

## PASSPORT CHECKS A DISTRACTION



ARE Britain's passport checks for European travellers the one thing which stands between stability and a flood tide of illegal migration? To judge by Charles Wardle's decision to resign as a Government Minister on this, you might conclude that (for some, at least) it is the issue upon which civilisation itself hangs by a thread. From the official response of the Labour Party — that tough border controls and immigration controls are the cornerstone of good race relations — you might decide that it is all common ground and that we just need to unite against these horrid old Eurocrats who want to make us free to travel around Europe without a passport.

Before deciding whether this is a pro-Europe or anti-Europe argument — a survive or "be swamped" issue — it is worth putting some of the key facts on the table. We are not talking about European countries (singly or collectively) having no immigration policies whatsoever. Whatever its faults or merits, the relationship between Europe and the rest of the world is not the key issue at stake here. We are talking about the rights of movement of existing (legitimate) residents in Europe. We can't avoid the issue of illegal migration but, if we are to avoid playing into the hands of those who would simply rattle the bones of European racism, we need to put it in perspective.

Europe currently has some 15 million settled immigrants". Two million of these live in the UK and most are long standing and settled members of community life in Britain. Over 800,000 of Britain's 'foreigners' are from other EU countries. Almost 350,000 come from America and Australia, and 150,000 are from other parts of Europe (including Scandinavia). The numbers from Asia (500,000) are a lot less than those from the rest of Europe and whose residence in Britain is more accurately measured in decades rather than years.

Britain neither has the greatest number of 'foreigners' living in it (France has twice as many and Germany three times), nor is the most sought after place to come to from outside the EU; 30,000 refugees or asylum seekers apply to enter Britain each year, while ten times that number apply to live (and work) in Germany. In the 1990s. Britain has also returned to being a country of net emigration — where more people leave than arrive. So would we be flooded without European passport checks?

While the tabloid papers might talk of 15 million 'foreigners', ready to lurch into Britain at the drop of a passport control, the figures pan out very differently, only a minute fraction would even be interested. Most are settled in countries which pay them better, treat them better and offer better prospects and security for their families.

If you want to go into a panic about a looming invasion, it might make more sense to do so over the 320 million European citizens who have the automatic (and legal) right to come to live in Britain now, simply as part of our European treaty obligations. In return, British citizens have exactly the same right to go to

live and work anywhere else within the European Union — as we do.

Given the freedoms that we already possess there are a different set of conclusions you might want to draw about the limited migration around Europe. Most of us are happier to remain within a language, culture and local geography which we understand. Most of the migration around Europe is of those moving up the earnings ladder (following a job offer) or towards sunnier climes (having acquired the cash to do so). Britain is not a particular magnet or either. But are we a magnet for the illegal migration of economic refugees?

We move here into the world of shadows and speculation. The numbers game approach quickly polarises between prejudice and purity. It takes us nowhere. But it, is possible to explore legitimate areas of concern. For any country' the scope for illegal migration increases in line with two elements — the profits to be made out of the trade in illegals and the scope for exploiting them in sub-economic stratas of the economy. The removal of rights in the workplace and duties from the employer make the employment of illegal migrants all the more attractive. They will work for less than the going rate and remain silent (and grateful) that the employer doesn't shop them. It is the new layer of indentured labour which underpins modern, deregulated economies — invisible, disposable, degraded and despised. They serve a dual purpose as the focus of hatred as well as the source of great profit.

When I undertook some research on this before entering Parliament, a rich (and sad) tapestry of exploitation quickly appeared — Filipino women in hotel and domestic work, North Africans picking tomatoes and fruit around the Mediterranean countries. Street sweepers and street sellers from a League of Nations outside Western Europe, refugees from Asia working in kitchens and laundries, and doing the 'cash in hand' dirty work around factories after the legitimate shifts had finished.

It isn't enough to say that there are growing numbers of people, across the planet, who are in flight from poverty, famine and civil war. We need to follow their snail trails a lot further. The bulk of the world's poorest and stateless are sheltered by neighbouring states which are almost as poor. None of those forced into asylum and flight are in search of lives which are illicit, uncertain and exploited. In Britain (and across Europe) that just happens to be the terms offered by those who trade and profit out of illegal migration. If we want to tackle this it is better to pursue two very specific courses of action.

First, we need policies which raise the standards of employment rights and obligations. A duty on businesses to employ staff legally, on proper contracts of employment, with proper national insurance and sick pay contributions, would take us away from the cycle of down-grading employment and the degradation of the person. Punitive fines on the employers/exploiters of illegal labour would squeeze the 'markets without morality' which they operate in. It would also squeeze one of the aspects of our society which can so easily use Third World exploitation as a platform for spawning First world racism and prejudice.

Outside Europe, we need to recognise that an investment in other people's conditions of stability — democracy, self-efficiency, tolerance and security — all contribute to our own stability.

In this sense, passport checks within Europe could be a dangerous distraction. They won't halt the trade in drugs or guns — for which we need different policies. They won't tack 'the internal market' for illegal immigrants. They won't stop 320 million Europeans coming to live in Britain if they were daft enough to want to. And, in reality, they won't make us one jot safer, more positive about our neighbours or more

secure in our prospects.

alansimpsonmp.co.uk 