



FROM STRANGERS TO CITIZENS

MEMBERSHIP AND BELONGING IN
AN AGE OF MIGRATION



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National Renewal Programme

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Lord David Blunkett.....	5
Summary.....	6
The meaning of citizenship.....	6
Who should become a citizen?.....	6
Citizenship in the UK	7
How do we fix it?.....	7
1. Introduction.....	9
2. What is citizenship?	10
3. How has British citizenship taken shape?	12
4. What does citizenship look like in the UK today?.....	14
5. Who can become a UK citizen?	16
6. Where do the public stand?.....	19
7. What are the issues with UK citizenship today?	20
8. A reform agenda for UK citizenship.....	22
Recommendations	22
References.....	25

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FOREWORD

by Lord David Blunkett

This report is an important contribution to the debate about how we take forward immigration policy, citizenship and social cohesion.

When secretary of state for education and employment, I asked the late Professor Sir Bernard Crick to undertake a review into developing the concept of citizenship education in schools, including the issue of British values, understanding our history, our institutions and where power lies. This was seen as ‘responsibilities and duties’, ‘rights’ and ‘obligations’.

This was followed when, as home secretary, I asked Bernard to undertake a review of routes to citizenship; to an appreciation of – and willingness to learn – both the English language and about the country to which people were now becoming committed. These two reports complemented each other in terms of what we need to learn and the resulting contribution that all of us make to a civilised and functioning society.

As someone committed to the communitarian model, I was interested in the references to T.H. Marshall and Michael Walzer in the report, and I have myself been closely associated with Professor Robert Putnam and his writing.

Reflecting on this report and the recent announcements made from the Home Office, I think the way forward on citizenship is through collaboration rather than conflict; through positive dialogue and engagement rather than alienation and division. The journey to naturalisation could be sped up as people are supported to demonstrate their commitment and contribution to the community in which they live. The same approach could be used as part of this journey to citizenship to invest in and develop greater social cohesion and integration.

The debate around indefinite leave to remain could be reframed to ensure that the journey to citizenship supports the outcomes we seek to achieve. Assisting people on the way to learn the English language and take courses about the aspects of life which are included in the *Life in the UK* booklet (and completely revising this out-of-date means to gaining citizenship as the report suggests) would benefit us all.

Two immediate things need to be accelerated. The first, and obvious one, is to ensure that every school in the country teaches citizenship and democracy, and that the new additions to the curriculum – with revisions currently under consultation – are implemented in 2027 – not, as planned, in 2028. This should be alongside work that is already in train to help those who will, at the ages of 16 and 17, be able to vote at the forthcoming general election should the representation of the people bill become an act shortly.

Second, anyone entering the country on authorised visa or resettlement routes should be expected to take courses in the English language, and those granted asylum should sign up to a set of principles for framing their life and contribution at each stage of their ‘review’, leading to early indefinite leave to remain for those fulfilling the necessary light touch and clear criteria laid out.

As the government looks to reform its policies on settlement, citizenship and community cohesion, I hope that it will take seriously the analysis and ideas in this report. A fair and principled approach to citizenship, which encompasses a recognition of the reality of public perception, should be at the heart of our national policy debate.

SUMMARY

Britain faces a political battle over its future as a multi-ethnic liberal democracy. In recent years there has been the growth of a new form of ethnonationalism in the UK, excluding individuals on the basis of their ethnicity, religion or ancestry and arguing for mass deportations or ‘remigration’.

At the heart of this debate is how to determine the boundaries of citizenship. The question of who should be a citizen is one of the most fundamental for progressives, since it is from membership of the political community that the majority of other distributional decisions are made. In this paper we try to tackle the question of membership head-on: Who should become a British citizen in an age of growing mobility and migration?

THE MEANING OF CITIZENSHIP

There are three main schools of thought on the meaning of citizenship, reflecting the liberal, communitarian and republican traditions. Liberal thinkers, in the spirit of the sociologist T.H. Marshall, traditionally conceive of citizenship as a bundle of legal rights. By contrast, the communitarian approach centres society over the individual and therefore places greater emphasis on a shared identity and the responsibilities of individuals to their wider community. Finally, republican conceptions of citizenship are grounded in civic and political participation and contribution to the common good.

We draw on these traditions to develop an account of democratic citizenship for the UK, based on:

- equal civil, political and social rights
- active civic and political participation
- a shared identity with a responsibility to uphold core national values.

WHO SHOULD BECOME A CITIZEN?

We argue that new migrants should be seen as potential citizens, drawing on the work of the communitarian philosopher Michael Walzer. According to Walzer, states are justified in setting admission requirements for entry, because they should be able to determine their own character. But while states have the right to control migration in the first stage, they should also provide a pathway to citizenship for those who then become resident. Otherwise, this creates the conditions of a ‘little tyranny’, where non-citizens are subject to the rules of the citizens they live beside and are themselves subordinated and disenfranchised. The *Kafala* system of temporary migration in the Gulf states illustrates the end point of such a model: migrant workers with no prospect of citizenship face exploitation, precarity and the ongoing prospect of deportation.

To guard against this inequality, the pathway to citizenship should be neither excessively cumbersome, expensive nor elongated. But it should also be a process which carries weight and substance. Reflecting the communitarian and republican traditions, the journey towards citizenship should incorporate national values and identity as well as meaningful engagement in civic and political life.

CITIZENSHIP IN THE UK

The contemporary system of British citizenship has evolved over the past century in response to the decline of empire, successive waves of migration, and the changing politics of nationhood. For much of the UK's history Britons were subjects not citizens. All subjects of the British empire, in theory if not in practice, had the same status based on allegiance to the crown.

As British colonies gained independence, reform became necessary. The British Nationality Act 1948 created Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC), while continuing to treat citizens of independent Commonwealth countries as British subjects with equal rights to live in the UK.

This equal status was dismantled in the following decades as governments sought to restrict Commonwealth migration. Ultimately, the British Nationality Act 1981 abolished CUKC status and introduced the modern system of British citizenship.

