



Home Affairs Committee

Oral evidence: [The work of the Immigration Directorates](#)
[2014 Q2](#) , HC 712

Tuesday 28 October 2014

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Members present: Keith Vaz (Chair); Ian Austin, Mr James Clappison, Michael Ellis, Paul Flynn, Lorraine Fullbrook, Dr Julian Huppert, Mr David Winnick.

Questions 1 – 50

Witnesses: **Natacha Bouchart**, Mayor of Calais, **Philippe Mignonet**, Deputy Mayor of Calais, and **Emmanuel Agius**, First Deputy to the Mayor, gave evidence.

Q1 Chair: Madame Maire, les Membres de la Commission des Affaires Intérieures sont très contents que vous êtes venus aujourd’hui avec deux de vos Deputés pour discuter ce sujet très important. Merci beaucoup. Welcome to the Select Committee on Home Affairs and thank you very much for coming here today. Members of the Committee are pleased to see you here to discuss this very important matter. In terms of the interpreting, rather than speak in very long sentences, I think you would prefer if we made it as brief as possible and, since we are recording everything and transcribing what you have to say, we would appreciate it if you would do the same.

I had the pleasure of visiting Calais on 15 September when I met with your Deputy Mayor. Why is there a crisis in Calais? Why is there a migration crisis there?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I would like to thank the Committee, and you in particular, for this invitation, which I would like to describe as historic because it is the first time that an elected representative from Calais has been invited to speak in an assembly like this.

Q2 Chair: If I could repeat my first question: who is responsible for this crisis in Calais, which has seen an increase in the number of migrants by over 1,000 in the last five months? Who is to blame for this huge increase?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): International events, conflicts around the world are the first cause of this problem that people are seeing on television screens and in media. The second element is there is a lack of a sufficient European-wide mechanism. There is not enough solidarity between European countries and no efficient strategy. The third element, which I would maybe call aspirational, is the measures that have been put in place by the British Government that are attracting immigrants.

Q3 Chair: Your Deputy Mayor, M Mignonet, said in August 2014, “The migrants want to go to England because they are told by the media when they get to England they will get facilities quite readily and will be able to bring their families also to England”. Do you think that there is a perception that England is a soft touch for those who want to come here?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): You have a much more favourable regime in Britain than in other European countries. There is the language question. The second thing is the weekly benefits of £36 that are given to asylum-seekers or migrants, which is a huge amount for people who have nothing in their lives.

Q4 Chair: Do you think the French Government is doing enough? President Hollande has announced that he wants to open a reception centre in Calais. Do you think that that is a good idea?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Yes, I do think it is a good idea for the humanitarian aspect. It is very important for the entire urban zone of Calais so that all the migrants can be in one place, so for the whole city it is an important idea.

Q5 Chair: So you do not think this will be a magnet to attract more people there? You have been reported as saying this.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): You could say there is a risk that it is going to be a magnet but the real magnet is not the city of Calais. The real magnet is the benefits that are perceived in Great Britain.

Q6 Chair: In terms of the British Government, Mr Cameron told me yesterday in the House of Commons that he has now sent you the fence that the G8 summit was using in Mr Flynn’s constituency of Newport. We did not send Mr Flynn but we sent his fence to be built around the port. Is that enough for you or do you still think the border should be removed from Calais and brought back to Dover?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I do think that the frontier should be on British territory because it is up to you to decide whether or not you wish to welcome these migrants. Fences make everybody laugh. It will just push the problem back a few metres.

Q7 Chair: So it is not going to be effective? When I went to Calais to speak to people, they were in Calais because they wanted to get on the ferry to come to England. If you take the border back to Dover, they will still be in Calais, will they not, because that is where the ferry leaves, or they will be near Eurotunnel, which is where the trains and cars can go across? Is it not the case that you would still have this problem even if the border went back to the United Kingdom?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I think that it would change something if we put in some kind of mechanism together, jointly, so welcome facilities on both sides. We could at least better regulate the flows of people and control them better and reassure the populations of Calais, Dover and the surrounding areas.

Q8 Chair: Has the British Home Secretary or the Immigration Minister visited you and met you in Calais?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): No, he has never been.

Q9 Mr Winnick: The situation in Calais is obviously unsatisfactory, often featured in British newspapers and television, as one would expect. Could you give us a round figure of the migrants at the moment, or in the last few weeks and months, trying to get elsewhere, principally across to Britain?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): About 2,500 people.

Q10 Mr Winnick: That is quite a lot. What would you say are their nationalities, in the main?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Eritrean, Ethiopian, Sudanese, Syrian, Egyptian, some Lebanese, Iranians and Iraqis.

