

Policies often have unintended consequences that, once known, cause a policy's strongest advocates to regret that they ever supported the policy in the first place. I suspect that many citizens of Great Britain, who recently voted to leave the European Union, may live to regret their votes. This is because, by leaving the European Union, Great Britain will decrease the amount of time that it will be able to sustain its welfare state.

Great Britain, and many other European countries, offer generous health care and retirement benefits to its citizens. Consider the benefits that are directed toward those who are not working, such as retirement benefits. When the population is growing, there is usually an ever increasing number of workers available to pay taxes that support the benefits of the people who have stopped working, but who still receive benefits. With such an arrangement a reasonable amount of taxes per worker can fairly easily support the benefit system.

On the surface, it appears that Great Britain will be able to continue to support its social welfare arrangement. After all, the population is growing at about 0.6 percent a year. However, this figure is misleading. Yes, the population is growing, but much of this growth is due the success that advanced nations have had in improving their healthcare, which has extended the number of years that a British citizen can expect to live. More to the point, the number of births per female in Britain is only 1.9. Because two people, a man and a woman, are required for reproduction, when females, on average, have fewer than two children, then the population will eventually start to shrink.

Because people are living longer, they are also able to claim government benefits for more years. This adds to the expense of the social programs at a time when fewer workers are entering the system each year. With fewer new workers and more people to support, the cost per worker for supporting the generous benefit system will reach an unsustainable level.

One way out of this dilemma that allows Britain to keep its benefits structure viable for a longer period of time is for Britain to allow more immigrants into the country. Young people from across Europe in places like Poland welcome the opportunity to move to London because of the wide range of job opportunities available in London's dynamic economy. If Great Britain allows enough immigrants in, then its population can grow enough, even with its low birth rate, that there will be enough tax paying workers to keep the social welfare system in place.

The major objection that British voters had against being in the European Union was that their membership required them to allow people from other countries in the union to move into Britain. Quite simply, the British wanted to keep out Europeans from places like Poland. Most of the supporters of Brexit (Britain's exit from the European Union) may not have realized that they will be giving up some government financed benefits, sooner rather than later, because of the outcome of the vote.