In its current form, there are two main ways to become a British citizen: by birth or by naturalisation. Children born in the UK only automatically become citizens if one of their parents already has citizenship or indefinite leave to remain (ILR). Naturalisation typically requires five years of residency followed by a further 12 months of ILR. Settlement is therefore a crucial stepping stone to naturalisation and provides a secure status for those who are not yet eligible or do not want to take up citizenship – particularly where their home country does not permit dual nationality.

The current system fails on two counts: citizenship is both insufficiently accessible and empty of proper meaning. Excessive fees and complexity impose major barriers to citizenship, including for children born and raised in the UK. Moreover, naturalisation is a largely formal process disconnected from matters of national identity and civic engagement – exemplified by the obscure questions which populate the life in the UK test. This reflects a decline of shared national culture, reinforced by the collapse of civic institutions and community spaces.

HOW DO WE FIX IT?

We argue that citizenship in the UK should both be made more accessible and reconnected to its core principles. Our reform agenda includes the following.

1. **Establishing clear, consistent pathways to citizenship for all long-term residents.** With respect to the government's forthcoming 'earned settlement' and 'earned citizenship' reforms, we suggest that the qualifying period for ILR should in general be five years and as a maximum be no more than 10 years. There should also be no blanket bars on naturalisation and there should be fair protections in place for people already on routes to citizenship.
2. **Strengthening pathways to citizenship for children who have grown up in the country.** All children born in the UK should be able to apply for citizenship after five years of living here, regardless of their parents' status.
3. **Restructuring and reducing the cost of citizenship.** Fees for children should match their administrative cost (£324). Fee reductions could in part be funded through an increase to the costs of certificates of sponsorship for employers.
4. **Addressing future citizenship within a wider migration plan published and updated annually by government.** This plan should set out clear objectives for migration policy and consider the implications of changes to migration rules for future settlement and citizenship levels.

5. **Reforming the process of naturalisation so that it is more meaningfully connected to civic life and values.** We recommend a new citizenship course for all adult applicants, which would involve a practical volunteering component to encourage civic engagement. A new citizenship test would focus on a mix of factual questions focussed on everyday life and scenario-based questions to test for national values. This would complement an expanded citizenship education for young people and new funding for social infrastructure and community assets.
6. **Actively encouraging acquisition of citizenship.** Those applying for citizenship could undergo a faster process compared to those applying for only ILR.
7. **Developing a broader political narrative to make the case for the core tenets of democratic citizenship.** This reform agenda on citizenship must be matched with a full-throated rejection of ethnonationalism and a convincing political case for an account of citizenship grounded in equal rights, democratic participation and a shared civic identity.

1. INTRODUCTION

The concept of citizenship sits at the heart of a political battle over the future of Britain as a multi-ethnic liberal democracy. At its narrowest, citizenship can be defined as a formal legal relationship between an individual and a state, which confers rights such as indefinite residence, electoral participation and legal protections. In broader terms, citizenship also captures the ideas of belonging, participation, identity and recognition within a shared political community.

There is a complex history to British citizenship – or more accurately, citizenship of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Unlike many continental European states, there was no single constitutional moment which determined its parameters. Citizenship emerged gradually through constitutional change, empire, Commonwealth migration, postwar nationality legislation, and more recently European integration followed by Brexit.

This history poses a fundamental tension for progressives. On the one hand, citizenship can be understood as an egalitarian ideal: a status which in the UK and elsewhere has emerged over centuries of struggle, granting individuals equal footing within the political community and providing a foundation for collective action, including progressive taxation and redistribution.

On the other, citizenship is by its nature bounded. In most modern-day contexts, it is tied explicitly to the nation state – or in the case of the UK, a multi-nation state or union-state comprised of four nations. Some people are members of the political community and others are not. In the words of one theorist, citizenship is ‘hard on the outside and soft on the inside’ (Bosniak 2006).

The distribution of citizenship status among individuals is therefore arguably the foundational question for progressives, as it is from membership of the community that the majority of other distributive decisions are made (Walzer 1983). In this paper we try to tackle this question head-on: who should become a British citizen in an age of growing mobility and migration?

This question has particular contemporary force as the boundaries of citizenship come under fierce contestation. There is a growing movement to define citizenship in ethnonationalist terms, excluding people based on their ethnicity, religion or ancestral ties. At the same time, the current government is proposing some of the most significant reforms to migration and citizenship policy in the past half-century, including plans for a system of ‘earned settlement’ and ‘earned citizenship’. This could affect the pathway to citizenship for hundreds of thousands of people in the UK.

We begin this paper by exploring how citizenship should be defined and understood and by examining the historical development of British citizenship, before analysing what citizenship looks like in the UK today. We then consider the central question of how the boundaries of citizenship should be determined, and we follow this with a discussion of public opinion and an assessment of the major problems within the present citizenship regime. As progressives look for an ambitious new project of national renewal, we conclude by considering how citizenship policy should be reimagined to deliver democratic justice, a cohesive national identity, and renewed civic and political participation.

2. WHAT IS CITIZENSHIP?

The core idea of citizenship can be described, in the words of the political scientist Rainer Bauböck, as ‘equal membership in a self-governing political community’ (Bauböck 2008). This definition captures both the egalitarian nature of citizenship – members are on an equal footing – and the democratic – as the community must be self-governing.

Yet citizenship is a contested concept. Liberal thinkers traditionally conceive of citizenship as a bundle of legal rights and protections. The most prominent articulation of this is by the sociologist T.H. Marshall, who described the development of citizenship in the UK along three dimensions of rights: civil, political and social (Marshall 1950).

By contrast, the communitarian approach to citizenship centres society over the individual and therefore places greater emphasis on the responsibilities of individuals to their wider community, typically the nation (Lister and Pia 2008). This includes a commitment to adopt and uphold the values shared by the wider community (Etzioni 2011).

Finally, republican conceptions of citizenship are grounded in civic and political participation. For republicans, the good citizen is characterised by active democratic engagement and contribution to the common good within a political community (Miller 2000).

