

UK immigration policy is punishing Britons with non-EU spouses

I have witnessed the trauma our supposedly pro-marriage government is inflicting on thousands of families and their children



British citizens' families – as many as 17,800 a year – are being broken up under the new rules.

Recently I met a group of people who were so traumatised that at times they found it difficult to speak. It was a harrowing meeting, although a necessary one. Those who are so distressed find great help in being listened to. But I was left feeling helpless, such is their plight.

The people I met are all victims of the new regulations regarding foreign spouses of British nationals coming to live in the United Kingdom. These new immigration rules were introduced in July 2012 and are ruthlessly applied against British citizens seeking to establish a marital home here.

The people I met were citizens of this country, holders of British passports. All of them, however, were broken-hearted because they were not permitted to bring their wives or husbands to live here. In each case there was going to be no call on the public purse – in fact each excluded spouse would be an earner and a taxpayer, not a benefits claimant. Yet protection of the public purse is the constant argument from our government on limiting immigration. From what I was being told, this argument is false and misleading.

Upset at these people's stories, I wanted to find out more, and was amazed to discover that their cases were numerous. In fact, the government's own estimate is that the new rules will break up as many as 17,800 families every year – yet the government that is operating this policy claims to be supportive of the family and in favour of the institution of marriage.

A hidden consequence of this anti-family policy is, of course, its impact on the children who are separated for an indefinite period from a parent unable to live in the United Kingdom. Hundreds of British children are growing up in this country with a parent unable to be with them. This damages their development and wellbeing.

The government's intention with these new regulations is to cut the number of immigrants from outside the European Union. But in doing so, is it the government's intention to penalise British citizens? To undermine marriages and to split up families? Other EU citizens are free to come and live in the UK with spouses from outside the EU. And yet British citizens do not enjoy the same rights. The feeling of being victimised by one's own government is a bitter pill to swallow.

The new regulations make demands that are, in practice, very difficult to meet. One is that British spouses prove a disposable annual income of £18,600 if they want to sponsor a foreign spouse. This sum is well above the earnings of full-time workers receiving the national minimum wage, and research shows that it excludes up to 47% of Britain's working population.

The administration of the new regulations is often arbitrary and subjective. One man, breaking down in tears, told me of how he filed more than 250 pages of application forms and information, and travelled halfway round the world for interview, only to be told that the official had concluded their marriage was one of convenience, and not of genuine love.

Another person told me that his Canadian wife had waited several months for the processing of their application, which included the surrender of her passport. She asked for her passport back in order to attend a family event outside Canada, only to be told, after the trip, that doing so had jeopardised her entire application.

I am not surprised that the expressions of public disquiet about this scandal are growing. In June a cross-party committee of MPs and peers reported on the anguish inflicted upon many working families by the new regulations. The four UK children's commissioners recently called on the government to review the rules in favour of a more family-friendly approach. Anyone who is truly concerned for the family as the building block of society, and is realistic about the mobility of British people today, must see both the folly of this policy and how it is an affront to the status of British citizenship.

Concern about levels of immigration is high, and there are real social challenges to be faced. I do not pretend that this is an easy political issue. But there is a moral responsibility on all those in public life, including the media, to avoid stirring up irrational fears that feed prejudice. Demonising immigrants, who often contribute hugely to our society and wellbeing, is a dangerous path to follow. The fostering of mistrust and dislike of those who come to this country is the promotion of unjust discrimination, and unworthy of any true political leadership. It is a trend we must surely resist.

Equally, there is something deeply unsavoury about the inhumanity with which immigration targets are being pursued. The administrative processes, as I heard myself, strip applicants of their basic dignity and often presume, or even try to manufacture, corrupt motives and intent. Evidence that people have circumvented previous regulations and abused the status of marriage does not justify the inhuman treatment of every applicant today. Those who are determined to cheat should be stopped. Those who offer full co-operation with the system should not be presumed to be cheating.

Support for family life is a cornerstone of British society and, in fact, of the Catholic tradition. This victimisation of a group of British citizens is an indication of how far we have moved from these principles and values. In a healthy society rhetoric is one thing. Action requires well-fashioned policies, tested against their effect on fundamental values and applied with humanity and care. Policies in family migration leave a lot to be desired. I hope that parliament, in considering the current immigration bill, will take the opportunity to correct this clear injustice.

Archbishop Vincent Nichols - The Guardian