

## Indefinite Leave to Remain

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See the full transcript [here](#)

The debate on Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR), triggered by two e-petitions with more than 270,000 signatures, centred on whether the Government should retain the **five-year qualifying pathway** for existing skilled worker visa holders and for those arriving under the **British National (Overseas) Hong Kong (BNO) visa scheme**, rather than extending it to ten years as proposed in the recent Immigration White Paper. The discussion revealed a striking degree of cross-party consensus on the principle that fairness, clarity and trust must underpin immigration policy, even where there is broad support for reducing overall migration levels.

At the heart of the petitions was concern about retrospectivity. MPs described how individuals and families had come to the UK, uprooting their lives and investing financially on the basis of clear rules that settlement would be available after five years. Many are now only months away **from eligibility, having passed the “Life in the UK” test, paid multiple fees and the annual immigration health surcharge, and lived without access to public funds**. To change the terms midway was likened to altering the rules of a marathon halfway through. The debate captured the intense anxiety felt by skilled workers in health, social care, IT, research, and other sectors who had structured their futures around this expectation.

The economic contribution of skilled workers was repeatedly emphasised. Members highlighted local NHS staff, carers, neonatal nurses, data scientists, and defence sector engineers who had filled vital shortages, particularly in regions with ageing populations such as Cornwall. MPs warned that lengthening the ILR pathway risked undermining recruitment, damaging retention, and emboldening exploitative employers who take advantage of visa-linked vulnerabilities. **In social care, where low pay and poor conditions already leave 40,000 workers in limbo**, extending settlement times could intensify insecurity and silence workers facing abuse for fear of losing sponsorship. Calls were made for sector-specific visa schemes, stronger trade union rights, and protections to prevent exploitation, particularly in social care, where migrant labour underpins the system.

Another major concern was financial cost and inequality. Visa renewals every **30 months and the £1,000 annual health surcharge** were already described as “extortionate”. Prolonging these costs for ten years would deepen financial hardship, push families into poverty, and leave children at risk of poorer health and educational outcomes. Children of migrants on the longer route would often be excluded from home student fees at university, pricing them out of higher education. MPs from Wales and Scotland stressed the equalities dimension, **warning of disproportionate impacts on black and minority ethnic communities, women, and those working in health and social care**.

The debate also touched on the **immigration system more broadly**. Several MPs acknowledged the pressure of high net migration numbers but urged that reforms must not be blunt or punitive. Some, like Chris Murray, argued for a more creative approach that differentiates between indefinite leave to remain and citizenship, and that actively incentivises integration and civic contribution. Others, such as Rebecca Long Bailey, pressed for clarity on



which sectors would count as **“high-value contributors” under the White Paper’s new earned settlement model, stressing that industries from defence to social care depend on migrant labour.** MPs highlighted the risks to the higher education sector, already under financial strain and reliant on global talent. They warned that raising the bar for ILR would deter researchers and international students, harming soft power, competitiveness and growth.

Underlying all interventions was the theme of trust in government promises. MPs repeatedly reminded Ministers that people had moved to the UK in good faith, having played by the rules and contributed. **To extend settlement periods retrospectively was seen as a breach of trust, undermining Britain’s reputation as a country of fairness and stability. The phrase “moving the goalposts”** recurred throughout, capturing the sense of betrayal and dismay among constituents.