

UK Immigration control (some thoughts at the end of the 2010 ANC academic year)

They're all gone now and there is nothing more that the Border Agency can do to me. My apologies to John Millington Synge for paraphrasing one of the saddest lines in his tragic play "Riders to the Sea", but as Director of the NCUK operation at ANC-UK it has been a stressful time, indeed a tragic time for those students who have had their visa applications refused. I have had to look through the documents that they have received from Chennai and one of the things that struck me was the fact that the named officer did not have a UK name. There must have been a time when that officer or their family were themselves immigrants to the UK. It put me in mind of the first wave of Irish immigrants to America working hard to keep the second wave out. It also put me in mind of the mother of a school colleague, who although Irish had grown up in war-time Germany. She had a job that none of us would envy. Armed with a Luger pistol she had to sit all day in an administrative office and ensure that the entire staff, all slave-labour from Nazi occupied Europe did what they were required to do.

Immigration is an emotive issue in UK, as it now is in Ireland. My own people were immigrants to Ireland in 1172 and at subsequent times, when the natives were revolting outsiders were bought in as 'planters'. From the point of view of the authorities there was a problem, because within one generation the immigrants were assimilated into the population and became "more Irish than the Irish themselves". This process has been repeated so many times with only one significant exception. The north-east of the country was the last to come under British control and on this occasion the locals were displaced and the region planted with ethnically identical lowland Scots (Celts). There was only one difference. They had a different label. They were Protestants, while the natives were Roman Catholics. Both sides wished to retain their cultural identity and this could be deemed the source of the Northern Ireland Troubles which have troubled us all for so long. So the maintenance of cultural identity can be a basis for conflict. In times past this got confused with racism and in the immediate aftermath of Empire Britain was a racially intolerant society. I remember seeing a dying Enoch Powell interviewed on television. To him, his whole life's work had been a waste. I don't know whether his infamous 'rivers of blood' speech represented his personal feeling, but it struck a nerve and the people of Britain had to ask themselves "is this what we want?". Clearly, it was not, and Britain is now a wonderful multi-cultural society in which to live and people can be confident that anti-racism is backed up by stringently applied laws. In this respect I feel that Enoch Powell made a contribution for which we should all be grateful.

A multi-cultural society does not mean that those who are resident in the country are going to be happy when hordes of economic migrants arrive. This is a daily and weekly discussed political topic, that was a major issue in the recent general election which has brought about so many changes. Britain is not a signatory to the Shengen Agreement which removed the physical manifestation of borders over a large part of the European Community. In order to understand the reasons for this one has to go back approximately two hundred years. When the French armies under Napoleon were sweeping across Europe they heralded a new era whose effects continue right up to this moment. They imposed the *Code Napoleon*, a new legal system that persists in many European countries today. They insisted that everybody be registered and that everybody carry an identity card. It continues today in almost all European countries except Britain and Ireland. The recently ousted Labour government in the UK tried to introduce identity cards. There was not an outcry of opposition, more a sullen resistance. I for one come from a country where the citizenry believe that the less the authorities know about them the better for their civil liberties and "if I don't cause the authorities any problems, then they won't cause me problems." In fact there is a good basis for this. The truth is that if we can genuinely trust our benevolent politicians to look after our best interests, then what they know does not matter. When I lived and worked in the Netherlands in the mid 1970s I had to register with the police and was appalled to see details of the entire population of Nijmegen entered onto a giant card index. This level of information proved to be of great benefit to the Nazis when they invaded the Netherlands in 1940. A few insightful police officers destroyed their records before their new masters arrived, but for the most this massive database indicated exactly who was Jewish and the rest is history. I

for one am much relieved that the new Government of David Cameron has dropped identity cards, even if their declared reason was "on cost grounds", but it does bring us back to the basis for this contribution. The majority of states in Europe operate identity cards and thus are able to monitor people within their own territories. Not only are there no identity cards in the UK or Ireland, but the police are extremely limited in their authority to stop and question people without good reason. It is therefore essential to have a very tough vetting system at the points of entry, even if it is inconvenient for us all.

Depending upon your point of view emigration/immigration can be a very emotive issue. I myself am part of what was until the 1980's Ireland's biggest export commodity - people. In many ways I saw my undergraduate education (at my father's expense) and my postgraduate education (at Government expense) as being steps in a preparation for this process. At that time the breadth of employment opportunities and the intellectual stimulation which they offered were very limited. All of this came later when I wasn't looking. By the time that I was ready to fulfil my ambition, the cost of living in Ireland had risen to such a level that I could not afford to make the transfer back home. So, while maintaining pride in my national identity I have allowed myself to be assimilated into the population in Britain. Above all, I have endeavoured to make a contribution to university education and to the engineering profession in what is now my home country. It is undeniable. I was part of a brain-drain and while I do not necessarily advocate such, there may be young people who are contemplating emigration. Seen from the other side, it must be stressed that while the economic immigrant can be major stress on the welfare system of the UK and other EU countries, there are many who are willing and able to make an intellectual or commercial contribution. UK has always been receptive to those with skills or knowledge which could contribute to the wellbeing of UK Inc. The problem remains; how are the authorities to distinguish the one from the other? While politicians and others continue to ponder these difficult problems some of our outstandingly good students will continue to have their visa applications rejected upon what might appear to us to be trivial grounds.

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Autumn 2010