
BREXIT: EU NATIONALS 'SHOULD BE ALLOWED TO STAY IN UK'

-

13.12.2016

12.12.2016

EuroNews

Alasdair Sanford

The British government should move unilaterally to guarantee the post-Brexit rights of European Union nationals living in the United Kingdom, according to a report published on Monday by a group including politicians, employers, trade unions and academics.

The report was published by the think tank British Future, describes itself as an independent, non-partisan group seeking to address peoples fears about matters including integration and migration.

There are an estimated 2.8 million EU nationals living in the UK, as well as 1.2 million Britons living elsewhere in the European Union.

You scratch my back...

The report for British Future recommends that 1.8 million people from countries in the area known as EEA+ who have been resident in the UK for five years be offered permanent residence. The term EEA+ covers the European Economic Area – the 28 EU countries plus Iceland, Lichtenstein and Norway – as well as Switzerland. Those who have not acquired five years residence should be allowed a five-year transition period to be allowed to apply to remain indefinitely, the report says. It recommends as a cut-off date, the day the government invokes a legal mechanism to set the Brexit process in motion, widely expected to be Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty.

There are also recommendations that EU nationals rights be maintained in matters such as family migration, pensions, health care, social housing and education.

Figures from both sides of the Brexit divide contributed to the British Future study, including several politicians who backed the UKs decision to leave the European Union. The panel was chaired by the Labour MP Gisela Stuart – herself a migrant to the UK from Germany in the early 1970s. Her work on behalf of the Blair government, advising the EU on drawing up a new constitution, helped turn her into a Eurosceptic and she became a prominent figure in the Leave campaign.

They (EU nationals) have made the United Kingdom their home and they want it to continue to be their home. They have the right to expect to be able to plan their lives and not have to change things retrospectively, she wrote in the foreword to the report.

People are not bargaining chips

In a separate move, campaigners from The Three Million group, a forum for EU citizens in the UK, were due to hand in a letter to Downing Street – the prime ministers residence in London.

We don't want to be bargaining chips because we don't believe you can negotiate people's lives, the group's chairman Nicolas Hatton, a French former marketing worker who has lived in the UK for 21 years, told the Press Association.

The calls have received support from health service management. The Cavendish Coalition group of health and social care representatives said guaranteeing the status of EU nationals would ease uncertainty and anxiety, and urged the prime minister to take the fair and reasonable proposals very seriously.

The Labour oppositions Brexit spokesman Sir Keir Starmer said there was a mounting sense of very real injustice about the governments stance. Labour would continue to push to ensure EU nationals are not used as part of the negotiation process, he added.

A Downing Street spokeswoman repeated the governments position since the EU referendum in June, telling reporters that it expected to be able to guarantee the rights of EU citizens in Britain – but a reciprocal arrangement with the EU was needed.

The governments refusal to guarantee the rights of EU nationals once the UK leaves the EU, until the status of British citizens in Europe is safeguarded by reciprocal arrangements, has been one of the most controversial aspects of its stance on Brexit – as Euronews reported previously. In a parliamentary debate in early July soon after the referendum, many MPs took the government to task over its stance, which took many by surprise and caused widespread dismay.

Don't leave ex-pats high and dry

The government has argued that the interests of UK citizens abroad can best be served by seeking a reciprocal arrangement with the EU, suggesting that these might be at risk if it guaranteed European nationals rights unilaterally – while making it clear that it wanted to secure their status nonetheless. The prime minister told the House of Commons that acting unilaterally and giving away the guarantee for EU nationals in the UK risked leaving Britons in Europe high and dry.

Last month Politico reported that Theresa May had approached Angela Merkel seeking a quick settlement on the issue, but had been rebuffed by the German chancellor who stuck to the line that there can be no pre-negotiations until Britain formally launches the Brexit process. Her stance was echoed by the European Council President Donald Tusk.

The authors of the British Future report claim there is significant public backing for their appeal. However some comments on social media and in response to newspaper articles on the issue suggest strong opposition from at least some quarters.

Emotional turmoil

Migration experts have warned of the impact on the UK economy of ending free movement from EU countries. Jonathan Portes of the National Institute of Economic and Social Research told a

House of Lords sub-committee that the administrative task of identifying and registering EU nationals before Brexit to guarantee their right to remain could be formidable.

We don't want to be the victims of a bureaucratic nightmare because it would be crazy for the government not to act now and then be left with an impossible task of registering everybody, Nicolas Hatton of the Three Million group said on Monday.

There is evidence that the lack of a cast-iron guarantee for EU nationals has exacted an emotional toll on many Europeans living in the UK. A forum on Facebook set up by the Three Million group has been inundated with comments from people worried about their future. Despite official advice that people living in Britain for over five years should seek permanent residence, there have been complaints that in several cases, even people who moved to the UK decades ago have had applications rejected. The Guardian reported the feelings of several Europeans, whose complaints ranged from charges of excessive bureaucracy to sentiments of betrayal and exclusion.

The British Future report argues that setting an example is the best way to secure the status of UK citizens in the EU: by offering European nationals such guarantees, it says, the government can expect similar conditions to be offered Britons in return.

Kaynak/Source: