

# Expatriate worries are mistaken

The pro-independence movement is excited by the prospect of withdrawal. However, to secure that all-important “out” vote, it will be necessary to win over a good many people for whom the terms of the debate so far has made them anything but excited about the thought of “Brexit”. One such group is the expatriate community. Some of our compatriots living abroad are very concerned indeed.

The root of the problem is the strong language that has been used in the debate about immigration. For a number of voters, a desire to limit the number of people coming to the UK is the most important reason they would give for supporting withdrawal from the EU. Some of these people may have genuine concerns, such as suffering an increase in waiting times at their local GP’s surgery due to large numbers of migrants, or finding themselves undercut by Eastern European tradesmen willing to work for a pittance. Others may be xenophobes in the worst sense. For all the variety of reasons different people may give for their concerns, the net result is that there is considerable political capital to be made in talking tough on immigration, whether from the EU or elsewhere.

However, this cuts both ways. A substantial number of UK citizens live abroad – some 8% of our population, in fact. Most countries boasting large numbers of expatriate Brits are, unsurprisingly, Anglophone nations such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the USA, but the prospect of a retirement in the sunnier climate of the Mediterranean has attracted large numbers of our fellow-countrymen too. Estimates vary, but it is possible that as many as 700,000 UK citizens are resident in Spain and 200-400,000 in France. Also growing in popularity is Bulgaria, which boasts a pleasant climate, incredibly cheap housing and, at least in the villages, a strong community spirit. At least 50,000 of our countrymen have chosen to relocate to this country whose own citizens are not exactly

popular when they come over here. It's not just retired people who have moved abroad. Berlin, hardly renowned for sea, sand and sunshine, was home to over 14,000 Brits at the end of 2012 – many of them young people attracted by a city that has developed a trendy image in recent years.

If freedom of movement of people were curtailed when we leave the EU, what would become of these people? As has already been pointed out on this website, misinformation stating that they would become “illegal immigrants” has been put about by no less an individual than Dominic Grieve, the former Attorney General. As we pointed out, people who have acquired rights of residence will still have those rights whatever form of exit might ensue. They simply can't be booted out. However, our blog isn't reaching the areas it should, for a recent report suggests that a number of expats are so concerned about withdrawal that they are looking at acquiring dual citizenship to ensure they won't end up stateless. Likewise, as the *Guardian* reported recently a number of EU citizens resident in the UK are considering similar action.

It would be a tragedy for the “out” campaign if immigration was to become the most dominant issue. It would mean that we would lose, point blank, and the blame lying with wishful thinking. Given that the most seamless exit route from the EU is via the EEA and EFTA, whatever some people might desire, we would still initially remain subject to all four freedoms of the Single Market, including free movement of people, so compulsory repatriation of EU residents just isn't going to happen. Within the EEA, we need not allow the dependents of migrant workers from the EU to join them and if we feel we are struggling to cope with the number of EU citizens arriving here, there is the possibility of applying a temporary brake, as Liechtenstein has done. That is all. Furthermore, any long-term arrangement replacing the EEA agreement would inevitably want to ensure the preservation of vested rights – a fundamental principle of international law – allowing long-

term residents to remain where they are. It is, of course, possible that independence may well result in substantial numbers of people voluntarily returning to their own country. Some expats, disillusioned with recent politics in the UK, may feel that independence offers a chance to put the country right and come home. Some EU citizens currently resident in the UK may decide that they do not wish to reside outside of the EU, even if they would not be treated any differently in an independent UK. However, we cannot be sure what will happen. Others clearly like it here and will want to stay, come what may. It is therefore better for them and for our own expatriate community if ALL supporters of withdrawal keep the focus on what really counts – the re-establishment of UK sovereignty – rather than allowing free movement of people to dominate the forthcoming campaign. Those who are uncomfortable with the current level of immigration will vote to leave regardless. Their votes are already in the bag. We need to focus on winning the votes of people who have other concerns and alienating our expat community for no sensible reason will do our cause no good.

For further comment on the *Guardian* Article, we recommend the latest article in the *EU Referendum* blog.