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The UK has been one of the main beneficiaries from free movement of labour in the EU

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Free movement of labour across the EU has become a controversial issue in several European countries, with parties such as UKIP and the Front National calling for restrictions on EU immigration. Adrian Favell writes on the debate over the issue within the UK. He argues that while free movement has generally been portrayed as an 'immigration' problem, it should instead be viewed as a set of rights which allow a range of short-term and long-term movements within the EU. He also notes that the UK economy has been particularly well placed to benefit from free movement, with cities like London being among the most attractive destinations for highly skilled workers.

The recent electoral successes of the United Kingdom Independence Party have seriously distorted intelligent discussion in Britain about the pros and cons of European free movement rights – not only for migrants but for Britain. As UKIP boasts it will “take back control of the UK’s borders”, and Conservative and Labour party leaders scramble to affect anti-“EU immigration” poses, there has been a serious short term memory loss about just how good migration has been for Britain these past three decades.

As London moved into a global city position to rival New York, the 1990s and 2000s saw a massive transformative dynamism in Britain as a hub of international mobility of all kinds, with new European migrations making London the unquestioned symbolic capital of Europe on the regional and world stage. Such was its success that everyone forgot just how dismal and provincial London was in the 1970s and 80s; before the era of what anthropologist Steven Vertovec calls its new “super-diversity”, based on Britain’s open labour market driven growth during these years.

Why free movement is not immigration

The first point is that free movement within Europe is not immigration. The vast majority of EU nationals using their rights of EU citizenship – to unconditionally move, stay, look for work, and choose to live in another member state for up to three months, longer if self-reliant – have been mostly invisible and rarely seen as “immigration”. These are the rights that, reciprocally across countries, allow people to send their children abroad to study, shop internationally with consumer protection, buy houses in sunnier climes, retire and collect pensions, get emergency medical treatment, marry and have normal family life and social benefits with a foreign European spouse, and countless other shorter and longer term cross-border mobilities.

They are also the rights that allow Europeans to look for work in another country, and be recruited and employed on strictly equal conditions to nationals – without the intrusion of border agencies or state imposed national limitations on the pool of workers. As a recent cross-national project (EUCROSS) has extensively documented, these rights have all become routine parts of everyday European life for decades now among stayers and movers alike, and are consistently rated the most popular aspect of membership of the European club – again, among Britons too.

Free movers do not change national citizenship and naturalise – they do not need to. Their citizenship and social rights are fully guaranteed by their nationality of origin. Because they have free movement across borders, they do not worry about visas, quotas, or arbitrary immigration checks questioning their right to be in a country – by themselves, or with a family. Typically, they come and go fluidly between their home (resident) and origin countries, using cheap air and rail travel, live in both places, with longer terms plans still strongly embedded in their place of origin. They live a kind of free transnational life of the kind that would have been thought a utopian absurdity in the bad old days in Europe; when it used to take hours to cross hostile, heavily policed borders, and when the continent was still divided by a huge population control device (called the Iron Curtain) which prevented Europeans, East and West, from mingling normally.

The benefits of free movement of labour for the UK

By design or chance, Britain during the long New Labour years found itself in a hugely positive position to benefit from these new European mobilities. With more flexible labour regulation, and employers generally less parochial than on the continent – as well as the huge appeal of being an offshore global English gateway – Britain was ideally placed to attract the brightest and the best of the continent into its booming commercial, financial, media, high tech, educational and creative sectors.

And come they certainly did, in droves – albeit almost invisibly – on Eurolines, Eurostar, and Ryan Air: the youth of France, Germany, Denmark, Italy and Spain self-selected in large numbers, transforming the London economy from the mid-1990s onwards. By the mid-2000s, these dynamics were being reproduced by young Poles, Czechs, Latvians, and Romanians, with similar hungry ambition – again, disproportionately, well-educated or skilled in comparison with the British labour force. Only now, the demand in the British labour market was such that it could also support much larger numbers of workers and entrepreneurs in lower skilled service sector employment. As well as sparking a service, construction and hospitality sector boom in Britain, these migrants also transferred wealth and investment back to their origin economies: such that Poland, for example, has been largely a positive story of internal growth and human capital circulation over these years.

