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Britain Faces Soaring Immigration from Eastern Europe

By ALAN COWELL

LONDON, Aug. 22 — Britain acknowledged today that immigration from eastern Europe had soared far beyond initial forecasts, fuelling a rancorous debate over the country's readiness to absorb further outsiders as the European Union expands to the southeast.

The figures, released by the Home Office, are likely to present Prime Minister Tony Blair with one more challenge when he returns from vacation to face a new opinion survey showing that his Labor Party's popularity has skidded to a 19-year low.

The Home Office said that, since the European Union expanded to embrace 10 more countries in 2004, some 427,000 workers, almost two-thirds of them from Poland, had applied formally to work in Britain. The figure is closer to 600,000 if self-employed workers, such as those in the construction business, are included, said Tony McNulty, a Home Office minister. Those figures do not include illegal immigrants — a number unknown by the government.

Initially, the government had predicted that no more than 15,000 East Europeans would arrive each year from eastern European countries after 2004.

Along with Ireland and Sweden, Britain was one of a minority among the European Union countries prepared to grant open access to its labor market when the Union expanded from 15 to 25 member states with the accession of Poland, Hungary, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Slovenia, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, Malta and Cyprus.

Freedom of movement is supposed to be one of the guiding principles of the European Union. But, as British unemployment nudges upwards, politicians and others have begun to express concern about the likely influx of new immigrants if Bulgaria and Romania join the European Union as scheduled next year.

The issue is one that feeds on deep-seated xenophobia among some Britons and could strengthen the far-right British National Party. Newspaper headlines have already begun to raise alarms, reflecting concerns that more foreign workers will take British jobs while straining state-funded schools, hospitals and benefits systems.

Mr. McNulty said today that the latest figures "show that migrant workers from the accession states are benefiting the U.K. by filling skills and labor gaps that cannot be met from the U.K.-born population."

But, in face of a mounting chorus of calls for restrictions on further immigration, he said: "We are yet to take a decision as to what access Bulgarian and Romanian nationals will have to our labor market when they join the European Union."

The call for restrictions is not limited to the Conservative opposition, which has traditionally sought electoral support from voters troubled by the impact of immigrants on Britain's economy and social services.

“These figures make it all the more urgent that the government takes an early decision and stops ducking and diving on the issue of Bulgaria and Romania entering the European Union,” said Damian Green, the opposition Conservative home affairs spokesman.

Two former Labor ministers, John Denham and Frank Field, also called for curbs on migrants. Richard Lambert, the head of the Confederation of British Industry employers’ association, said it was “only right that the U.K. takes the time to reflect on the earlier experiences and debates how and when to welcome the next phase” of European Union expansion.

The debate touches nerves in Britain, where many foreigners — from Poles to South Africans — do jobs that Britons either do not do or will not do for the same low wages, such waiting on tables, fixing leaky faucets, driving the buses or hefting bricks on construction sites.

The issue offers one more strand of contention for Prime Minister Blair.

In an ICM poll published in The Guardian today, David Cameron, the Conservative leader, increased his popularity rating by 1 per cent to 40 per cent — a 9 percent lead over Mr. Blair, whose popularity fell by 4 percent to 31 percent. The smaller opposition Liberal Democrats picked up 5 percent to score 22 percent.

The telephone poll was taken among 1,007 adults between Aug. 18 and 20 as Britain struggled to recover from the impact of an alleged terrorist plot to bomb trans-Atlantic airliners. The Guardian blamed the fall in Mr. Blair’s popularity in part on a feeling among 72 percent of respondents that Britain’s military actions in Iraq and Afghanistan has made the country more vulnerable to terrorist attack.

Labor’s popularity, The Guardian said, was its lowest since 1987. By contrast, the 40 per cent scored by Mr. Cameron was the Conservatives’ highest since 1992.

However, The Guardian said, because of electoral quirks in Britain, the Conservatives “still need to build a big lead over Labor before it can hope to become the largest party” in Parliament.