

UK ELECTION TIME: THE BATTLE LINES ON IMMIGRATION AND BORDER CONTROL



By Tony Smith CBE, former Director General, UK Border Force and Managing Director, Fortinus Global Ltd.

The UK general election takes place on 7 May 2015. The wheels of government will grind to a halt whilst the political parties marshal their arguments about who is best placed to manage the UK's immigration and border controls for the next 5 years. As ever, immigration is one of the top issues whereupon votes will be won or lost – alongside the state of the economy and the National Health Service.

This is the first time that we have known with any real certainty when the election will be held. In years gone by the ruling party has decided when to “go to the polls” within the 5 year window, and decisions on timing were often made on the state of the opinion polls. Now that we have “fixed term” elections it is reasonable to conclude that the main parties have planned their election manifestos accordingly. Have they?

This is a difficult time for operational leaders in UK Border and immigration services. They are already significantly muted about what they are allowed to say in public about immigration policy, practice and procedure (notwithstanding that most are eminently more qualified and experienced to do so than many of the political leaders they serve). As the election approaches they will be placed into “purdah”, which effectively prohibits them from making any public pronouncements about their subject matter expertise in the run up to the election. Meanwhile politicians in government will want to demonstrate to the electorate what successes they have achieved in policy development and operational delivery over the previous term; whilst those in opposition will want to demonstrate the opposite of course. This means that front line officers often feel they are being treated like “political footballs” at this time, although their professionalism does not allow them to be fazed by it. Life goes on. People and goods continue to trundle across borders. Smugglers, terrorists and criminals don't observe purdah; nor do they respect any form of government for that matter.

People don't join the Border Force to win popularity contests. It is a rare commentator that dares to praise the work of the Border Force or the Immigration Department. It is much more fashionable to decry the organization as “not fit for purpose”. Rarely does a week go by

To download the latest agenda for Smarter Borders 2015 and see what Tony Smith CBE and other senior professionals from the Border Security Industry will be speaking on, click here: <http://wbresearch.ch/sbagenda2015>

without some kind of story about our “porous border”. Only once in over 40 years’ service do I recall any vague complement, and that was after the London 2012 Olympics (when everybody thought we would screw up and we didn’t).

So what are the policy intentions of the main parties in this area? Both the Labour party and the Conservative party have admitted to errors of judgment during their time in office. Labour’s extension of primary immigration from outside the EU under the “points based” system backfired, when the heavily argued economic case for more managed migration was contradicted. The Conservative promise to “cut numbers” to an arbitrary figure of below 100,000 net immigrants a year was ill conceived – particularly in the context of EU migration which by definition cannot be controlled. Meanwhile the prolific rise of the UK Independence Party – whose primary pitch is to leave the EU and “regain control of our borders” – has led to a massive swing in their direction in recent months, despite scant discussion about where that would leave the UK on things like the juxtaposed controls, EU asylum shoppers and access to EU systems (which might ultimately prove counter-productive for stronger border controls).

Clearly one of the critical areas is the UK position on freedom of movement within the EU. Whilst no party is advocating the abolition of the internal frontier and membership of the Schengen group, the party divisions on this are clearer. UKIP says that it will pull out of the EU altogether. The Conservatives say that they will “renegotiate” the terms of membership, and thereafter offer a referendum on the subject. Labour continue to support EU membership whilst keeping a watchful eye on Brussels; whilst the Liberal Democrats appear to be the most pro-European party around right now.



A quick look at the facts might help. Since coming into power the Coalition government has created a single separate Border Force as a Home Office Department; dismantled the UK Border Agency (that was created with a splash by the previous administration); abolished the national identity register and accompanying ID card programme (another brainchild of the previous Labour administration); and terminated the “e Borders” Programme (which was much publicized by the previous administration as the modern day solution to UK Border Control).

Meanwhile immigration figures have remained stubbornly high with net migration figures to year ending June 2014 rising to 260,000 (from 182,000 the previous year). This compares with a highest annual figure of 320,000 in 2005 and a lowest ever of 154,000 in 2012, and demonstrates the folly of setting an overall net migration target of below 100,000 against the backdrop of the freedom of movement of 500 million EU citizens across Europe.

On the other hand, asylum intake (which is probably our best real yardstick for measuring illegal entry) has hovered in the region of 24,000 per year – and has remained so for around a decade now. This is a remarkable show of strength, given that illegal entry into the EU has

To download the latest agenda for Smarter Borders 2015 and see what Tony Smith CBE and other senior professionals from the Border Security Industry will be speaking on, click here: <http://wbresearch.ch/sbagenda2015>

increased 3 fold in 2014 over 2013 to an estimated 180,000. For that we can thank the Border Force – particularly in Calais and other juxtaposed locations – for maintaining strong border controls in the face of unprecedented pressures upon them.

For me, as with most things, the biggest issue comes down to resources. The Border and Immigration budgets – save for a brief blip in 2012 for the Olympics – have been cut year on year since 2007. Border Systems Procurement – held out as the follow up to “e borders” – has failed to materialise. Potential vendors and developers remain in a state of limbo, without any clearly defined strategy or vision for the state of UK border controls in 2020. The inexorable growth in international traffic has not been matched by a consequential growth in resources flowing to the Home Office, and that seems likely to remain the case for the next 5 years.

We cannot maintain a strong border without paying for it. Any weaknesses in our defences will certainly be exploited by the traffickers, criminals and terrorists that pose the greatest risks to the safety and security of the nation. There are imaginative ways of raising revenue for border security and immigration services which do not involve a charge upon the British taxpayer. I for one will be looking to see how the parties intend to control and modernise our borders for the next 5 years in government – and, equally, how they intend to pay for it.



*Tony Smith CBE is former Director General of the UK Border Force and UKBA Gold Commander for the London 2012 Olympics. He is now **Managing Director of Fortinus Global Ltd** and Director of International Development at Borderpol.*

To download the latest agenda for Smarter Borders 2015 and see what Tony Smith CBE and other senior professionals from the Border Security Industry will be speaking on, click here: <http://wbresearch.ch/sbagenda2015>