Q11 Mr Winnick: We have reports, and no doubt they are in the French press as well, of those who have sacrificed their lives trying to get from their homelands into Europe. They are so determined that they are willing to take on that task and tragically, as we know, fellow human beings have died in the process. Would you say that people, having reached Calais, are absolutely determined one way or the other to try to get to Britain, even though Britain is not able to receive them?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): These people are prepared to die to come to England.

Q12 Mr Winnick: We remember the camp at Sangatte. Is the problem bigger than it was when the camp was there?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The problem is worse than Sangatte. It was a closed environment whereas now we have the immigrants throughout Calais city centre and that is affecting the local population.

Q13 Mr Winnick: In your view, is this is a problem to be resolved between France and Britain—although no doubt you think it is more for Britain—or would it be more a problem for international agencies, such as the United Nations and refugee agencies?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): It is an international problem and it is number one problem in Europe. I think we need new European arrangements to regulate it so that we have a proper flow of migrants through to England.

Q14 Chair: Basically, are you saying that the EU has not done enough to help you?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The European Union has not done anything to contribute. They have not come to visit and they have not paid for anything. All the situations and the problems that we have had in Calais we have had to deal with ourselves. The local population is being harassed and there has been violence, and there has been no indemnification for that.

Q15 Michael Ellis: Madam Mayor, you should look after your own borders first in France, should you not? Is it not up to the French to stop them getting into France in the first place?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): As I said before, the problem is an international one and it is a failure of Europe because the Schengen agreement does not work and the Frontex agency does not work.

Q16 Michael Ellis: On the media you have been blaming the British and it has not been the British responsibility to have sovereign control over Calais since 1558. Why do you blame the British?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The first point is that you are checking the British frontier on the territory of Calais. Secondly, having such an attractive regime for migrants coming to this country is your responsibility.

Q17 Michael Ellis: The French were leading proponents of the Schengen agreement, which the British did not sign up for. It is because of the Schengen agreement that you have this situation, ultimately, isn't it? Do you regret that now, Madam Mayor? If so, surely you have only yourselves to blame.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I am a mayor and a member of the senate but I am not a minister or the President, so I can't speak for France in that respect. I believe that there is a need to revise the Schengen agreement because it is not working. What we need are rules and regulations Europe-wide, and if we are in Europe then we respect those rules and regulations and if we are not then each country should have their own rules and regulations.

Q18 Michael Ellis: My final point is this: shouldn't it therefore be up to you, Madam, to go to see the French President in Paris to talk about the faults of the Schengen agreement and deal with the situation that way? Isn't that the route, rather than coming to the British taxpayer to expect the British to solve French problems?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I would say that it is not a French problem, it is a European problem, and we, as citizens of Calais, are suffering from the agreements that have been made. You really need to take your responsibility; if you have conditions that are attractive to migrants you need to think about changing those.

Q19 Ian Austin: The fact that illegal immigrants are in France is not a European problem. That is a French problem and one with which the French ought to be dealing.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): If you think it is just a French problem, then I am going to suspend Schengen and we could stop all movement of people through Calais.

Q20 Ian Austin: Nobody who is already in France can be treated as an asylum-seeker in the UK. If somebody is fleeing persecution abroad and they are in France, that is where they should be seeking a safe haven, not coming to the UK to do it.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): That is part of the problem and why the problem is so complex, because we don't actually have asylum-seekers in Calais. They are just saying they want to come to the United Kingdom.

Q21 Ian Austin: When they get here they tell us that they are asylum-seekers. Why shouldn't we simply deport them back to France so that you can deal with them there?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): They don't ask for asylum in Calais. They are not requesting asylum in Calais. We do a lot to facilitate them so that they could ask for asylum, because it would make life a lot easier, but they don't.

Q22 Ian Austin: If their status is not legal in France, why are they not dealt with by the legal authorities in France, by the courts in France, instead of you essentially facilitating their stay in Calais?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I have asked the French Government about this because I am not in agreement with the decisions that have been made. The city of Calais has been taken hostage by the Government.

Q23 Chair: Just to be clear, is it your view that the people in the camps do not want to stay in Calais; they want to come to live in England?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): It is a certainty.

Q24 Chair: And you don't want them to stay in Calais?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I don't want them to stay, but that is why I asked for a day centre so that the population in Calais is not penalised by their presence.