No matter how exactly it is understood, it is clear that citizenship cannot be seen purely as an administrative status. There are incisive aspects of each of the liberal, communitarian and republican theories. First, the liberal emphasis on civil, political and social rights captures the egalitarian impulse underpinning what it means to be a citizen. On this account, citizenship provides a foundation of inviolable rights for all members of the political community.

Second, the republican theory builds on the liberal definition but goes further, characterising the ‘good citizen’ as one who engages and participates in the public arena rather than focusses on exercising their rights in the private domain. In an era where community life is under growing pressure and democratic trust and participation is on the decline, any progressive understanding of citizenship would benefit from incorporating the republican insight that citizenship must encompass civic and political participation.

Third, the communitarian account grounds citizenship in a shared identity, typically at the level of a nation or a union of nations. The argument here is that citizenship must be bounded, because mutual trust between members can only be established on the basis of a shared identity, and mutual trust is essential for the common good to prevail over private interests (Miller 2000).

However, the communitarian account of citizenship is itself contested. One version of communitarianism that has increasingly gained ground in the UK’s public debate is ethnonationalism: the belief that national belonging is rooted primarily in shared ethnicity, culture, ancestry and religion. Recent political discourse has moved towards delineating Britishness on the basis of ethnic

homogeneity, characterising those who do not conform to this national identity as an external threat.

In a diverse country such as the UK, this form of ethnonationalist communitarianism cannot be reconciled with social cohesion because it makes equal citizenship impossible in practice. If national belonging depends on inherited identity then, even when there are formal routes to naturalisation, this legal process can never fully succeed because some citizens will always be treated as more authentically national than others. In other words, formal equals are divided into cultural insiders and outsiders. This undermines democratic legitimacy and prevents integration, since individuals who are continuously asked to prove their loyalty will be made to feel as if they do not belong.

The alternative to ethnonationalism is a civic communitarian understanding of citizenship. The civic communitarian still believes in a conception of citizenship grounded in shared identity. But rather than defining this as an ethnic inheritance, civic communitarianism speaks to a common identity based on shared participation in democratic institutions, a common language, similar values and mutual obligations. There are social norms tied to a shared civic identity, but they should be broad and pluralistic enough to encompass multiple different cultures without contradiction. A civic identity can be attained through subscribing to common values and norms, rather than by birth or heritage.

Our account of citizenship therefore brings together elements of the liberal, republican and civic communitarian strands of thinking. We characterise this as democratic citizenship. Throughout this paper, we argue that democratic citizenship should be understood as equal membership of the UK's political community that: (i) confers civil, political and social rights; (ii) is practised through active civic and political participation; and (iii) is grounded in a shared identity with a responsibility to uphold core national values.

3.

HOW HAS BRITISH CITIZENSHIP TAKEN SHAPE?

To understand how citizenship is experienced in the United Kingdom today, we begin with its historic roots. Citizenship is not created in a vacuum: it evolves through particular historical struggles over who is and is not excluded. In the UK in particular, citizenship has developed over time in response to social change, the decline of empire, and new patterns of migration.

The modern idea of the nation is, according to the historian Eric Hobsbawm, founded on ‘invented traditions’ reinforced by rituals, symbols and narratives (Hobsbawm 1983). Moreover, the French writer Ernest Renan famously maintained that a nation is a ‘daily plebiscite’ sustained by shared political will and collective memory (Renan 1882). For Renan, nationhood is both rooted in history and constituted by present solidarity.

Citizenship emerged relatively recently in the UK. For much of its history, people in Britain were subjects not citizens, and subjecthood was determined by loyalty to the crown. With the expansion of the British empire, growing numbers became British subjects, as people born in colonies were deemed subjects in the same way as people born in the UK. But imperial subjecthood was far from true equality. While it represented a deep connection to Britain, it at the same time maintained deep racial hierarchies (Home Office 2024).

This contradiction became particularly significant after the Second World War and the decline of empire. The British Nationality Act 1948 marked the formal creation of Citizenship of the United Kingdom and Colonies (CUKC), while maintaining the broader status of British subjecthood across the Commonwealth. Citizens of independent Commonwealth countries continued to have rights of entry and settlement in the UK, which helped to enable major postwar migration from the Caribbean, South Asia and Africa. Yet when they arrived, many people faced exclusion and discrimination.

Subsequent legislation reversed openness to Commonwealth migration. The Commonwealth Immigrants Acts of 1962 and 1968, followed by the Immigration Act 1971, progressively narrowed rights of entry. The discriminatory intent of the legislation was clear: to place controls on migration from the Caribbean, India and Pakistan, while minimising any impacts on the ‘old Commonwealth’, including Canada, Australia and New Zealand. This was reflected in the people who were exempted from immigration control. In the 1971 Act, freedom from controls rested on the concept of ‘patriality’, which was closely tied to one’s birth or ancestral connection to the UK (ibid).

The key turning point for citizenship was the British Nationality Act 1981. This legislation laid the foundations of the modern system of citizenship. The former CUKC status established by the 1948 Act was abolished and replaced with British citizenship, while a new citizenship status for British dependent territories (later overseas territories) was formed (as well as the residual category of British overseas citizens). This produced a hierarchy of citizenships rather than a single equal status. The Act also ended the principle of *jus soli* (citizenship by birth),

instead only automatically extending citizenship to children born in the UK when they had at least one parent who was a British citizen or had settled status.

Membership of the European Union created further layers of complexity. The Maastricht Treaty of 1992 introduced European Union citizenship. This extended the principle of freedom of movement originally introduced by the Treaty of Rome and granted the right to participate in European and municipal elections. EU citizenship represented a supranational model in which rights derived partly from membership of a wider political community beyond the nation state.

For the UK this model of citizenship was highly contested and ultimately short-lived, given the 2016 vote to leave the EU. But in turn, Brexit raised new questions for citizenship by removing EU citizenship rights for British nationals and instigating negotiations over the legal status of millions of EU residents in the UK (and vice versa). EU migrants were guaranteed a pathway to settlement and citizenship through the creation of the EU settlement scheme. This reflected the principle that the rights of those who had already moved to the UK and made their lives here would be guaranteed, regardless of the public vote to leave.

