

In the WMS on Friday Beverley Hughes had already told the House that the investigation would extend to the wider context of guidance to caseworkers about quicker decision-making to clear backlogs.

The embarkation control was withdrawn at seaports in 1994 and reconfigured at major airports in 1998. Reconfiguration allowed the Immigration Service to concentrate its resources on key delivery areas such as tighter on-entry controls and removal of failed asylum seekers.

Elephant Traps

- Suggestion that thousands of immigrants are being allowed to remain in the country without checks
- Beverley Hughes misled the Commons. This wasn't a one-off unauthorised relaxation of standards in respect of a single category of case. The relaxation had been authorised at a senior level and applied to all kinds of cases
- The numbers keep changing- "7000 backlog" on Monday, "under 40,000 applications" on Wednesday, "26,000" decisions on Friday. Seems to be out of control.
- Estimated number of bogus marriages is 15,000 - but official statistics suggest 1,700 [2,700 in 2003 was published in answer to a PQ]
- Students are being allowed to stay, without proper checks that they or their college are genuine, or that they can support themselves

Lines To Take

Positive story on ECAA

- Migration brings significant benefits, both economic and social. EU Enlargement is welcome. Workers from the A-8 states will fill key labour and skills gaps - boosting productivity and overall economic growth. The UK has one of the most dynamic economies in the world, with record employment levels. As long as they are self-sufficient, they are welcome.
- The right hon Gentleman seems to forget that the first EC Association Agreements were signed in 1994. They anticipated the benefits of enlargement by allowing nationals of acceding countries to establish

themselves in business or self-employment in Member States on an equal basis.

- The relatively large numbers of applications under this route in the UK [compared to some other member states] reflects the lack of unnecessary regulatory burdens on business in this country. We welcome entrepreneurs and those who provide valuable services - whether they are cleaning, plumbing, building - who can find a demand for their services in this country.

Positive story on the economy

- This is one of the reasons why our economy is thriving :
 - The UK labour market has upwards of 550,000 vacancies [571,900 in January 2004]
 - UK employment at record highs - up by 1.7 m since spring 1997
 - UK ILO unemployment down by 0.6m since spring 1997
 - Long-term unemployment down by more than three-quarters since April 1997
 - Lowest ILO unemployment rate in the G7 one of the lowest ILO unemployment rates in the EU: almost half that of France and Germany [4.9% compared with 9.3% in Germany and 9.5% in France]
 - Around 15% of UK trend economic growth depends on migration
 - Migrants make up just 8% of the population but generate 10% of our total wealth
 - Migrants are substantial net contributors to the Exchequer - studies show that they paid £2.5bn more in taxes in 1999/00 than they consumed in benefits and services

Positive story on asylum

- The Opposition prefer to ignore the fact that we now have an increasing grip of the asylum system. The dramatic reduction in asylum numbers reflects this.
 - border controls have been significantly strengthened;
 - removals of failed asylum seekers and other illegal immigrants has increased

- Continuing proud tradition of helping genuine refugees with new UNHCR resettlement scheme and working internationally to help more refugees closer to regions of origin.

Guidance to caseworkers on backlog clearance

- The Home Office is investigating the guidance to staff on managing backlogs in immigration casework and my rt hon friend will make a full report to the House when the outcome of the investigation is known.
- As has already been made clear, no question of thousands of people being allowed to enter the country under these procedures - the vast majority of these cases were people who were in the country legally already
- Large backlogs are unacceptable. Delays are unfair to genuine applicants, sometimes causing real hardship and stress- many members of the House will be aware of these- and allow others to simply stay in the country while the application waits for consideration. Successive administrations have grappled with backlogs and have had to take clearance measures.
- A balance has always to be struck between delivering an effective and responsive service to the majority of straightforward and genuine cases, and properly pursuing those which are suspicious - marriages which seem to be bogus, or students at unrecognised colleges- at a reasonable cost. This is not a new challenge.
- What is genuinely new is the introduction by this Government of charging for leave to remain and work-permits, which allows us to properly resource this area of the business and is a key step in becoming modern, competitive and effective.

There should be checks when people leave the country

- I am surprised that the rt.hon Gentleman does not recall the reasons why the Immigration Service stopped doing embarkation checks in 1994. It is estimated that the cost of reintroducing embarkation controls and establishing new ones at ports within the Common Travel Area would be in excess of £26 million per year. We do not consider this a cheap option, especially where there is no evidence that this requirement would contribute greatly to the overall effectiveness of the control, but would be likely to cause significant passenger congestion at ports.
- We are keeping the option for embarkation controls under review whilst exploring the extent to which new technology could provide us with more efficient ways of checking those leaving the country.

Key Quotes

- A report from the Ernst and Young Item Club on 3 March said "an influx of workers in the UK from the 10 Eastern European countries set to join the EU is necessary to alleviate the nation's growing labour shortages" and "that modest increases of 70,000 migrants would boost GDP by £10 bn in a decade." It said the UK needed Eastern European migrants to fill unpopular jobs. It added that people from countries including Hungary and the Czech republic are well-educated by international standards.
- Lukas, a Polish carpenter, came to the UK from Poland six years ago and now lives in East London with his wife and young son. He used to work on the black market but, tired of poor pay and of looking over his shoulder the whole time, he decided to enter the mainstream building trade and regularised his stay. He said "it was quite difficult.. I had to prove I was self-employed by showing receipts, bank-statements and invoices." He doesn't believe that people like him should claim benefits- "I think it's enough if someone's willing to pay taxes and can get work here- he doesn't need to apply for any benefits does he?" [BBC website]
- According to the Boarding Schools Association's website, overseas boarders bring into the UK foreign earnings of £243,041,100 (ISC census 2003) in fees alone.

Sunday Times / Mail on Sunday: case-working practice in
General Group in Sheffield and Croydon

LINES TO TAKE

Beverley Hughes misled the Commons:

- There is no question of Beverley Hughes having misled the Commons. She was asked about the arrangements for dealing with applications under the EC Association Agreements, and described guidance on the cases which had been ~~had been~~ issued in Sheffield without her knowledge or that of senior officials. This guidance went beyond the general arrangements for dealing with the backlog of other cases. The circumstances in which it came to be issued are now being investigated.
- In her Parliamentary statement on Friday 12 March, Beverley Hughes said that she had also asked Ken Sutton to report on current long standing and any previous exercises over the past 10 years for dealing with backlogs. This will enable what happened in Sheffield to be set in a wider context.

But is [REDACTED] ^{*} not right that there have been periods in recent months where the entire caseworking department at Sheffield has been working under BRACE conditions?

- This is a matter for Mr Sutton's investigation.
- [It is true that in the latter half of last year, following the introduction of charging, there was a heavy concentration of effort on clearing older cases under the arrangements for backlog clearance. Since the introduction of charging, new applications have been dealt with separately within agreed service standards.]

[more to be provided about proportion of cases at different times & refusal rates]

* NAME REDACTED BY COMMISSIONER, SECTION 40(1)