



Smart Borders Interview: Tony Smith's views on the future of UK Border control.

Official figures released in February 2014 show that although Immigration to the UK from outside the EU dropped from 269,000 to 244,000 in the year ending September 2013, immigration from within the EU rose from 149,000 to 209,000 over the same period. As more EU citizens flock to the UK seeking work, what does this mean for the future of the UK Border?

We asked Tony Smith CBE, former Director General of the UK Border Force, for his views.

“As the UK general election looms in 2015, the main political parties will continue to argue about how they intend to better control immigration in the next term, if elected”, said Tony.

The coalition government took a blow in February 2014, when the Office for National Statistics (ONS) produced its latest quarterly report. This estimated a net flow of 212,000 new long term migrants into the UK in the year ending September 2013 - a "statistically significant" increase from 154,000 the previous year. This was against a backdrop of a "promise" by the current government to reduce net migration to below 100,000 a year.

“Actually, Immigration from outside the EU - where the UK government can exercise some control - dropped by 25,000” said Tony. “The truth of the net increase was due to larger numbers of EU citizens coming to work in the UK. Under the European Treaties EU citizens are allowed free movement to work in other EU countries.

Obviously many EU citizens feel their employment prospects are better in the UK than elsewhere in the EU right now, so

they have chosen to move here. These figures do not take account of the changes in January 2014 when Bulgaria and Romania achieved full accession rights. The impact of those changes is not likely to become apparent until the summer of 2014 - when the elections will be even closer. If numbers continue to rise then the more extreme parties seeking independence from Europe will continue to gain ground - and the real messages about how we might improve our border controls will be lost in the political mire.”



Image: European Commission

This latest report had led to the usual rhetoric from some parties that the UK government has "lost control of its borders". Whilst this catchy phrase might score some political points in some quarters, it is a fiction that bears no relation to fact, in Tony's view.

“Nothing could be further from the truth of course”, says Tony. “The UK is one of only six EU countries that still has a border control with neighbouring EU countries. Four of those (Bulgaria, Croatia, Romania and Cyprus) are legally obliged to remove their internal frontiers - leaving just the UK and Ireland retaining the opt-out to the Schengen Agreement.”

“In other words, the UK and Ireland will be the only 2 countries in the EU with the reserved right to refuse entry to non EU nationals at their Internal Frontier. It must follow- therefore - that the UK has kept



control of its borders when nearly all of its neighbours have lost control of theirs.”

The big question for Europe of course is how it intends to control its "External Border". This challenge has haunted the pro European lobby for years now, and continues to do so. We await with interest the detail of the EU "Smart Borders" Program, which advocates a "registered traveller program" (RTP) and an "entry / exit" system for the EU. Meanwhile we continue to see mass illegal migration into the EU through the Balkans and across the Mediterranean, which undermines confidence in the external frontier and fuels the debate about more internal frontiers in the Union.

So what about the UK Border?

“What the UK has failed to do - and needs to do - is to take advantage of its pre-existing border controls to introduce some practical measures for the greater benefit of the country” says Tony.

“Firstly we are very well placed to introduce exit checks on all routes out of the UK - so we know who is leaving the country and when. This was a commitment in the coalition agreement in 2010, but it has failed to materialise not least because the e borders programme failed and there has been no significant investment in border technology since then.

Secondly the coalition erred by ditching the national identity card programme. By locking people into one identity - backed by a unique biometric identifier - the government would be able to crack down upon benefit and tax fraud perpetrated by individuals claiming benefits in different identities. By combining the two, the government would be able to tell when somebody is still claiming benefits after

leaving the country. It would be able to clamp down on revenue fraud. It would be able to identify over stayers and prevent them from returning. It would be able to identify more criminals, terrorists, human traffickers and smugglers than ever before. And it would stop illegal immigrants duping Government Ministers into believing they had permission to work in the UK when they did not.”

Tony believes that technology is now available to do this. “Biometric identifiers are routinely available and accessible. Other parties such as transportation companies and security screeners could scan passports and transmit bulk passenger data to the government. Data centres are available to cross match personal data across government departments to identify fraud and verify entitlement.”

“This is border control at its smartest. It is not just about immigration control, which is largely controlled through visa processes these days rather than at frontiers. Nor is it about controlling the movement of EU nationals who are legitimately moving around Europe to exercise Treaty Rights. It is about ensuring that we use our borders to ensure that people living in the UK - regardless of their nationality - are playing by the rules. This is the debate we need to have - and I hope we will have the right people with us at Smart Borders 2014 to enable us to have it.”

In addition to speaking at Smart Borders 2014, Tony Smith will be an advisor and chairman at the upcoming event.

[Smart Borders 2014](#) is the only conference to bring together government agencies worldwide with major industry suppliers and associations to discuss how they are working to achieve a coordinated approach towards increased and more effective border security.