Northern Ireland presents perhaps the clearest example of citizenship's complexity in the UK. Under the Good Friday Agreement, the people of Northern Ireland may identify as Irish, British, or both. Citizenship here is not singular but plural, reflecting competing national identities and constitutional compromise. This suggests that citizenship can be politically stabilising when it is flexible to the reality of multiple identities.

British citizenship in its current form is an evolving political settlement. Its history reveals that the boundaries and content of citizenship have been regularly contested, that principles of citizenship have often collided with the politics of migration, and that British citizenship has never simply been about legal status, but about whose membership is recognised as fully legitimate.

4.

WHAT DOES CITIZENSHIP LOOK LIKE IN THE UK TODAY?

The modern system of British citizenship reflects the multilayered evolution set out in the last chapter. It is therefore perhaps no surprise that citizenship and nationality rules are some of the most complex and contested areas of legislation on the UK's statute book.

In broad terms, there are two main ways to become a UK citizen. Children born in the UK automatically become citizens if one of their parents has indefinite leave to remain (ILR) or British citizenship.¹ Adults not born here must go through a process of naturalisation – typically after living in the UK for five years and holding ILR for 12 months, which in general means a six-year wait. To naturalise, applicants must pay hefty fees, demonstrate a certain level of English (or Welsh or Scottish Gaelic), take the life in the UK test, and pass checks to show they are of 'good character'.

A significant proportion of UK residents are not British citizens. Around 10 per cent of people in England and Wales (5.9 million) held non-UK passports at the 2021 census, which can be seen as a proxy for non-UK nationality (ONS 2022).²

Many non-citizens nevertheless have settlement, otherwise known as indefinite leave to remain (ILR). An estimated 621,000–820,000 non-EU citizens have ILR (Migration Observatory 2025). Settlement offers no time limit on someone's stay in the UK and unrestricted access to public funds. Settlement is a crucial step on the pathway to become a citizen, but it also provides a secure status for those who are not yet eligible or do not want to take up citizenship – particularly where their home country does not permit dual nationality. Notably, the legal category of ILR provided the basis for protecting EU citizens living in the UK following the 2016 referendum.

Yet settlement does not offer the same permanence or symbolic recognition as naturalisation. It can be more vulnerable to future policy change and legal challenge (and lapses after two years outside the UK). Indeed, there have been recent calls to abolish the category of ILR altogether.

While modern citizenship is primarily a legal status, previous governments have made some efforts to imbue it with greater meaning. Citizenship ceremonies were introduced in 2004 to try to reinforce the idea that becoming British involves a commitment to shared civic values. Applicants make an oath or affirmation of allegiance and a pledge in support of the UK's rights, freedoms and values. In theory, this reflects the republican understanding of citizenship built around participation and responsibility. But the principle behind citizenship ceremonies only extends so far. Civic engagement plays a half-hearted role in the broader education system, workplace institutions, and wider public services. While the actual process of acquiring citizenship may be grounded in ceremony, its symbolic significance is quickly forgotten after the event.

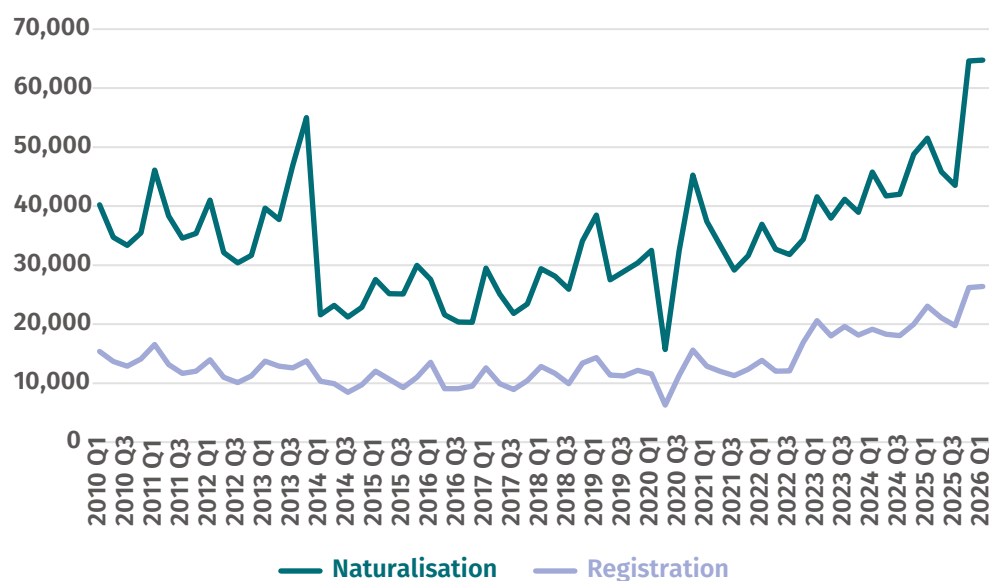
1 Otherwise children born in the UK can register as a citizen if their parent subsequently obtains settlement or citizenship or if they have lived in the UK until the age of 10.

2 Those who also have a UK passport are not included in this cohort.

Applications for British citizenship have risen significantly in recent years, in part as a result of higher levels of migration in previous years. The number of applications for naturalisation has roughly doubled in the past decade, from 108,000 in 2015 to 205,000 in 2025 (Home Office 2026). This is expected to increase further over the next five years as the post-Covid surge in arrivals apply for settlement and eventually citizenship.

FIGURE 4.1: APPLICATIONS FOR NATURALISATIONS HAVE ROUGHLY DOUBLED IN THE PAST DECADE

Applications for British citizenship, 2010 Q1–2026 Q1



Source: IPPR analysis of Home Office, 'Citizenship detailed datasets, year ending March 2026' (Home Office 2026)

The flip side to the granting of citizenship is its occasional removal. The home secretary possesses powers to deprive individuals of British citizenship where the status has been obtained by fraud or where it is considered conducive to the public good, including in national security cases. There have been more than 1,500 citizenship deprivation orders since 2010, primarily due to fraud (McKinney et al 2025).

