



# **Adjournment Debate: UK Entry Visa**

**Monday 19<sup>th</sup> November 2018**

**Called by Patrick Grady MP (Glasgow North)**

**Source: Hansard ([www.tinyurl.com/ycrsuak](http://www.tinyurl.com/ycrsuak))**

***To watch this debate visit: <https://goo.gl/BU8Gn5>***



10.50 pm

**Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP)**

*[Share]*



I am pleased to have secured this debate. I start with a slight sense of déjà vu, because in June 2016 I led a short debate in Westminster Hall on visas for visitors from sub-Saharan Africa. It was a different Minister in that debate, mind you; he went on to become the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, so who knows what awaits the Minister for Immigration if she can improve on the answers that I received then?

Sadly, many of the issues that I raised that day are still relevant today, and if anything the situation has deteriorated further and goes beyond the experiences of those in one region of Africa. The Minister will know that at Prime Minister's questions on 24 October I raised the increasing concerns among academics, the creative industries, businesses, non-governmental organisations and basically anyone and any organisation with links to overseas counterparts who might want to travel to the UK. The experience of the visa system of both individuals and organisations stands in stark contrast to Home Office rhetoric and the Government's stated ambition of building a "global Britain". The situations that I hinted at in PMQs barely scratch the surface, but they all

exemplify the huge frustrations created by both practical failures in the visa application system and the overall policy failure of what essentially remains a hangover of the hostile environment policy.

Throughout the summer of this year, the media were full of reports of festivals disrupted by the denial of visas to artists from different parts of the world. The director of the Edinburgh international book festival described the problems faced by over a dozen authors seeking to attend as “humiliating”. Peter Gabriel, the founder of WOMAD, expressed alarm after at least three acts were unable to perform, saying that

“our UK festival would now have real problems bringing artists into this country,”

many of whom “no longer want to come to the UK because of the difficulty, cost and delays with visas, along with the new fear that they will not be welcomed.”

That is borne out by the experience of Celtic Connections, which has been a major highlight of Glasgow’s cultural scene for the past 25 years. Its director Donald Shaw has recently said that visa refusals are undermining the festival’s musical internationalism, and that at least two major world acts have pulled out of next year’s festival simply due to the hassle and stress of the visa application process.





**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP)**

[Share]



I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on bringing this issue to the House for its consideration and on his endeavours on behalf of universities and students from all over the world. Does he agree that it is essential to our universities that there is a quick but effective visa system, and that every effort must be made to ensure that the system for applications to study here has top security procedures but at the same time is streamlined and quick?

**Patrick Grady**

[Share]

Absolutely, and I will have some examples from my constituency in a couple of moments. In the debate in June 2016 I listed example after example of delays and denials experienced by members of the Scotland Malawi Partnership. I declare an interest, because the partnership provides pro bono secretariat support to the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, which I chair. The Minister may also know that in February, I and my hon. Friend the Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) had to raise an urgent case at business questions, because just days before they were due to fly to Scotland a group of Malawian schoolchildren and priests had been denied visas, which they had been assured would be granted, risking thousands of pounds that pupils and families in Scotland had raised to bring them over.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes (West Dunbartonshire) (SNP)**

[Share]



On that point about members of religious faiths, in West Dunbartonshire we have St Margaret of Scotland hospice, run by the Sisters of Charity, who have hospices across the entirety of the UK from Hackney to my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that the problems facing us are affecting not only people of religious faith, such as them, but those in hospices across the UK trying to deliver social work, palliative care and frontline services?

**Patrick Grady**

[Share]

Absolutely, and I would have thought that if anyone was going to honour their visa requirement to come here for a short period and then go back to their country of origin, it would be members of religious orders whose vows of obedience and stability mean that they need to remain where they are based.

Departments at the University of Glasgow frequently encounter difficulties in bringing over visiting academics. Last year, the Home Office denied a UK entry visa to Dr Nazmi al-Masri, the vice-president for external relations at the Islamic University of Gaza, despite the fact that he had a 30-year history of entering and returning from the United

Kingdom, and that he was due to travel to support research programmes funded by the UK Government's own research councils. The situation is perverse and the list goes on.

