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The show that demystifies economics **What Would A Brexit Mean for the Brits?©**

by Charles Dennery



Immigration is one of the key arguments of the Leave campaign in the Brexit referendum. The UK already imposes border controls as it is not part of the Schengen area, and Schengen countries check the passports of people travelling from the UK. Leaving the EU is unlikely to bring much change in that regard. Nobody is really making a case for more stringent and vexatious border controls, and travel visas would be very unlikely.

The real contentious issue will be about residence. EU citizens can freely move and reside in any other EU country, provided they have the means to provide for themselves and their families. Britain has seen a large immigration from Poland and other Eastern European countries in the last decade, working mostly in agriculture, and low paid services. French and Spanish waiters are also very common in restaurants in London. Most of them work hard and do not receive any unemployment benefit, but since their pay is low, they receive some income support from the government – similar to the “prime pour l’emploi” in France, but more generous. They are also accused of driving up the price of housing in London. Low paid immigrant workers are likely to suffer a lot under Brexit.

In all likelihood, EU citizens would have to apply for residence visas. They would need to earn a minimum income, and the whole process would not be automatic. At the moment non-EU immigrants must earn at least £20,000 per year to remain temporarily in the UK, and £35,000 to remain permanently. Some exemptions exist for nurses and other professions in high demand, but if such a policy were applied to EU citizens, it would be detrimental for many of them. Currently, Britain is one of the most open labour markets. The paperwork is very minimal, and one can start working even before having a National Insurance Number – the British social security. This would likely change under a Brexit. Of course the EU could retaliate, and make it harder for Britons to live and work in the EU.

If the UK or the EU decided to make life harder for each other’s citizens, it would be important to look for so-called “grandfather clauses”, “droits acquis” in French.

Arguably, freedom of circulation is not just a treaty between some countries, it is also a right given to citizens. Some Italians have been living in the UK for years, as have some British in Spain. Even if they no longer qualify for a residence permit under some new rules, it would be quite harsh to deport them immediately. Governments will likely create a special, more lenient rule for them, or at least a transition period.

As a side note, it is interesting to look at the possible impact of Brexit on non-EU citizens in the UK. One common complaint among British Eurosceptics is that Britain has “betrayed” the Commonwealth. Because Europeans can come freely to the UK, the rules have become tougher for Kenyans, Nigerians, Indians, but also Australians and Canadians who want to come and live in Britain. Commonwealth citizens living in the UK can vote in every election because of their formal ties to the British Empire. But for the most part they do not get any special treatment in terms of immigration. The Leave campaign has tried to convince the British from Commonwealth descent that a Brexit would restore the special relationship between Britain and the Commonwealth. Of course, it will largely depend on the political situation. Some Brexit proponents are eager free traders, very open to globalisation, and they would welcome more immigration. But other supporters, and the UKIP in particular, want to curb immigration altogether, and not replace one by another.

To sum it up, Brexit is unlikely to have much impact in terms of tourism, but work immigration would be strongly affected, and Britons living in the EU might face some form of retaliation. The changes would be slow, but possibly very substantial, and it would be a mistake to underestimate them.