The government is now planning to make major reforms to the process of acquiring both settlement and citizenship. Under its 'earned settlement' and 'earned citizenship' proposals, migrants will have to wait significantly longer to acquire ILR and therefore citizenship. The default waiting period for ILR will increase from 5 years to 10 or 15 years.³ People will then be able to 'earn' reductions in the waiting period based on their earnings, occupation or language proficiency; or may face longer waits for claiming benefits or breaching immigration rules. These measures represent a significant shift in both the practice and theory of citizenship in the UK.

³ Rules for refugees will be tougher, including a 20-year wait for ILR under the 'core protection' route.

5. WHO CAN BECOME A UK CITIZEN?

The major reforms currently under way raise a fundamental question about the nature of citizenship: Who gets to be a UK citizen and how should that be decided? For progressives, this is a matter of central importance. Citizenship offers equal membership of a political community, and so the bestowal of citizenship is perhaps the most significant step a government can take for the purposes of economic, social and political justice.

Of course, in practice the acquisition of indefinite leave to remain (ILR) in the UK offers many of the same social and economic rights as citizenship, if not quite the same certainty or stability. But the process of getting citizenship is typically contingent on a grant of ILR. This means that the assigning of citizenship is intimately tied with that of settlement.

In his seminal book *Spheres of Justice*, the communitarian political theorist Michael Walzer offers a twin insight into the question of citizenship (Walzer 1983). First, he argues that the members of a political community – in particular, territorially bounded states – can be justified in setting admission requirements for entry. While this power is subject to certain constraints – including the principle of mutual aid in respect of helping refugees – he argues that for communities to determine their own character and sustain a common life they should be able to control the immigration of newcomers. This means that states should have the right to set policies on different types of migration, such as people coming to work and study.

But the second insight is just as important. Walzer argues there are moral requirements for citizenship policy. A state which hosts residents who never have a pathway to citizenship is, in Walzer's words, a 'little tyranny' – analogous to a 'family with live-in servants'. These non-citizens are subject to the rules of the citizens they live beside but are themselves disenfranchised.

For Walzer, this is an unjust exercise of power. He points in particular to the experience of the Athenian metics. The metics were non-citizens who were admitted as permanent residents, but who were excluded from basic rights, treated as inferior and subject to the rule of Athenian citizens. The metic status was hereditary: their children were also metics and only under exceptional circumstances could metics become citizens. This engendered a class of people who were 'governed without consent' (ibid).

The contemporary equivalent of metics is the *Kafala* system for regulating migrant workers in the Gulf states. Under *Kafala*, migrant workers hold a temporary status tied to their sponsors and are in effect unable to obtain permanent residency or citizenship. In reality, migrant workers may stay for many years, including past the retirement age, but in formal terms they remain non-citizens (Lori 2012). The practical implications of the *Kafala* system are widespread exploitation and sustained precarity for migrant workers, including the ongoing prospect of deportation (Khan 2014).

The force of Walzer's argument becomes clear when considering our earlier characterisation of citizenship as grounded in equal rights, civic and political participation, and a common identity and values. Permanently excluding residents within the territory of a nation state from these core elements creates a new subclass of disenfranchised aliens. They do not have the same rights as proper citizens; they are restricted from fully participating in civic and political life; and they are excluded from the nation's shared identity. This status is held in perpetuity and passed on through the generations. Such a status is inimical to a flourishing democracy and to societal cohesion.

Does this mean that every resident should automatically become a citizen? This would be a step too far for two reasons. First, the automatic granting of citizenship upon entry would likely jeopardise any effort by a state to determine admissions. This is because governments would be reluctant to admit legal entry in most circumstances since this would provide for immediate permanent residence. At the same time, it would escalate irregular entry because of the sizeable benefits of securing residency. Second, becoming part of a political community is a significant step, and so naturalisation should be a meaningful and considered process, to ensure that the key principles of civic and political participation and shared identity are respected and protected.

The result is therefore that all residents in the UK should not automatically be granted citizenship but should be on a pathway towards it. This pathway should not be excessively cumbersome, expensive or elongated, since otherwise migrants will in practice (if not in principle) face an extended subordinate status. Neither should this process excessively differentiate between individuals based on their economic circumstances. Instead, the proper place for tests of this type is at the point of admission to the UK. The government has every right to admit migrants based on their economic contributions, but once this extends into the process of determining citizenship for existing residents it risks reserving full political membership for those with sufficient resources and disenfranchising those without.

This raises the question of what the process of becoming a citizen should look like. The liberal conception of citizenship discussed earlier has less to say on this question: citizenship is primarily understood in terms of the bundle of rights it bestows, rather than what duties or obligations may be expected.

The model of citizenship we are interested in must therefore move away from a purely liberal account of citizenship and incorporate insights from both the communitarian and republican traditions. The civic communitarian tradition suggests that citizenship should be grounded in individuals embracing the common identity and values of the community and signing up to an agreed set of rights and responsibilities. For the UK, these responsibilities include subscribing to the values of tolerance, reciprocity, contribution and respect for democratic norms.

Signing up to these values should not entail dropping one's own cultural identity – this would suppress diversity and be antithetical to the very values of tolerance and equality in question. It should, however, involve a recognition that these are the beliefs which underpin everyday life and which bind the political community together, regardless of culture, ethnicity and religion.

This could be characterised as multiculturalism with a core of non-negotiable shared norms and values. Multiculturalism is often caricatured as incompatible with embracing a common national identity, but this is too simplistic. As the sociologist Tariq Modood has argued, it is possible to both recognise and respect multiple group identities and maintain a rich account of national citizenship (Modood 2024).

Following the republican tradition, the journey towards citizenship should also incorporate meaningful engagement in civic and political life and contribution towards the common good. In practice, this means that the process of naturalisation could involve the promotion of participation in the local community and in the democratic process.