Britain was a clear winner of this particular European trade-off. Suffering significant brain drain to its more dynamic neighbour, France remained mired in an economic sclerosis that prevented young people – nationals and foreigners alike – from getting respectable entry level employment. Moreover, it kept the doors shut to East Europeans through accession barriers that Britain removed at once after the first wave of enlargement in 2004.

Poles could follow a degree course in France only to find they had no access to a job in the country; the Polish plumbers famously were blamed for anti-EU voting, even though the vast majority had simply moved straightaway to Manchester or Birmingham. In Scandinavia and the Netherlands, unions and labour market regulation also restricted entry, while abetting a new nationalist tone in immigration politics. In Spain and Italy, migrant workers faced much worse, more marginal labour conditions than in Britain, while their own educated youth drained out of the country northwards. Post 2008, the British economy has suffered less than its neighbours, while absorbing much higher migrant numbers.

How has this remarkable European success story been ignored? If any of UKIP's contradictory ideas make it into real policy, there will be no more free movement to Britain for any of these foreign populations in Europe; and nor, reciprocally, for Britons on the continent. With self-selection ended, the quality of migration will fall – mostly defaulting to family reunification not human capital driven movements. Students and entrepreneurs will be shut out; and Britain will reap the kind of bad press that turned Denmark and the Netherlands from model progressives into nasty racists in a handful of years.

European free movement cannot be defined selectively to draw a line only against poor people, or people only from low income countries, or people from Eastern or Southern countries with bad credit ratings. Free movement allows the regional market, not the nation-state to decide. The state is defined by national borders. If new control is introduced it will have to be for all foreigners wanting to visit, stay, study or participate in Britain. British politicians presumably

think that they will introduce some form of physical and electronic border control and visa system of the kind that makes entering the US such a complex and discriminatory process for “aliens”. Students may have to plan for months just to get access to British territory; no employer will be able to take their pick from the pool of European wide talent on offer; the most talented will no longer be able to see if they can make it in London, and will go (or stay) elsewhere.

At lower ends of the scale, British workers will be now privileged to take up the low paid, dirty, dangerous, dull, flexible and insecure work that a few years before they would have been delighted to leave to others. Many will still avoid taking such employment; there will therefore be fresh demand for cheaper, irregular immigrants from further afield. Britons may also struggle to relearn entrepreneurial skills that have been wiped out by East European competition. No-one, moreover, can gainsay the hard to quantify effects on other free movements – of capital, goods and services.

Will international corporations want to stay in a newly parochial British environment, wrapped in red tape employment restrictions and complex visa based immigration controls, which prevent the regional and global labour market from working as it should? Will trade with European neighbours recover from new intrusive controls on routine border crossings and business travel? Will the one million or so European foreigners resident in Britain be given three months to naturalise (a sure bet for the poorest and least wanted, if not others); or face deportation? Has anyone seriously thought about how the end of free movement of persons is practically to be implemented to avoid complete chaos for this 2 per cent of the working population?

The ironies of anti-European “immigration” politics in Britain today are manifold. Conservative nationalists are flirting with intrusive free market regulation and restriction – in the name of border control, insider community privilege, and labour law implementation – that might make a hardy social democrat blush. Labour nationalists, meanwhile, have turned blue imagining a return of Britain to a pristine, post-colonial, island condition, in which the new forms of regional diversity and cosmopolitanism that came with recent globalisation are shut out by frankly xenophobic barriers.

Neither prospect sits at all well with Britain’s long and justly proud multi-ethnic, multi-racial, and multi-national composition, nor its long tradition of openness, toleration and the liberal freedoms of social and spatial mobility. Londoners, most of whom know something about movement and mobility, apparently largely agree: with UKIP doing half as well in the capital, and pro-European parties gaining well over 50 per cent in the recent European elections. The thought of cosmopolitan London having to align itself with Little England is surely impossible: maybe they too, like Scotland, should think about secession.