Q25 Chair: On 24 October, Marine Le Pen visited Calais and she said, "The rule of law no longer holds sway in Calais. Now it is no more than a jungle where violence and the survival of the fittest reign". Do you agree with that? Is it that bad in Calais at the moment?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I don't agree with Marine Le Pen and I regret that she came to Calais. What is important is that the migrants are there, they have their own destinies and they have arrived there, but the population of Calais has a right to live in peace and have a normal existence, like the people of London do. I am not against the idea of having some kind of centre for refugees, but the migrant population has changed now. It is much more violent, they are harassing the people of Calais, and there are a lot of mafia and traffickers in the population. I have called on the French Interior Minister to take strong action.

Q26 Chair: The situation has given rise to more criminality involving organised crime. Is that what you are saying?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Yes.

Q27 Lorraine Fullbrook: Madam Mayor, the Schengen agreement, to which France is a signatory, was the abolishment of your internal borders. The UK opted out of the Schengen agreement because we wanted to maintain our own borders. Under the agreement, of which France is a signatory, you agreed to a single external border and, more importantly, a single set of rules for the policing of that border. Have you taken your case to the French Government or to the European Union in Brussels?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): For a number of years I have been presenting my case to the French Government. I have not yet officially made a case to the European Union.

Q28 Lorraine Fullbrook: As I say, the UK has opted out of the Schengen agreement so we can maintain our own borders and, under the Schengen agreement, France has agreed to abolish its internal borders. Under article 2.2, France is able to reinstate its own borders if it is necessary for public policy or national security.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The spirit in which we have come to discuss this today is not about calling into question the European legislation, a failure of which would be going backwards. What we need is to have a strategic view of how to move forward—again, these are common problems—and to talk to the British Government about the system of benefits, which are too attractive and are encouraging people to come here.

Q29 Lorraine Fullbrook: What the United Kingdom may or may not give its residents and citizens here is irrelevant to your argument. This is a European Union problem and particularly a Schengen treaty problem, on which you should be taking your case to Brussels and to Paris.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The message that I have been trying to get across for a number of years is that what the British Government is offering is what is understood around the world and that is what people want to come here for.

Q30 Lorraine Fullbrook: But you can't expect us to disadvantage our people here because France can't police its own borders between Italy, for example, and other areas.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I agree with you about policing in Italy and I am not here to teach anybody any lessons. I am trying to explain that this is a problem that is confronting both Britain and France and it is a reality that we have on the ground.

Chair: We have invited you to come here. You are not coming here to make a case. It is this Committee that has invited you and we are extremely grateful to you for coming.

Q31 Paul Flynn: The migrant population in Calais is constantly changing. There is a stream going through. That means that many people are successfully getting across the Channel with the help of the mafia, criminals and corrupt people in the transport system. Is there no chance of concentrating on those gangs who organise the transport of people across in order to end the practice?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Absolutely we do need to step up measures to focus on criminality, the mafia and people traffickers, but we also need to understand that there are the criminal gangs here and we need to address the question of the aspiration of people wanting to come here.

Q32 Paul Flynn: By providing, for good humanitarian reasons, the centre des enfants for the refugees, would you create another Sangatte? By providing a solution to the problem, would you increase the problem by making Calais even more attractive?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): We need to do something like this. The city of Calais has become worse than Sangatte, so we need to do something now.

Q33 Paul Flynn: We understand. We sympathise with the terrible problems that Calais has, but perhaps the solution will increase the problem.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): What would you prefer? We think that the problem is going to get worse anyway so we need to do something to contain it. Perhaps the solution is to set up this centre and have it as a Franco-British co-operation project.

Q34 Paul Flynn: You provide legal advice to the migrants on how the British system works and how to come to Britain legally. Do you provide the same advice on how to get asylum in France?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): We do give that advice, but it is more difficult in France because the process to seek asylum there is much longer.

Q35 Paul Flynn: The Chairman referred to the visit from Marine Le Pen. What is the political situation? What are the political pressures? As you said, immigration is a very big issue, an issue where great passions are involved. Is it possible that there might be a solution from the politicians? You said you are not the President, but is it possible that there will be a solution coming from France to make life more acceptable for refugees there?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I am doing everything I can to do that. For several months now I have been making many proposals about what we could do but I am the only person who is doing that.

Q36 Chair: Do you feel that you are not being listened to? Do you feel that the EU, the French Government and the British Government are not listening to what you are saying?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): They don't want to listen and they are in denial because they don't really want to know what is going on.

