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Grape harvesters to be considered 'skilled workers' in the UK

Former Environment Secretary advocates for reevaluation of skilled labour and immigration policies with focus on agricultural sector

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In a recent interview with the BBC, George Eustice, the former environment secretary of the United Kingdom, urged the government to reassess its skilled labour and immigration policies. Eustice's statement emphasized the need to recognize the

expertise required in agricultural work, particularly fruit picking, which has historically been categorized as low-skilled labor by the UK government.

The UK has a stringent immigration policy that favours what it categorizes as "skilled workers." This classification is vital as individuals deemed skilled are eligible to apply for a UK work visa as per an approved government list of occupations. This list encompasses an array of farming-related roles but excludes fruit-picking.

Contrasting with Eustice's perspective, the current Home Secretary Suella Braverman has previously argued for the UK to train its domestic workforce in fruit-picking to reduce immigration. Braverman upheld the conventional view of fruit-pickers as low-skilled workers and asserted that there was "no good reason" the country couldn't foster its own fruit-pickers.

However, Eustice vehemently disagreed with Braverman's position. Having been a fruit farmer himself, he brings firsthand experience to the table. He argued that fruit picking demands a level of dexterity and knowledge which merits classification as skilled labor.

According to Eustice, the UK's immigration policy should be attuned to the country's economic requirements rather than solely being skills-oriented. He advocated for acknowledging the "dextrous, human skills" required for fruit-picking and called on the government to implement a long-term seasonal workers scheme as an alternative to the skilled worker scheme.

The agricultural sector, being one of the linchpins of the UK economy, relies heavily on seasonal workers, especially in harvesting seasons. The categorization of fruit pickers as low-skilled workers has been criticized for not addressing the sector's labor needs adequately. With Brexit affecting the inflow of European workers, who historically constituted a significant portion of the agricultural labor force, reevaluating the classification could have a substantial impact on the industry.

By recognizing fruit-picking as a skilled occupation, the UK could potentially attract more qualified and experienced workers from abroad. This could, in turn, bolster productivity and have a ripple effect on related industries such as food processing and distribution.

Experts in agriculture and economics concur that the recognition of fruit-picking as skilled labor could have positive ramifications for the UK economy. They underscore the importance of adapting immigration policies to reflect current economic conditions and labor market requirements.

The call by George Eustice to reconsider the classification of fruit-pickers as skilled workers shines a spotlight on the wider issue of the UK's approach to skilled labor and immigration policies. With the agricultural sector being vital to the nation's economy, the implementation of a long-term seasonal workers scheme and reevaluation of the skills needed in the sector could be steps in the right direction. It remains to be seen how the UK government will respond to these suggestions and the impact it could have on both the agricultural sector and the economy as a whole.