

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FROM LIB DEM IMMIGRANTS TO LIB DEM LEADERSHIP CANDIDATES.

Q1: If Brexit happens, what should the voting eligibility of resident (non-Commonwealth, non-Irish) EU citizens be? What about resident citizens of other (non-Commonwealth) countries?

Jo: I believe that it makes no sense to withhold voting rights from people who live, work, and have settled in the United Kingdom. We saw in the Euro elections this May the impact of having a double standard of voting eligibility - councils unable to administer the system and people unaware that they weren't going to be able to vote. To add insult to injury, the idea that people born outside the Commonwealth don't have a vote simply because they weren't once taken over by Britain as part of the Empire, is outdated and completely unfair. Put simply - I believe that if you're living in this country long term, you should be able to vote.

Ed:

- the voting eligibility of resident EU citizens (I presume you mean people who have permanent residency rights) should be full, i.e., all elections.
- to widen the franchise to give voting rights to non-EU, non-Commonwealth citizens, would be a major departure. Nonetheless, I would be very keen to do it for local elections, but would want to consult widely before giving voting rights for national elections.

Q2: The party is committed to reducing visa fees to the cost of administration. What other steps could we take to stop visa regulations tormenting immigrants? For example, how could we make work visas less of a barrier to career progression?

Ed:

- party policy is not a bad start, e.g., by putting visa regulations for workers to the Department for Business, where there's more incentive to help people get on
- overall, having helped well over 10,000 people - possibly 20,000 - with their cases with the Home Office over the last 20 years, including many wrt visa issues, I am determined to strip the Home Office of ultimate control, as I think they are institutionally incapable of treating people. By sharing responsibilities across Whitehall, the cultures of other organisations will over time assist dramatically
- and there are a whole range of individual aspects of visa regulations that bug me and my constituents all the time, from those linked to the hostile environment to other more bureaucratic and offensive ones.

Jo: I believe there is much to reform in the visa process - not just the costs but the inflexibility of different routes which means, for instance, that business visitors are unable to study, that grandparents are unable to visit their families for extended periods, and that migrants living in the UK are often unable to care for elderly family members within the country. These inflexibilities are an unjustifiable burden on family life and I believe they should be reformed. I also believe that the visa system as a whole is slow, cumbersome, expensive, and often frustrates the intended ends of applicants. More visas should be processed face to face by qualified officers - saving time and reducing incorrect or inadequate decisions, and taking pressure off the wider system of employment and appeals.

Q3 NHS charges for migrants: keep them or scrap them?

Jo: First of all, I think we need to distinguish between migrants who are living and working in the UK (and so who have very little choice about using the healthcare we provide here), and the very small numbers of people that the NHS estimates use their services while on holiday or otherwise in the UK without residency or a visa in place. People who are living in and contributing to the UK should not be penalised by being forced to pay for healthcare - we all know how difficult it is, for instance, keeping a job if you have a chronic condition where you need regular doctors' appointments. We shouldn't expect people to leave the country to receive this basic healthcare if they're living and working in the UK on an extended basis. I do believe that people who are not in the UK long-term should not be able to expect or receive free secondary care. Of course we must, ethically, treat anybody who turns up in A&E or for maternity care etc. without any regard to 'eligibility' for care - but beyond this, the NHS is stretched both financially and in terms of personnel and given that the vast majority of people using this care will have health insurance in place, it's only reasonable for them to pay in the same way British citizens would if they were on holiday abroad. It's worth noting as well that we already have a healthcare sharing arrangement within the EEA which is easy to access and enables British citizens to access free and discounted healthcare across 31 countries. These kinds of reciprocal arrangements enable easy access to essential services for both British and EU citizens and should be built on. The bigger issue here, I think, is what the focus on 'eligibility' means for British citizens - disproportionately BAME or foreign-born citizens - who as a result of this policy are asked to provide identity documents before care is provided. This can be counter-productive, and as we know from the Windrush scandal, Home Office opinions on citizenship and eligibility for services don't always match reality. This is the issue we need to address to ensure that healthcare is available to all who need it, regardless of nationality.

Ed: scrap them, immediately.

Q4: How can we make sure that, when we rightly argue in favour of immigration, we value immigrants as human beings, not just for the benefits that their presence brings to the existing UK population?

Ed: by arguing from Liberal principles, that all human beings are of equal value, deserving of equal respect. I do think arguing for the benefits of immigration for the UK is still important, given we have a lot of people to convince, but I absolutely take the point we need to argue about individuals as people with families, with rights etc.

Jo: It's a tough part of politics to admit that the best message politically may not always be the one you want to use. Migrants who come to the UK deserve our welcome as liberals who recognise the inherent value in human beings and the values of internationalism, liberty, and equality that put people at their centre. But immigration is a difficult topic for many in the country - particularly, we see, among those who don't know anybody born outside the UK or who fear the impact immigration may have on their area. It is not pandering to these views to paint a picture of immigration that goes beyond the individual - yes, individual immigrants are wonderful and I welcome them, but we absolutely must be clear that for hundreds of years migration has enriched our language, culture and society, and driven innovation, productivity and economic growth. Immigration is not a story about one person who lives down the road from you, but about the values of our people and our nation.