Examples emerge from all around the world on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. No fewer than 17 researchers were reported as being unable to attend the Women Leaders in Global Health Conference hosted by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine last week, which the organisers said was tantamount to discrimination and bad for science research in the UK, and means that they may have to consider hosting events overseas in the future. Pioneering anti-poaching female rangers from Zimbabwe were denied entry to collect humanitarian awards on 3 November. The Syrian journalist Humam Husari was granted entry, again to collect an award, only after high-profile complaints. Here in Parliament, on a weekly if not daily basis, events I have been to recently hosted by the Industry and Parliament Trust and various all-party groups all have similar stories which are heard frankly with embarrassment and cringing by the UK-based participants.

**Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP)**

*[Share]*



Many of the academics my hon. Friend talks about are from sub-Saharan Africa, India and the middle east. Does he share my concerns that post Brexit this may involve academics from across Europe too?

**Patrick Grady**

*[Share]*

That is a very real concern and I will touch on Brexit just before I finish.

It is no wonder that I heard a very senior official from the African Union, who himself had had to produce a marriage certificate and bank statements even though he was invited to attend an event by the Lord Mayor of London, tell one such meeting recently that he is not surprised when he sees business class flights from Addis Ababa to Brussels full, but similar flights to the UK more than half empty. These are not examples of a UK that is open for business. These are not examples of a global Britain. These are not examples of a Home Office that has abandoned the hostile environment. These are examples of failure across the board: failure of policy and failure of practice.

Will the Minister confirm what the Government's policy on entry visas actually is? Can she explain why so many stakeholders feel that an effective travel ban is in place for certain countries and regions, particularly Africa and Asia? Can she explain why the reality experienced by so many sponsoring organisations is so different from the rhetoric of global Britain? Will she confirm or deny whether there is any connection with the net migration target and the rates of rejection for visitor visas? Do the Government really believe that everything on these islands is so wonderful that they must presume that everyone who applies for a visa secretly wants to abscond; that musicians, authors, academics, scientists, business owners and senior civil servants will take one look at the streets of mother Britannia paved with gold, and abandon their families and careers for a job in the UK's gig economy? Laughable although that idea is, that is the impression that is being given.





**Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP)**

*[Share]*



As a representative of Scotland's festival city and as the constituency MP for Edinburgh's book festival, may I congratulate my hon. Friend on this important debate? Is he aware of any evidence of invited artists absconding during planned visits or festivals, which might explain why things are so much more difficult these days?





**Patrick Grady**

*[Share]*

The short answer to that question is no. Perhaps the Minister has that evidence. Certainly, when I have tried to ask for similar evidence in written questions I have had very little back, because the Government do not seem to keep a track of this data. It is simply a hostile environment hangover.

The policy has to change and that means the practice should also change. The Government need to do more to respect the bona fides of sponsoring organisations. It is not in the interests of festival organisers, universities, churches, or, for example, the City of London Corporation for their guests to abscond. The Government should be prepared, either as a matter of policy or through some kind of formal accreditation, to start from a principle that guests invited by such organisations are coming for good reasons and can be expected to abide by their visa conditions and return in due course.

The Incorporated Society of Musicians has recommended that if freedom of movement for musicians cannot be preserved after Brexit, then the UK and EU should develop a two-year multi-entry touring visa for UK and EU musicians. I know that the City of London Corporation also expects to publish a major report on visas and immigration in the very near future, and I hope the Minister will look out for that and pay attention to its recommendations. I will also send her extensive documentation from the Scotland Malawi Partnership on this issue, which she may already have seen, and I look forward to her response. I hope, most importantly, that she will be willing to meet some of the all-party groups that are particularly interested in this issue. I have mentioned the all-party group on Malawi. I am also secretary of the all-party group on Africa, and I know that they would very much appreciate the opportunity to discuss this in more detail.

**Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP)**

*[Share]*



There is also a huge issue in my constituency with people not getting the visas that they require. The Central Gurdwara Singh Sabha has found it very difficult to get Sikh priests to come over. They have tried on numerous occasions, but they have not got in, which is also a concern of the all-party group on UK Sikhs.

