

Set the world in motion

[Is Freedom of Movement a right?]

I am getting more and more concerned about the contrast between the visible mobility which many people from the West have and the increasing restrictions on travel for others.

Since the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York, and with the threat of further attacks, most Western nations have stepped up their security arrangements. In many cases, a major component of these measures is further regulation of international travel and greater surveillance at ports of entry.

Such a response is understandable and some of the measures are reasonable. Others, however, are more controversial and seem to target people of particular ethnic or religious origin. I well remember arriving at Washington Dulles airport with some distinguished Muslim leaders, all of whom were very apprehensive of what awaited them at the immigration counters. A Kenyan Anglican bishop was delayed on his way to an important conference because Britain now requires a transit visa, even if someone is simply connecting at a British airport for a flight to a third country. Is this simply aping the USA or is there a security reason here that I cannot fathom? Passengers in transit do not enter the country as such. Their baggage goes directly to a connecting flight (and could be further screened) and people could be subjected to a security search as they enter the transit lounge. Why do they need a visa for a country they do not intend to enter?

One potential outcome is that such actions will fuel resentment against the West. More and more, inequality will not be seen in terms of wealth or opportunities for education but in the ability simply to move from one place to another.

The neo-conservative free trade philosophy of so many western countries used to emphasise the free movement of goods, capital and labour. We still hear quite a lot about the first two, to the point of compelling impoverished nations to open their markets to western goods, regardless of the impact on local producers, and to allow foreign investment sometimes without any clarity about its benefit for ordinary people. The free movement of labour has, however, quietly disappeared from the agenda or it has been restricted to regional cartels.

Of course, every government has a responsibility for the welfare of those already in the country. As I have said already, I also understand the security concerns arising out of the terrorist threat. I do plead with Western governments, however, not to be part of a two-track world where some can move around easily and others very little or not at all.

Since 9/11, I have been advocating the broadening of the exchange programmes sponsored by many governments. In the past, they have been very technologically oriented on the secularist assumption that technology will change the world for the better. Technology has, however, been shown to be neutral at best and complicit in terrorism at worst. Exchange programmes need to move beyond 'technology' and 'science' to areas which really matter to many people; culture, history and religion. Through scholarships and bursaries, a range of educational opportunities can be extended to those beyond the élite from Asia, Africa and Latin America. None of this entails permanent settlement in Western countries. In fact, I believe, the more free movement there is, the less there will be the desire to settle here and to acquire a 'mobility passport'. The widening of horizons which such opportunities will bring about will be worth much more than any amount of spending on arms and security.

Encouragement of properly regulated tourism and facilities for visiting family also need consideration in a positive way rather than by way of reluctant concession.

All the North Atlantic countries face labour shortages of one kind or another. Ways could surely be found of providing young people, from across the world, with appropriate work-experience in the West. Work permits can be also considered not only for the highly-skilled but for workers in areas of the economy where there are real shortages. Some may wish to settle here, of course, and want to be citizens. That will require a deeper commitment to the country of adoption, greater knowledge of its language, customs and culture generally and a desire to contribute constructively to national life. In a more mobile world, such qualifications will seem less of an artificial barrier to entry and more to do with allegiance and loyalty to particular institutions, laws and values.

By all means let us make our borders secure and our people safe but let us also look over the wall and assess where our true interest lies.

767 words

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