The implications for the journey towards citizenship are therefore twofold. First, citizenship must be accessible. If it is a distant prize open only to a select few, then this fatally weakens the motivation to belong and creates a class of people excluded from the UK's common identity and political life. Second, obtaining citizenship must be meaningful. The process of naturalisation should be designed to provide the institutional foundations for social integration and civic participation. Together, these principles point to a renewed understanding of democratic citizenship rooted in the communitarian and republican traditions.

6. WHERE DO THE PUBLIC STAND?

The public's instincts on migration and citizenship reflect the arguments we have just made. First, public opinion research consistently finds that greater control over who is and who is not admitted to the UK is foundational for restoring public confidence in the government's handling of immigration (Rutter and Carter 2017). Concerns about migration tend to focus on irregular arrivals – that is, those forms of migration over which the government has least control (Katwala et al 2025). In fact, for much of the public, control is more important than minimising levels of migration. When asked to choose between controlling migration regardless of whether numbers are significantly reduced and deterring people to bring numbers down as low as possible, 43 per cent of the public opt for control compared to 33 per cent who choose deterrence (ibid).

Yet while the public want control over migration, they also tend to favour an inclusive account of citizenship. A total of 51 per cent believe it is possible to become truly British if someone makes an effort, compared to 36 per cent who believe a person has to be born British to be truly British. More people believe that being able to speak English and respecting Britain's political institutions and laws are important for being truly British than they do birthplace or ancestry (YouGov/IPPR 2025). By and large, more of the public believe in civic rather than ethnonationalist or exclusively birth-based forms of Britishness.

Moreover, the public favour fair and accessible pathways to citizenship. A majority (56 per cent) believe that people should be eligible for citizenship after at most five years (British Future 2025). A detailed study by the Bright Blue think tank in 2020 found strong support for easing pathways to citizenship for UK-born children: 72 per cent backed either discounted fees or free citizenship for children with non-citizen parents who were born and raised in the UK (Arslanagic-Wakefield 2020).

The public also attach significant meaning to the concept of citizenship. The Bright Blue study found that most people (60 per cent) believed that it was important for migrants living permanently in the country to obtain citizenship (ibid). A separate public opinion study found that respondents' belief that a hypothetical migrant contributed to the UK economy increased by 21 percentage points in the scenario where the migrant had become a British citizen compared to the scenario where they hadn't (Cooper et al 2024). Citizenship is valued as an important signal of contribution.

7.

WHAT ARE THE ISSUES WITH UK CITIZENSHIP TODAY?

Citizenship in Britain today falls short of the vision of democratic citizenship we have outlined. There are two main structural weaknesses.

The first problem with contemporary citizenship is inaccessibility. Fees for citizenship and indefinite leave to remain applications, visa renewals, the immigration health surcharge and legal advice together create a financial burden that is prohibitive for many individuals navigating the system. The current fee for naturalisation is £1,709, more than five times the estimated administrative unit cost (£324) (UKVI 2026).⁴ According to our analysis, the cost for naturalisation is the highest in the G7 (see table 7.1). This gives the impression that for the Home Office citizenship is primarily a source of income rather than a democratic institution core to the British way of life. Those who contribute but cannot afford to naturalise may end up staying in the UK with a permanent insecure status despite having lived in the UK for years or even decades.

TABLE 7.1: ADULT NATURALISATION FEES IN G7 COUNTRIES

Country	Application fee for adult naturalisation
Canada	£347
France	£218
Germany	£218
Italy	£214
Japan	£0
UK	£1,709
US	£562

Source: IPPR analysis of country naturalisation guidance as of 10 August 2026 (converted into £)

Note: Figures are based on core fees for standard routes for adult naturalisation. Italian fee is for marriage or residency related applications. US fee is for paper filing of form N-400.

Indeed, even children born in the UK can find it difficult to access formal citizenship. Unlike countries that operate unambiguous *jus soli* principles, being born in the UK does not automatically make a child a British citizen. Citizenship usually depends on the immigration status of parents, specifically whether at least one parent is already settled or a citizen. Otherwise, children born in the UK may have to wait until they have lived in the UK until the age of 10 before they can apply to register for citizenship. Moreover, this registration route is expensive and administratively complex (involving a fee of £1,000 per child).⁵ The consequence of this system is that exclusion from national membership can become embedded across generations.

⁴ There is a further £130 fee for the citizenship ceremony.

⁵ It is possible to apply for a fee waiver in certain limited circumstances.

It might be argued that the UK is a special case when it comes to citizenship, because due to the UK's history of empire, Commonwealth migrants have voting rights and so can participate in the political process without ever becoming citizens. Therefore, the argument goes, citizenship is not necessary for democratic inclusion. But this is an insufficient response in three respects. First, and most obviously, it does not include migrants from outside the Commonwealth. Second, it does not address other rights which migrants are entitled to at the point of settlement, which as we have already argued is intimately tied with citizenship. And third, citizenship has a deeper significance which transcends eligibility for electoral participation – both in terms of the cultural affiliation it denotes and the security it provides. This means that even those Commonwealth migrants with settlement rights are missing the symbolic recognition and certainty which come with citizenship. Ultimately, barriers to citizenship are a fundamental constraint on belonging.

The second weakness of contemporary citizenship is that it is too thin a concept. There is little institutional support to support the link between citizenship and wider societal norms for those growing up in the UK. Formal citizenship education was introduced onto the English national curriculum in 2002 and there is some evidence that it has been effective in encouraging civic engagement; but it is still often limited and patchy, with a 2021 study finding that under a third of secondary schools provided weekly lessons (Weinberg 2021). For migrants who naturalise, the life in the UK test often focusses on obscure historical facts rather than the aspects of national and community life which might prove most useful for connecting with British identity or encouraging civic engagement. Citizenship therefore boils down to an administrative test rather than a process of social integration.

This challenge is intensified by the broader decline of shared national culture and civic institutions. The growth of new technologies and social media and the collapse of community spaces have weakened many of the informal structures tied to democratic citizenship. The decline of trade unions, religious institutions and local associations, all of which historically played an important role in forging a common identity, has left a major gap in the public sphere. There are now far fewer spaces where citizens can meet each other as equal members of a shared political community rather than simply consumers or service users.