**Patrick Grady**

*[Share]*

There we go, and that goes back to the points made by our hon. Friend the Member for West Dunbartonshire (Martin Docherty-Hughes).

What all the stakeholders have told these groups and what all the evidence shows is that the visa processing system also needs to be fit for purpose. The level of detail being requested, sometimes from very senior or very high-profile individuals, as we have heard, has been described as humiliating. In the case of applicants from developing countries, sometimes the information requested is simply impossible to provide. Priests and pupils in remote villages in northern Malawi or elsewhere in Africa may not have bank accounts or birth certificates and almost certainly do not have credit cards or online access to pay the visa processing fees, and neither would they have the means or

resources to travel hundreds of miles to a processing centre, sometimes in another country and often on multiple occasions.

Of course, all this takes place in the context of Brexit. We are told that many leave voters voted leave because they wanted freedom of movement to come to an end, but freedom of movement simply cannot come to an end without having any impact on our economy or society. We can all agree that there are different types of movement of people—for labour, for holiday, for family, and for the longer term or the short term. My concern in this debate is largely around very short-term movement, when people enter the country for specific reasons, such as a festival or an academic conference, for a short period of time before returning. Many of the examples, as we have heard, are in any event about visitors from non-EU countries, so they will not be affected by any Brexit withdrawal agreement.

I also accept that those of us who supported, and still support, remaining in the European Union could and should have done a better job of championing the benefits of freedom of movement and immigration, because after all, many people from the UK benefit significantly from ease of travel to the EU and other destinations around the world. The risk of Brexit and the hostile environment more generally is that perhaps the restrictions that the UK Government place on visitors will be increasingly reciprocated elsewhere. Indeed, many UK residents, not least artists and musicians, are already experiencing increasing difficulty applying for entry visas to the United States.





The consequences may be even more far-reaching and unintended. Last year, Corina Cojocaru, Moldova's economic counsellor to the World Trade Organisation, and her team were denied entry to the UK, even though they wanted to come to discuss their country's future relationship with Britain after it leaves the European Union. This year, Moldova was one of several countries to question openly the UK's re-entry to the World Trade Organisation's Government procurement agreement. Maybe that was just a coincidence, but the examples mount up—case after case of how to lose friends and alienate people, but that seems to be the overall direction of Government policy in a whole range of Departments.

I will not be surprised if the Minister gets up shortly and tells us that all this is imaginary, that statistics show upwards of 80% of visas are granted in a timely and orderly manner, that feedback on experiences in processing centres is positive, and that all these cases and examples are just isolated and can be easily resolved, but I am not sure that that is really the case. Even if the approval rate is accurate, how many visas are not being applied for in the first place, or how many fall at the first hurdle? If these examples are just rare, isolated, high-profile cases, why are there so many, why are they so frequent, and why should they require high-level intervention in the media or here on the Floor of the House to resolve them? How many denials or delays do not have the luxury of media or political contacts that can cut through the red tape?

The reality is that the whole immigration system needs root and branch reform, and that includes visitor entry visas. The Minister knows full well that if she does not want it to change, the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament would be more than happy to take responsibility and build a system that works for Scotland's economy and society.

As I said at Prime Minister's questions, Brexit is a small, isolationist retreat from the world stage. The reality experienced by those going through the visa and immigration system is one of suspicion, frustration and all too frequently, rejection. It is not conducive to growing the economy or building a more tolerant society and it will not be without fundamental change.

How would the Minister feel if the situation were in reverse? If she wanted to visit a country in sub-Saharan Africa, or in years to come wanted to travel to promote her autobiography—about how she survived the final days of the May Administration—or had been invited by a major Government-backed non-governmental organisation in the country concerned, and was asked before she could travel to produce her birth certificate, marriage certificate, bank statements and biometric information, to pay an exorbitant fee and to travel hundreds of miles to do so, perhaps multiple times, and all at risk of being denied because there was a presumption that she would stay in the country and never leave, would she even bother applying for the visa? If she would not want to go through that experience herself, why do the Government continue to inflict it on others?