Q37 Mr Clappison: I have heard what you said about the reasons why asylum-seekers wish to come to Britain, in your view, but I am genuinely perplexed. You mentioned the sum of £36. That is not a great amount in the United Kingdom, given our cost of living. One of the biggest demands of the asylum-seekers is to be able to work in the United Kingdom. Can I put another issue to you? You touched on it a moment ago when you said that the process of claiming asylum in France takes much longer. Do you have a message or a feeling that the asylum-seekers wish to come to Britain because once they get here they will be able to stay here?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): The heart of the problem is the explanation of why these migrants want to come to the United Kingdom. Everybody is welcome to come and meet

migrants to talk to them and understand why they want to come here. You say that £36 might not be much in the United Kingdom but they don't know that. They come from very poor countries and they have no idea about the value of money. They don't understand that £36 is very little per week, but they know from those people who have got through that when they get here they can easily find work, they don't need to declare their work, they can find accommodation, and they can get some money every week.

Q38 Mr Clappison: If people are claiming asylum, they are interested in what their chances are of getting asylum and being able to stay. Do you have the impression that these asylum-seekers believe that they have a better chance in the United Kingdom because, for example, we have had amnesties for asylum-seekers here and people have not been sent back, that once they get here they can stay here? Do you have that impression?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Yes, absolutely. That is the message but we don't communicate that message. The people who have got through will call and say they have got through, "This is El Dorado. We are here and we are staying here". There are no identity papers so the population is not checked in the same way, or the flows are not checked. There has not been a message from the British Government or elsewhere saying that it is not El Dorado here.

Q39 Chair: When I went to the migrant camp, they were very clear, as Mr Clappison has said, that they were not being pulled by the benefit system in this country. They said to me, "We love Mr Cameron. We want to go to England so we can work illegally". Do you think that it is the reason: it is not the benefits pull; it is actually illegal working?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Both are nice for people who have nothing.

Q40 Chair: That is evidence that has been given to me. £36 is nice, if you have nothing, we accept that, but you have visited the camps and met these people. These are people who are absolutely determined to come to the UK. They will jump on ferries, get into cars. One young girl, sadly, was killed as she crossed the road. They just want to come to England, don't they? They don't want to stay in France. There are not a whole lot of people in Dover who are clamouring to go over to Calais. It is all the other way round.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I can understand your slightly humorous point, but as you have been—and we invite people to come and see what the reality is on the ground—nobody said they wanted to stay in Calais. What we really need to say is that we have a common destiny in that and that is serious. The port of Calais and the port of Dover are linked; it is the only pathway and it will always be there. If the port of Calais is not doing well, then the port of Dover won't do well.

Chair: Of course. We understand that. Thank you.

Q41 Dr Huppert: Can I pick up the point that the Chair and Mr Clappison made? You have repeatedly said that the problem is that the benefits here are so generous. Is there any evidence behind that, not just anecdotes but actual evidence? There have been a number of academic studies—by Professor Heaven Crawley at Swansea; the Home Office did a study; there was a review of major OECD countries—that found that entitlement to benefits was not a major factor and that countries that are more generous do not get more people attending.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Studies are good but reality is better.

Dr Huppert: So that is a no.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): If you take a case of an Eritrean who is in Calais, he knows that if he can get through to England he can work or have a benefit of up to £154 a month, which is more than he would imagine for a year. I am not advertising those benefits. It is the migrants who are already here in this country, the populations of migrants who have already arrived, who are communicating that. If it is not true, you need to be saying it very loudly and clearly in our country and throughout Europe.

Q42 Dr Huppert: I think that is right and you could certainly help to dispel many of the myths. We are somewhat concerned about what you have said. It simply does not make sense that people would be coming here when there are a number of other European countries that are more generous. I think Mr Clappison is correct that the problem is that the French system is very slow and hostile to people, and that is perhaps something that you could raise with your President.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): It is the overall arrangement that is important. People can come here and integrate very easily. They can easily find work and accommodation and have some kind of benefit. It is the overall picture that is important.

Q43 Chair: We are coming to the end of the session. If colleagues have quick questions and then I am going to sum up. This Committee has visited the borders of Greece and Turkey. Mr Clappison came with me and our former colleague Mr Reckless. Do you accept the view that by the time they reach Calais it is too late to deal with this problem?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I absolutely agree with you and we need a wider strategy, European or beyond Europe, to get the message through that there is no point in coming. There needs to be a very strong message to say that there is no point in moving across the continent.

Q44 Chair: The pressure points are Italy and North Africa and Greece and Turkey. The Committee has felt for some time that Frontex is not doing enough to protect the outer borders of the EU.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Absolutely, yes.

