Britain is on the move – but in the wrong direction

Paul Benneworth

As I write, all my worldly possessions are on an HGV speeding across Belgium to the ferry to the UK. The moving process has been a demonstration of the value of European integration.

We’re moving to Whitley Bay and hired a local removal and storage company until we buy a house. They sent two North Eastern porters to collect our stuff, but when they arrived, the differences were immediately clear.

Dutch houses have very steep stairs, so furniture is habitually removed through upstairs windows. Their British truck wasn’t equipped for this, so they contact their local agents, who in turn arranged local help. A team of porters came the next day from Rotterdam with a cherry-picker. No more than two hours later than originally planned, the curtain fell on our Dutch family life after ten glorious years.

It’s an everyday example of the Single Market making life easy; things differ between countries but it’s not a problem.

Because we don’t own any restricted products, there’s been no need to fill in forms; the move’s been nerve-shredding, but relatively straightforward.

It’s a total contrast with the experience of a friend who emigrated five years to America. He’d built up a rather nice wine collection, but importing that to America was going to be prohibitively expensive.

He bowed to the inevitable and gave up his hobby; we had great fun in helping him finish it before he left, but a bureaucratic rule caused him great personal discomfort.

I’d always planned to be abroad for a decade, but in the wrong direction. I was right about the cuts: Gordon Brown’s Labour government was running out of steam and the Tories were poised to take over. Big cuts were obviously coming, but I assumed that after five years of austerity, Labour would recover its popularity and start the necessary reconstruction.

I was about the cuts: Cameron’s Conservatives immediately tripled student fees, axed the regional development agencies, and bled the North East councils dry. Fairly standard Tory stuff – breaking up Labour’s carefully crafted public services.

What I hadn’t anticipated was government turning so viciously on UK residents. The hostile environment made a whole section of Britons suspect, and social security reforms demonised unemployed and disabled people.

Together with slashing social services, this shifted the British state’s relationship with its citizens. Instead supporting, caring and helping, it moved to punish, discipline and sanction hard-working law-abiding residents.

This unlocked a poisonous public atmosphere that was looking for someone to blame. Politicians stoked fears of immigration as a neat scapegoat masking the problems’ true cause: Tory mismanagement and Whitehall’s dysfunctional relationship to us all.

It’s unsurprising that this led to the Brexit vote. What amazes me today is the total absence of efforts to address those underlying causes.

I was hoping I’d be coming back ahead. I’d always planned to be abroad for a decade, but in the wrong direction. Britain lost the last decade to this national institutional paralysis, and seems determined to make the 2000s as hard as possible for itself.

Before we restart building our country, we must bring back a sense of solidarity and shared purpose. Only by government respecting, valuing and supporting all UK residents can we finally start to feel things getting better in the North East.

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