11.05 pm

**The Minister for Immigration (Caroline Nokes)**

[Share]



I congratulate the hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) on securing this debate on UK entry visas.

We all know that the United Kingdom is an attractive destination for legitimate travel, and the Government are determined that it stay that way. We want people to come here on holiday, to do business, to visit family, and our immigration system contributes to the

prosperity of the UK. We are also keen to ensure that the UK continues to attract the world's brightest, most talented and most innovative people once we leave the EU. We will continue to be a global, outward-looking nation that is home to the best talent in the world, and our immigration system is fundamental to delivering that ambition. For example, the UK is a global leader in attracting international students, and our student offer is already one of the best on the global market.

That said, we recognise the need for an adaptive immigration system to meet the UK's needs as we leave the EU. As such, we are designing a future borders and immigration system that will incorporate recommendations made by the Migration Advisory Committee, and we plan to publish further details in the autumn. The Government also have a duty to keep citizens safe and the country secure, and our visa requirements are one of the effective means we have in this regard. They are a valuable tool for the UK in reducing illegal immigration, tackling organised crime, protecting national security and safeguarding vulnerable people.

**Martin Docherty-Hughes**

*[Share]*

On the point about safeguarding, how many nuns, monks and priests have absconded in the last 18 months?

**Caroline Nokes**

*[Share]*

I am sure it will not surprise the hon. Gentleman to learn that I do not have those precise figures to hand, but the Home Office is working closely, and will continue to work closely, with the all-party group led by my right hon. Friend the Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman) on this precise subject, because it has raised concern across the House.

Everyone entering the UK has to meet the same set of entry clearance requirements. Some nationals of non-EEA countries need a visa to come to the UK; others must demonstrate that they meet our entry clearance requirements on arrival at the border. All applications are assessed on a case-by-case basis, according to their individual



merits and against the part of the immigration rules that relates to why someone is coming to the UK. Many categories of temporary migration, such as students or those coming to work in the UK, are required to obtain an entry clearance before coming, regardless of their nationality. This allows assessments to be made before someone travels.

I am committed to ensuring that the UK visa service is high performing, customer focused and continually improving, in terms of both products available and the route for application, and there is always room to improve as we respond to evolving demands and requirements, harness new technology and reflect customer experiences and needs. Globally, our international network of over 300 visa application centres manages applications from customers from over 200 countries. In the year to June 2018, 2.7 million visas were issued, and 96% of non-settlement applications were processed within 15 days.

The UK offers a priority visa service that sees applications normally processed within five days in nearly 200 locations. The UK is also the only country to offer a 24-hour service in China and a same-day service in India. Access UK, a new online application service, has been successfully rolled out to visit visa customers in over 200 countries and 19 different languages. This new system means a faster, more streamlined and increasingly automated application process for customers.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned the creative industries. Of course, that sector is a major cultural and economic success story for the UK. It is a high-value, high-growth sector worth £91.8 billion to the UK economy in 2016. The Government as a whole are committed to supporting and promoting a thriving live music industry and ensuring the continued growth of a vital and vibrant sector. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the UK continues to welcome artists and musicians who come here to perform. They make an important contribution to our creative sector, which is a major cultural and economic success story. The Home Office is working with the sector and with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport to better understand the needs of the creative industries, clarify visa requirements, and ensure that processes are as smooth as possible.

**Deidre Brock**

*[Share]*

Does the Minister accept the reports from cultural festival organisers across the UK that obtaining visitor visas has been increasingly difficult in the last few years?

**Caroline Nokes**

*[Share]*



I am aware of that, and I am certainly aware of some of the challenges that have faced a number of cultural festivals, especially during the summer. Although this was not mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), performers arriving from Ireland were particularly affected. We are continuing to review the existing operation and legislation to ensure that the tier 5 route is implemented for, in particular, those who come here to work in the creative industries. Across Government, we are working with the sector to understand the concerns and address them accordingly. In response to its feedback, work is under way to identify an acceptable approach to the tier 5 concession route.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned his chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group on Malawi, and his work with that country. I recently accepted an invitation from the Africa all-party parliamentary group to attend a meeting that it is hosting, I think, next month. Today I received another invitation, from the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall

(Mr Sharma), who was particularly keen for me to meet representatives of various gurdwaras in his constituency. I recognise the need for me, as Immigration Minister, to engage with APPGs, and I am always happy to do so.

