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Border controls? Here's a long line of reasons to relax

Queueing at border controls serves little purpose – they are as much about image as impact, and the image is not welcoming

People queue at Heathrow airport in London,
after the British government raised the alert state to 'critical' in 2006 and increased border security.
Photograph: Daniel Hambury/EPA

I landed in Heathrow last Friday on a direct flight from Athens. I walked off the flight, and then through what appeared to be mile upon mile of corridors, until eventually getting to passport control. There I queued very briefly, watching three or four people with biometric passports trying to use the automatic channel. Eventually, when the camera didn't recognise their faces, they were waved through to a human officer. "Put your feet on the footprints", the immigration officer kept on telling the confused and mostly elderly travellers, who were struggling to work out what to do. "I only speak English", she kept on repeating. If I had to spend all day saying "Put your feet on the footprints", I thought to myself, I might try to learn how to say it in Greek or French or German.

I was only at passport control for less than a minute. Maybe I was benefiting from being at the very tail end of the "'reduced security and passport regime' that is thought to have lasted until last week". If so, I was very grateful. You catch a train through a city in economic meltdown. You queue your way out of one airport. You sit in a cramped tube of metal and hurtle over Europe. You arrive in Heathrow, still have the train, tube and train to go before you are home. The last thing you want is someone making you queue within what is supposed to be a free movement of labour zone because they want to give the impression that they are being "tough on immigration", or that this queuing will somehow make us all safer.

Politicians say one thing when they want to sound tough in public, but – as Theresa May herself admitted – instruct their officials to relax checks on EU passport holders in private. Then, they have to be tough again when someone leaks the relaxation. Tired middle-aged professors of human geography like me might moan about queuing for longer. But people travelling with children, or the truly elderly, or simply those who find standing for long hard have far more to moan about. Others could face hours of questioning because they don't appear to be European enough.

The amount of hassle experienced in aggregate will be directly proportional to the number of people employed to hassle. Just as crime rises when more police officers are employed. What would actually reduce illegal immigration or reduce terrorism is only tangentially related to border controls.

If heavily policed border controls had a great effect on illegal immigration, the US would not be home to so many undocumented migrants. It is a high demand for cheap labour in countries with wide income inequalities that pulls in migrants. It is wide international inequalities in income that push them. People move to where there is demand for them and away from where there isn't. Over the medium term, border controls do little but encourage some to stay for fear that they might not be able to return if they left.

If border controls reduced terrorism, the UK could have contained the violence of "the troubles" within Northern Ireland. Instead, border controls are a short-term palliative: something that can reduce the anxiety and alleviate slightly the concern, but not an option that even pretends to begin to address what underlies any motives for trying to stoke up terror in the first place. Border controls have effects, but they are almost all short-term effects, which can be worked around by people with a little power, as smugglers always have. Border controls today are as much about image as impact, and the image is not very welcoming.

To be honest, having spent a week in Athens, put having to queue (or not) in Britain into a different perspective. At least when you queue you have an idea that there is something worth queuing for. You might say that it is good that we have more stringent border controls in Britain and Ireland than elsewhere in the EU. But how would you feel if one day it was Britain facing economic meltdown, and when you tried to fly to Spain for the weekend you got taken aside into a little room at Madrid-Barajas airport and grilled about why you were trying to leave the UK?

You might like being an alien in your own continent. Personally I feel safer being a citizen of something a little larger than one small country.