Chair: Do you agree with those who feel that if you go out and help those who come on the migrant boats from North Africa, all that does is encourage more people to come and therefore they end up on Lampedusa and eventually in Calais?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I think it is important to understand that when someone leaves their country they have a purpose in mind. If the objective is to go to England, along the way the migrants need to be stopped or given some kind of information that there are perhaps other possibilities and that England is not the only country to go to.

Q45 Chair: It does need a review, as Mrs Fullbrook has said, looking again at Schengen, which allows someone who gets a travel document in Lampedusa to travel all the way over to Calais without being stopped. The EU needs to have a much tougher approach on this.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Absolutely agreed.

Chair: By the time they get to Calais, it is England and that is it. There is nowhere else they want to go but England, whereas if the origin countries are targeted, such as the deal between Signor Berlusconi and the Libyans to support the North African countries, the migrants would not even leave in the first place.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): We need to be very clear and lucid and work together. We can't close the borders, but we need to look at the problem; we can't just ignore it. We also need penalties for the European countries who don't respect the agreement.

Chair: I think you will find agreement on that.

Q46 Mr Winnick: Would it be right to come to the conclusion from this session that this is a human tragedy of people involved who don't want to come here for benefits, basically, they want to work, and neither Britain nor France is in the position to allow an open-door policy? These people in the main—there are a few exceptions I am sure—would be perfectly law-abiding, whichever country they lived in, but they are desperate to find work, for reasons that we should understand.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): It is an international human tragedy. It is also a human tragedy for the population of Calais who for 15 years have been suffering for others.

Q47 Paul Flynn: It is disappointing that the three kilometres of security fencing that kept Obama safe when he was in Newport, in my constituency, is of no value to you. How many kilometres of fencing would help and will the extra 100 police that are going there help as well, or is there no security solution?

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): There are 100 extra police officers in Calais and that is probably good for the security of the port—that has been a good idea—but not for the security of the population. There are more and more accidents and incidents among the population. There are a lot of women being attacked and mothers in Calais don't want to let their children out. That is why I want to set up this day centre and allow squats but outside the city limits.

Q48 Ian Austin: It is obviously outrageous if people in Calais are the victims of crime and disorder, but you are the Mayor of Calais and it is your responsibility to deal with that. Surely opening a day centre in Calais is just going to encourage more people to come to Calais. It would make more sense to open this facility a long way away from Calais and ensure that people who are committing crime in Calais are arrested and prosecuted for it and then taken there.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): It is not as easy as the way you are expressing it.

Ian Austin: It is easier to allow them to come to England instead.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I need to repeat to you, sir, that the migrants don't want to stay with us, they don't want to stay in Calais. A mayor in France does not have authority over the national police force.

Chair: Just to be clear, Mr Austin is not offering to open a day centre in Dudley.

Ian Austin: This might be amusing, but the problem is that they come through from France and end up in Dudley. That is what I am furious about. I am sorry.

Chair: Mr Austin, order. It is not for you to be furious sitting on this Committee. This is a Committee of the House. If you cannot ask questions without making outbursts like that, you must leave the Committee.

Q49 Mr Clappison: I sympathise with the problems that people in Calais are facing, but one of the demands you make is for the border controls to be moved back to Dover rather than being put in Calais. Can I suggest to you that that would make the problem worse for both Britain and Calais? It would make it even easier for people to claim asylum in the UK because once they set foot on UK soil they would be able to lodge a claim for asylum. That would produce far more people claiming asylum in Britain and also far more people coming to Calais unless other measures were taken to try to keep them out.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): I understand that you think it is a bad idea that you would then have to supervise your own border, but it is very important that our meeting here today is going to be useful for something so that we can work together on solutions and proposals to regulate the flows.

Q50 Chair: Madam Mayor, thank you very much for coming here today. You have heard a variety of views that I am sure reflect the debates that you are having in Calais and that are happening all over Europe. Migration is an issue that raises emotions among all of us, Members of Parliament and members of your city council. We look forward to you keeping us informed. Please feel that this Committee is interested in hearing what is happening in Calais. In our previous reports we have talked about Frontex and the importance of a European-wide approach to this issue and at some stage in the future members of the Committee, perhaps collectively, will go to visit Calais again to look at the situation.

Natacha Bouchart (Translation): Thank you very much. I would like to invite the Committee to come to Calais so that we can exchange views and you can see for yourselves, meet with the people there and understand what is going on, so that we can build some kind of strategy together so that migrants will not want to come in greater numbers to this country. That could be one solution. I would like to give the Committee our press review on the problems of migrants in Calais. That is from this year, and the year is not yet over.

Chair: Thank you very much. Merci beaucoup.