing them into future negotiations. Starmer seems to have wrong footed the left of the Party suspicious of Starmer by nailing his colours to the mast of trade unionism.

For immigration Minister Jenrick it’s as simple as getting the economically inactive back to work. There’s no real plan or ideas about how to do this but it’s a pleasingly simplistic idea that sledge hammers both the Tories folk devils – benefit claimants and migrants.

Immigration is a headache for the Conservatives. Caught between its neoliberal New Right that champions free markets, and its social conservatism, which immigration is said to threaten, the Tories will never be able to get a coherent strategy together. And this infighting, always present but now extant, is playing out front and centre in the Party - even the Cabinet! - between those that see immigration as an economic good, and those that see it as a social threat. Recently PM, Britannia Unchained proponent Liz Truss wanted to see some increases in economic immigration, while her Home Secretary Braverman was incredulous at the prospect. Sunak meanwhile is full of indecision, struggling to keep his party together; a rabbit in headlights.

The hysteria around immigration has been all the more marked this week with record migration numbers. The instinct for Conservatives and Labour will be to shout even louder on reducing immigration. But this could be rooky political calculation from either Party; recently the British public seem to be [less bothered by immigration and more positive about increasing it](mailto:https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2022/nov/23/uk-politicians-win-swing-voters-more-open-migration-policy-report-finds). A breakdown of the figures shows that most of this rise is attribute to the Covid bounce, and the facilitated schemes for Ukrainians and citizens of Hong Kong, which the public broadly support.

The sticking point and the emblem of the Tory split on immigration is international students, which accounts for a large proportion of this increase. Predictably Sunak’s response was dogwhistling in suggestions of clamping down on international students. Ever since David Cameron’s infamous and failed net migration pledge, international students have been the thorn in the side Tory’s quest to reduce migration. The HE sector is reliant on international student fees and the Tories know it. Cue prominent backbenchers decrying Sunak’s p]suggestions as ’mindless’. It is the chasm the gulf in conservative thinking between headlines and practicality.

In the last decade populist politics has trumped any economic demands on immigration. But as the Tories run out of steam on prodding any growth from a stagnant economy, the Conservatives are now grasping at straws; it’s now a political calculation about whether their voters who have traditionally been opposed to increases in immigration will swallow their social distaste in the name of economic growth. The Conservatives traditionally win on both economy and immigration, but now one threatens the other. The Tories are being summoned… which issue, and which constituency, matters more?