I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that the visa application centre in Lilongwe is open five days a week. We offer a priority visa service, with a five to seven-day turnaround time for applications. We also offer an on-demand mobile service. Visa application centre staff travel to the customer's chosen location to accept applications and assist with the process. In the year ending in June 2018, there were 2,515 decisions on applications from Malawian nationals, and 78%, or 1,963, were accepted. Most of the visas granted were for visitors or students, but our latest online performance statistics show that 98% of visitor and student visas are issued within 15 days.

### **Patrick Grady**

*[Share]*



As I said earlier, I will send the Minister some of the documents and evidence that have been produced by the Scotland Malawi partnership, not least the denial form which contains the words “Reason for denial—insert reason here”. Even when reasons are approved, that often happens very late in the application process, sometimes after the flights on which people have been booked have departed. The Minister needs to look into that a little bit more.



**Caroline Nokes**

*[Share]*

I look forward to receiving the information from the hon. Gentleman, but, as I have said, our statistics show that most visas are being granted within 15 days.

The hon. Gentleman also referred to scientists and academics being refused entry to the UK. Of course we welcome the brightest and the best, allow academics on exchange programmes to come to the UK as visitors, and welcome them to conferences. However, they must meet the requirements of the immigration rules, which apply to all visitors to the UK. Applications for visitor visas, or for entry as a visitor, are considered on their merits regardless of the nationality of the applicant. Among the points on which applicants must satisfy the decision-maker is that they are genuine visitors who will leave at the end of their visit, and will not make the UK their main home through frequent or successive visits—for instance, that they have family, work or study ties in their home country. They must also be able to show that they are able to support and maintain themselves during their visit.

**Carol Monaghan**

*[Share]*

Some of the academics who are being refused visas have visited the UK many times in the past, and only now are their visas being refused for what are really trivial reasons. Does the Minister accept that, as many academics are now saying, massive reputational damage has been done to the UK's academic sector by this visa regime?

**Caroline Nokes**

*[Share]*

As I have said, it is important that we assess each application on its own merits and on the information provided by individual applicants. It is important that we enable academics to come here, but it is also important that applications be completed in a timely manner and with all the information that we have requested.

The hon. Member for Glasgow North mentioned the future for visitors from the European Union and the reciprocal arrangements for UK travellers going to the EU. On

13 November, the European Commission published a proposal to grant UK citizens visa-free travel to the EU after the UK's withdrawal. This is conditional on the UK also granting reciprocal and non-discriminatory visa-free travel for all EU member states. We welcome the Commission's proposal, which reflects the future relationship that we want to have with the rest of the EU. In our proposals, we have made it clear that we want to ensure reciprocal measures with the EU on visa-free travel for tourists and short-term business visitors.

**Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP)**

*[Share]*

Will the Minister give way?

**Caroline Nokes**

*[Share]*



No, I have given way several times this evening.

In conclusion, let me reassure hon. Members that the Government are absolutely committed to ensuring that we have a visa system that balances protecting our borders and national security with ensuring that people are welcome and are able to visit, to study and to work in areas where we need their skills. As we leave the EU, we will

remain an open and tolerant country that recognises the valuable contribution migrants make to our society and that welcomes those with the skills and expertise to make our nation better still. We will control immigration so that we continue to attract the most talented to work or study in Britain while managing the process properly so that our immigration system serves the national interest. We are carefully considering a range of options for the future immigration system and will set out proposals very shortly. We will want to ensure that any decisions on our long-term arrangements are based on evidence and on engagement.

*Question put and agreed to.*

11.16 pm

*House adjourned.*



All photos sourced from: <https://goo.gl/BU8Gn5>