

10th November 2016

Controlling Migration and Enabling Free Trade

By Vicky Ford, *MEP for the East of England and Chairman of the Internal Market and Consumer Protection committee in the European Parliament*

In our up-coming negotiations with the EU, the UK needs to re-establish its own authority over immigration policy whilst also maximising free and unfettered trade in goods and services with the rest of the EU.

The Prime Minister has said that she wants to “give British companies the maximum freedom to trade with and operate in the Single Market and let European businesses do the same here” but she also reaffirmed “We are not leaving the European Union only to give up control of immigration again.” How might both of these objectives be achieved?

Politicians on both sides of the channel risk being locked into positions based on ideological purity on “Free Movement” with many on the continent declaring Free Movement as non-negotiable. However, real world examples show that many cases of the European Union’s declared red line being far from rigid already exist.

Some of the measures that are already exercised by other governments within the single market, EEA or EFTA have proven to be highly effective controls, these include:

- Migrants only being able to access housing, health and education if they prove their employment through a registration system.
- Jobs being advertised locally before being offered overseas
- Stricter limits on access to benefits and welfare
- An upper break – or cap – on migrant numbers.

In **Belgium**, in practical terms it is impossible to move into the country without a reasonably well paid job. Any person wishing to access public services or rent a property must register within their local area for a social security card; this requires proof of employment and a guarantee from the employer to pay social security contributions, or to be able to prove considerable independent means. If the person subsequently loses their job then after a period of time the card is removed and with it the access to services. A card-based system has been rejected in the UK in the past due to data privacy concerns. To assuage this, one might consider **Estonia’s** "e-id" model, which enables individuals to monitor and control who has access to their own personal data.

In **Germany**, the government has approved a draft bill forbidding EU citizens from drawing benefits in Germany for their first five years in the country - considerably longer than the “Phased” four year moratorium offered to the UK in the February negotiation.

Switzerland, which is in the European Free Trade Area, is about to introduce new rules so that jobs must be advertised to local people before non-domestic residents. Access to jobs for local people will be

an important element of a reformed migration system in the UK. In the East of England, during the referendum, I heard complaints that some local jobs were not advertised locally at all and the advertisements were not always available in English.

In its relationship with **Liechtenstein** the EU has already accepted the principle of an overall cap on total migration, which gives residency permits to only around 90 people each year. A precedent has been set. Liechtenstein is a tiny country but if you scale up their cap for the population of the UK this would be equivalent to around 150,000 permits per annum. Interestingly Liechtenstein' population of 37,000 people is about the same as the population of Wisbech in the Cambridgeshire Fens which in some years has had over 1,000 new arrivals, putting great pressure on local services. It seems unreasonable for the EU to offer free market access to a small country with a cap but exclude access for larger countries who wish to better control the impact of migration on their smaller towns.

When we are negotiating our new relationship with Europe we should not underestimate how deeply cherished the right to free movement is in other parts of Europe. Especially for those that were held under Communist rule where there are recent and often emotionally painful memories of the heavy restrictions on movement. Therefore, drawing on examples such as those above may facilitate the negotiations.

We should be sensitive to how "points based" systems are perceived as these can easily be interpreted as an attempt to brain-drain talent and skills from others. Recently, in **Poland** the Deputy Prime Ministers of two large Eastern European countries told me about the recruitment challenges in their own health services from the high numbers of health professionals choosing to come to the UK. They proposed a 25 per cent increase in the number of medical student training places in England, which should help not only our health service but those in other countries too, but it will be the best part of a decade before this will be realised. The UK Prime Minister has sensibly rejected a points based system.

Increasing levels of skills and training in the UK will take time. We cannot afford to lose the skills and experience of the staff we currently have. Furthermore, if we are to retain our position as a world leader in areas such as science and innovation then it is important that top academic and research jobs can go to the best applicants from all over the world, and that the best in the world wish to continue to come to live in Britain. There is deep anxiety among many of those from across Europe currently living and working in the UK about their future status. It is important that the UK reassures them and sends out a clear signal that it will continue to be an open and welcoming country.