

British government rejected visa-free EU touring for musicians to bolster hostile immigration policy

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The *Independent* newspaper revealed this week that the British government, far from arguing for visa-free touring access to Europe for musicians as it claimed, rejected proposals for such access in the Brexit negotiations because it cut across their hostile immigration policies.

Touring musicians have been hit hard by the chaos around new border regulations following Britain's exit from the European Union (EU). Previously, British musicians could tour the EU without additional paperwork. Now, like every other sector, they are caught up in what Cabinet Secretary Michael Gove casually described as "significant border disruption."

Musicians were given repeated pledges that any Brexit deal would protect them. Deborah Annetts, chief executive of the Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM), said that throughout 2020 "we were given assurances that the government understood how important frictionless travel is for the performing arts."

The new arrangements provide nothing of the sort, putting musicians to the additional cost and bureaucracy of visas for them and their support crews. The impact is potentially devastating. Naomi Pohl, of the Musicians' Union (MU), pointed out that for an orchestra, "you're talking about 70 musicians needing to get a work permit."

The government claimed it had "pushed for a more ambitious agreement which would have covered musicians and others, but our proposals were rejected by the EU."

An EU source told the *Independent*, however, that it had proposed its "standard" provision to exempt performers from visa requirements for 90 days to facilitate touring, enjoyed by many other third-party countries. Whitehall rejected this.

The EU source said, "It is usually in our agreements with third countries, that [work] visas are not required for musicians. We tried to include it, but the UK said no."

The reason was made clear: "The UK refused to agree because they said they were ending freedom of movement. It

is untrue to say they asked for something more ambitious ... there has to be reciprocity."

The question of "reciprocity" links the decision to Home Secretary Priti Patel's immigration crackdown. In February last year—before the impact of the pandemic had essentially ended all touring—it was reported that this was already an obstacle to negotiations.

Patel, apparently in conflict with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) at the time, demanded that EU musicians be subject to the same punitive visa regime as that imposed on artists and cultural professionals from outside the EU in 2018.

The conditions require them to apply for visas for visits of more than 30 days, as well as providing proof of savings and a sponsorship certificate from an event organiser. These conditions had already been used to prevent performers and scholars from visiting Britain.

It is understood that the UK asked the EU for this 30-day exemption period and rejected the EU's standard 90 days because it did not match its hostile immigration policy. The result was no agreement.

There have been demands for a full account of what took place during the negotiations. Tim Burgess of the Charlatans rock band wrote, "We need clarity. What exactly did they ask for? How come an agreement couldn't be made? We make noise for a living. We're not going to go quiet now."

The DCMS protested that the *Independent* story was "incorrect and misleading speculation from anonymous EU sources," and stood by its claims to have "pushed for a more ambitious agreement... on the temporary movement of business travellers, which would have covered musicians."

The evasion is clear, however, as the disagreement was evidently over how long a period "temporary movement" covers. This was made plain by Cabinet Office minister Lord True, who told the House of Lords the UK's proposals covered "permitted activities for short-term visitors [which] would have delivered an outcome closer to the UK's

approach to incoming musicians, artists and entertainers.”

Musicians and other artists, already crippled by the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, reacted furiously. Thom Yorke, singer of rock band Radiohead, denounced MPs in a tweet. Referring to Prime Minister Boris Johnson, Portishead’s Geoff Barrow launched the hashtag #BorisKilledMusic.

The Ivor Novello award-winning musician Nitin Sawhney drew a direct connection with the impact of the pandemic, tweeting: “Why the hell is this government so keen on destroying the music industry??? They give no money to struggling artists (none of the £1.7 billion [Cultural Recovery Fund] was for artists themselves) and this after lockdown robs musicians of live performance income. Why???”

Musicians and promoters made it clear that the devastating impact of this move will not only be felt by current performers, but also be an obstacle to emerging performers in the future.

Isle of Wight Festival boss John Giddings explained to the *NME* website how the increased costs would work: “If you have to import and export your equipment in and out of each country, it’s going to take longer to do. There will be more travel days, and every day you’re on the road you have the overhead of staff, hotels and everything that goes with it. It will increase the overall cost of everything.”

This is manageable for big acts, he said, “but if you’re the average or emerging artist then you’re hand to mouth.” The additional costs and time involved mean that for those artists “it’s not going to be financially possible.”

Mark Davyd of the UK Music Venue Trust called it “basically a tax on new and emerging musicians.”

The arrangements will put an end to the possibility of small one-off events. Calculating the costs of paperwork for multiple visas, carnets for moving instruments and equipment across borders, import and export tax on merchandise and payment of social security locally, Davyd estimates that for touring Europe to be economically viable artists would have to play at least 10 shows to venues of no less than 800 capacity. “Anything below that and everyone loses money.”

Music industry figures were warning of the implications at the time of the 2018 escalation over freedom of movement. Michael Dugher, CEO of UK Music, wrote then that “the ending of free movement with no waiver for musicians will put our fast-growing live music sector... at serious risk.”

Few have expressed illusions in government, with Giddings saying, “Counting on the government for anything is the biggest waste of time going.” The *NME* reported Chris McCrory of the band Catholic Action saying, “we’re all going to lose our ability to live, work and travel visa-free in 27 countries for the sake of right-wing political careers and

bank balances.”

This exposes the weakness of the MU’s demand simply that the Culture Minister “urgently confirm one way or another whether it was the UK Government that blocked the deal.” The MU is also appealing for “genuine support for musicians who are still falling through the gaps in #Covid19 financial assistance,” under conditions where the government has already made clear its contempt and disregard for the arts.

The MU has launched a petition for an “affordable, multi-entry and admin-light” Musicians’ Passport for artists working in the EU post-Brexit. Even with its obvious limitations—the petition specifies that it “be free or cheap,” which is a hostage to fortune under the present climate—the petition has gained more than 111,000 signatures to date.

A petition calling for the negotiation of a “free cultural work permit” for visa-free travel for music touring professionals, and carnet exception for touring equipment has so far received 257,000 signatures.

Mark Davyd noted that “The immigration bill is proposing to end freedom of movement altogether and to have a points-based system. Musicians fall under the same category as fruit pickers. They don’t get paid very much and they do seasonal work.”

The assault on the rights of musicians enshrined in the Brexit deal is inextricably bound up with the bourgeoisie’s attack on all the social and democratic rights of the working class, as the ruling elite moves to impose its reactionary agenda. They are seeking to transform the UK into a Singapore on Thames low-wage, low-tax haven for big business, with every aspect of life subordinated to the rapacious drive for profit.

The Labour Party has no essential differences with the Tories over Brexit. The day after the *Independent* story, Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer—who was a leading figure in the Remain campaign in the 2016 Brexit referendum to keep the UK with the EU—told the BBC’s *Andrew Marr Show* that his previous pledge to fight for the restoration of freedom of movement within the EU was “unrealistic.” He signalled acceptance of Patel’s restrictions, saying “I don’t think there’s an argument for reopening those aspects of the treaty.”



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