Taken together, these problems expose the gap between the case we have made for democratic citizenship and the status quo. On the one hand, the journey towards citizenship is remote for too many. This risks an expanding subclass of people who are governed without political representation or social inclusion. On the other, the value of citizenship itself has become eroded by a decline in civic institutions, while efforts to revitalise citizenship through education and integration policy have not yet lived up to their promise.

8.

A REFORM AGENDA FOR UK CITIZENSHIP

The lesson of this paper is that democratic citizenship in the UK should be reconnected to its core principles: equal rights, collective identity, and civic and political participation. A reform agenda should therefore address both the legal architecture of citizenship as well as the wider social environment that invests it with moral significance.

But if the problems are so clear, why haven't they been addressed already? While there have been some past efforts to revitalise citizenship policy, the priority of governments has often been on controlling numbers and deterring new arrivals. As we have argued, drawing on the work of Michael Walzer, states do have a right to determine admissions and control migration. But this priority has often come at the expense of an accessible and meaningful pathway to citizenship. Indeed, the public agree: the majority of people support the idea that migrants living permanently in the country should become citizens. It is possible to pursue a reform agenda which controls migration, improves the citizenship process, and commands public support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Meeting the accessibility challenge

Our first set of reforms address the accessibility challenge highlighted in the previous chapter. Crucially, this means **establishing clear, consistent pathways to citizenship for all long-term residents**. All long-term immigration statuses should have an accessible route to settlement and citizenship which is welcomed and encouraged over temporary migration. While there are some visas where it would not be appropriate to embed such pathways – international students, for instance, should be understood as akin to medium-term tourists rather than long-term residents – they should be the exception and not the rule.⁶ If governments are uncomfortable about granting settlement and citizenship rights to those they seek to admit, then they should reconsider the decision to introduce these visas in the first place.

The system of settlement and citizenship is currently undergoing major reforms as the government intends to extend the period for which migrants must wait until they are eligible. A full assessment of these proposals would be beyond the scope of this paper, but we make a number of suggestions to ensure that the proposals result in accessible pathways to citizenship for everyone. In particular we recommend that:

- the wait for settlement should in general be five years and at a maximum be no more than 10 years
- there should be almost no circumstances which permanently prevent access to citizenship – unless, for instance, there is a risk to public safety

⁶ Irregular arrivals without well-founded asylum claims would also not automatically be in scope, given the need for the government to effectively manage immigration.

- fair protections should be put in place for people already on pathways to settlement and citizenship at the time the policy is announced.

We have highlighted the challenges children face in obtaining citizenship. **The UK should accordingly strengthen pathways to citizenship for children who have grown up in the country.** All children born in the UK should be able to apply for citizenship after five years of living here, regardless of their parents' status. This would bring the waiting period more closely in line with public expectations. A fairer approach to early-life citizenship would align legal status with lived identity.

As outlined in chapter 7, cost is a key barrier to citizenship for many. **The cost of citizenship should therefore be substantially reduced and restructured so that it more closely reflects administrative cost.** In particular, citizenship fees for children should be aligned with their unit cost (£324) – charging such fees should not be a profit-making exercise.⁷ The government should also extend fee waivers to those who cannot otherwise afford the price of settlement or citizenship because they are destitute or at imminent risk of destitution. (Fee waivers currently exist for certain immigration routes and for child citizenship applications, but are not available for settlement and citizenship in general.) Fee reductions could in part be funded through an increase to the cost of certificates of sponsorship for employers (currently £525 per certificate). This would shift costs towards admission of entry rather than settlement or citizenship, reflecting the principles we have set out in this report.

We also argue that **future citizenship patterns should be considered within a wider migration plan published and updated annually by government.** It is a core principle of self-governing democracies that they should be able to set their own policy for admitting migrants. But to command public legitimacy, this process must be democratic and transparent. This means that policies on migration should be developed through an annual plan with clear objectives that is presented and debated in parliament. As the Institute for Government has suggested, an annual plan could help contribute to a better-quality debate on immigration policy (Owen and Savur 2025).

Moreover, the implications of proposed migration reforms for future settlement and citizenship levels should be included within this plan. For instance, ministers should consider whether they are willing to expand total citizenship numbers when they make a decision to open up new migration routes. This is a lesson from the experience of the Health and Care route, where care workers were admitted into the UK with no proper consideration for the long-term implications for settlement and citizenship. In addition, major changes to immigration policy should be made through primary legislation, rather than via statutory instrument or changes to the immigration rules, in order to allow for effective parliamentary scrutiny.

Giving citizenship meaning

Our second set of reforms addresses the void of meaning in contemporary British citizenship. We propose that **the process of obtaining citizenship should be reformed so that it is more meaningfully connected to civic life and the values of our political community.** While the life in the UK test was principally designed to support the process of integration, in practice it has become a largely meaningless exercise in memorisation of arbitrary facts. The government should therefore reform the test and introduce a new citizenship course for all adult applicants. This course would involve a mix of information about individual rights, UK institutions, the legal and political process, and community life. It would also include a practical volunteering component with

⁷ We welcome the government's recent lowering of the child citizenship registration fee from £1,214 to £1,000 as a step in this direction (UKVI 2026).

activities designed to encourage civic engagement. Courses would ideally be delivered at the local level to allow for a bespoke element that engages and familiarises applicants with their local community.

The course would end with a revamped citizenship test which would focus on a mix of factual questions focussed on everyday life and scenario-based questions designed to test for national values, including tolerance, contribution, and equality of opportunity. The questions would be more grounded than in the current test but would be selected from a larger and more diverse bank, in order to encourage applicants to engage with the content rather than learn the answers by rote.

