

Immigration: - putting the cart before the horse?

Last week, the *Guardian* published a leaked draft of a Home Office document entitled 'Borders, Immigration and Citizenship System After the UK Leaves the EU'

It contained the welcome news that the Government is determined to bring immigration down and intends to use the opportunities presented by Brexit to honour – albeit rather belatedly – its pledge to bring net migration down below 100,000.

Given the high profile of the immigration issue during last year's referendum campaign, it is the least the government can do. In summary, free movement will come to an end on Brexit day. A scheme for seasonal workers will allow our fruit to be picked, but work permits will be time-limited, with those for low-skilled workers lasting only two years, with no right to settle. For all new EU workers, the right to bring family members will be significantly curtailed. UK companies will be encouraged to take on UK workers where possible. Though it does not give precise details, the document says the UK is minded to introduce an income threshold for some EU citizens before they will be allowed to reside here.

It all sounds good in theory. There are good, sound reasons for slashing immigration. The pressure exerted by migrants is making it harder for native Brits to get onto the housing ladder or, in some places, to see a GP or find a place for their children in a local school. The use of short-term work permits will give the government – and indeed, business – greater flexibility, especially as advances in robotics will drastically shrink the numbers of low-skilled workers required. Some experts suggest that we will have problems finding work for all the current UK working age population

within 30 years. We certainly don't want to saddle ourselves with lots of migrants whose jobs have been taken by machines but who have a right to stay here.

Of course, a Tory party which has found itself on the back foot since the General Election will be keen to do all it can to rebuild its support and there are plenty of votes to be garnered by being tough on immigration.

Yet the welcome given to this document must be tempered with a feeling that the Government is rather putting the cart before the horse. We know what it wants to do about immigration but very little about its proposed relationship with the EU. We would probably be able to implement most these restrictions as a member of EFTA and accessing the Single Market via the EEA agreement and applying restrictions in the same way as Liechtenstein, in spite of claims by one EU official that "Limits on numbers of people or categories of migrant worker are incompatible with single market access." They seem to have forgotten this small Alpine country which invalidates their argument. Likewise, we would certainly be able to restrict migration if we stormed out of the current negotiations and left the EU in March 2019 with no agreement and some commentators are suggesting that this is seriously being considered.

The EFTA route has thus far not been in favour while walking out would be foolish and lead to the "cliff edge" which we are repeatedly being told the Government wishes to avoid. So what, then, is the Brexit framework into which these immigration proposals will fit?

Furthermore, if the Government is serious about reducing net migration below 100,000, what about immigration from outside the EU? The most recent statistics did record a drop in arrivals from EU-27, but arrivals from the rest of the world stood at 266,000 during the same period. The government could act here and now to stem the flow if it so desired. Then what

about illegal immigrants? Will the Government finally get serious and deport them?

So while this document is a step in the right direction, a lot of questions remain unanswered.