At the same time, we propose that **the acquisition of citizenship should be actively encouraged by the government**. In the past, politicians have at times been reticent to promote the idea of citizenship, considering it to be a matter of individual choice. We think this is a mistake. People who are willing to become citizens and subscribe to the norms and values of the community – as opposed to those only seeking to obtain ILR – should benefit from a faster process. Rather than waiting an extra year after ILR to apply for citizenship as under the current system, aspiring citizens should be eligible to apply one year before people making an application for only ILR.⁸ Citizenship should not be the only option for people seeking long-term residence: there are good reasons why some people will not want to become citizens, particularly if they are nationals of countries where dual citizenship is not permitted.⁹ But neither should the government be neutral on the question of citizenship, given the risks associated with large numbers of residents living in the UK but sitting outside the political community.

The reforms to naturalisation should go hand in hand with a wider citizenship agenda focussed on young people. As Nick Garland argues in his recent report for IPPR, the government should make a renewed effort to strengthen citizenship education for children and young people, focussed on common values, the democratic process and volunteering. To the extent that it is feasible and appropriate, courses for adults applying for citizenship and education for young people learning about citizenship should mirror each other, in order to ensure that everyone in the UK becoming an adult citizen goes through a similar process (Garland et al 2026).

A new citizenship agenda should also centre the renewal of civic institutions and community infrastructure, in order to expand the spaces where individuals meet as fellow citizens rather than consumers, customers or service users. A new Citizens' Ownership Fund – funded by a levy on major online retailers – could help people to collectively buy local community assets (ibid). Citizenship education for both young people and adults should directly encourage engagement in local civic institutions, from community and cultural centres to independent high street shops and venues.

Finally, this package of policy reforms should be combined with a broader political narrative making the case for the core tenets of democratic citizenship. As we have argued above, formal citizenship rights in the UK are not delivered in practice when the acquisition of citizenship by outsiders is viewed as suspect or illegitimate. The growth of ethnonationalism is the latest manifestation of this challenge. This is why any reform agenda on citizenship cannot simply fly under the public radar; it must be matched with a full-throated rejection of ethnonationalism and a convincing political case for a citizenship grounded in equal rights, democratic participation and a shared civic identity.

8 This could, for instance, mean that there is a five-year qualifying period for people applying for citizenship and a six-year qualifying period for people applying for only ILR.

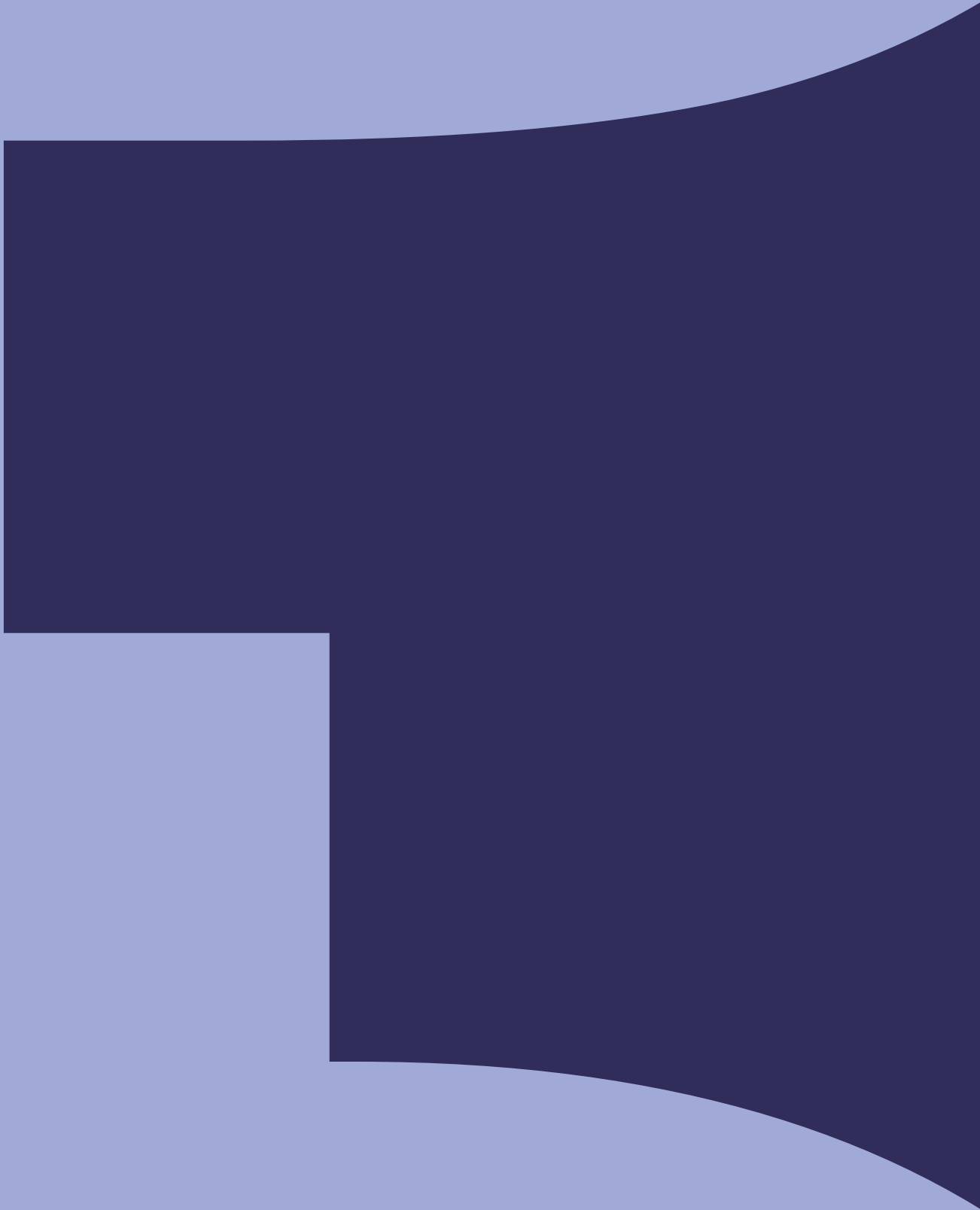
9 There are at least 39 countries which do not allow or recognise dual citizenship, including India and China (Edwards 2025).

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