

**Westminster Hall Debate - British Curry Industry, Wednesday 4<sup>th</sup> March 2009**

11 am

**Anne Main** (St. Albans) (Con): I am pleased to have secured this debate, because the curry industry is frustrated and threatened by severe staff shortages and has been trying to get some clarity from the Government about possible solutions. Curry houses can be found all over the UK; there are more than 12,000, employing some 80,000 workers and contributing an estimated £3.5 billion to the British economy annually. Yet the curry industry is in crisis: unfortunately, it has been a casualty of the Government's failure to get a proper grip on the immigration system. In response to mounting public unease over what some describe as unfettered immigration from A8 economic migrants, the Government have sought to introduce a points-based system, which has disproportionately affected certain sectors, including the curry industry.

In an article for *The Independent*, Jerome Taylor wrote:

*"I think part of the problem is the government's patronising attitude towards the curry industry, which is one of the greatest immigration success stories of the past 40 years, not only in changing the British palate forever but also contributing considerably to the Treasury coffers... A vibrant industry such as the ethnic restaurant trade shouldn't be penalised because the successful and ambitious children of restaurateurs have higher aspirations than doing what their parents did or because this government has caved into the anti-immigration hysteria and cut off the supply of chefs".*

That is a very strong sentiment, but I have some sympathy with elements of it.

Ministers have expressed sympathy for the plight of the curry industry and have apparently asked the Migration Advisory Committee to look into the matter. However, it is telling that, currently, no representative of the Bangladeshi curry industry is either on the Migration Advisory Committee or in the Migration Impact Forum. Even worse, the Government appear to have announced only last month that Ministers plan to compel restaurants and takeaways to recruit skilled cooks from people already resident in the UK or elsewhere in the EU. That announcement pre-empted a report from the Migration Advisory Committee on whether more job sectors should be removed from the special shortage occupation list, which allows firms in specified sectors to bring in staff from overseas. Sadly, that pre-emptive strike seems linked to highly publicised wildcat strikes over foreign workers allegedly taking British jobs.

All this is leaving the industry in an impossible position. It wants to work with the Government. Unfortunately, the numbers coming in to work in the curry industry are relatively small, yet the effects of the new immigration system will be disproportionately high. It is estimated that staff shortages will cost restaurants an average of £19,000 every year. In today's economic climate, the economic impact of a

downturn in or failure of many of the curry industry's major restaurants in the UK would be catastrophic, particularly on many high streets.

The points-based system works against the curry industry. It is impossible to show formal recognisable catering academic qualifications obtained in Bangladesh. As has been observed, in Bangladesh, one is either totally poor, or rather wealthy, and the latter do not go in to catering. However, that does not mean that many restaurants are not bringing in skilled chefs—they just cannot necessarily prove it. Under the new points-based immigration system for workers outside the EU, which came into force at the end of February, chefs need to speak English and have academic qualifications to live and work in the UK.

I am sure that such qualifications are desirable for many people who wish to come and work in our country, but sadly, in a country as poor as Bangladesh, such qualifications are extremely hard to achieve. The Bangladesh Caterers Association says that such policies have left its members in an invidious position. They cannot recruit trained Bangladeshi cooks but are critically short of staff, which is threatening the future of the industry in the UK.

Owners of restaurants who came to the UK and set them up—although often called “Indian”, a great number are Bengali from East Bengal, which is now Bangladesh, and predominantly from Sylhet, which is twinned with St. Albans, in the north-east of the country—find that their children do not want to work in their parents' business. Many of them are setting their sights on becoming professional accountants, doctors, engineers and lawyers, and they are succeeding. Having met Bangladeshi families in my constituency, I know that that pattern is repeated again and again. It is part of an immigration success story and a tribute to the hard work ethic that typifies the Bangladeshi community. All young people, whatever their race, are being encouraged to skill up and get a toolkit of qualifications that will help to ensure career progression and job opportunities. Yet the curry industry cannot currently offer that educational opportunity. I shall explore that point a bit more later.

No business can function without a pool of skilled staff from which to recruit. Yet the Government have inadvertently—I hope—made the situation worse, because without working with the industry to put in place a safety net, immigration policy was altered overnight, causing, as we have heard, raids on restaurants and people falling foul of regulations. There is not a lack of dialogue on this matter, but there is a lack of action and short and long-term solutions.

**Damian Green** (Ashford) (Con): My hon. Friend rightly mentions training. I am particularly concerned about high unemployment in the Bangladeshi community in this country. Does she agree that proper and better training, in this country, for British people of Bangladeshi origin would be a double-whammy winner, because it would help the curry industry, as well as one of the groups in our society most prone to unemployment?

**Anne Main:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and the curry industry recognises the mismatch. Some young Bangladeshi people would probably consider entering the curry industry, which is enormously successful and offers many opportunities, but no career training and progress path is in place. Unemployed people want to make career

choices, so it is peculiar that they cannot obtain a skills set that will ensure that they can not only find employment in the curry industry, as a waiter, kitchen porter or whatever, but make a career for themselves. It would also allow them to obtain qualifications that they and the industry value.

In February 2008, the then Parliamentary Secretary, Office of the Leader of the House of Commons, the hon. Member for Bishop Auckland (Helen Goodman), suggested that there was no case for applying different immigration rules for this group of workers. Despite the ongoing dialogue, the door has been shut for a long time. She said:

*“It is, of course, important that Indian restaurants in this country retain their high standards. However, I do not think that anyone can seriously suggest that different immigration regulations should apply to the sector. As the hon. Gentleman knows, there was a debate yesterday on this matter following the Home Secretary’s statement”.*—[Official Report, 21 February 2008; Vol. 472, c. 532.]

It was made quite clear, therefore, that the Government never had any real intention of altering the immigration system to favour a particular group of workers, yet they have done nothing to help the industry to put in place an alternative solution.

Successive Immigration Ministers have met with representatives of Bengali caterers, including the Bangladesh Caterers Association, the Guild of Bangladeshi Restaurateurs and the Greater Sylhet Development and Welfare Council, all of which are actively engaged with the Minister. I wish to pay tribute to Enam Ali, who produces *Spice Business* magazine, is a restaurant owner, extremely influential in the industry and organises the British curry awards; to Mr. Rashid, president of the Bangladesh Caterers Association, which is the voice of the industry, and who has also met the Minister; and to Mr. Faruk Shahagir from the Bangladesh-British Chamber of Commerce. All of those men have met regularly and are frustrated that their industry, which has so much to offer, cannot get the ear of the Government, to sort out the problem. That really is a worry.

I pay tribute to those who have worked to raise the profile of the British curry industry and to champion its cause—some of them are here today to hear—but I share their frustration that they cannot move this forward. As my hon. Friend said, Ministers have suggested that unemployed Bengalis in Britain should fill the vacancies. In a Government-directed command economy, that might be feasible, but simply to say that unemployed Bengalis ought to work in the curry industry is derisory.

Unemployed Bengalis are no different from any other unemployed people in the UK. If merely fitting unemployed people to vacancies was the answer to the problem, we would not have to import large numbers of foreigners to pick fruit, de-bone carcasses and do other unpleasant jobs that we are told that the indigenous population cannot or will not do.

Eastern Europeans may be able to serve as waiters, but they may not have the cultural sensitivity or the language that is necessary to work in a curry house kitchen. Mr. Rashid, who is president of the Bangladesh Caterers Association, says that eastern

European workers are not the solution. He observes that they do not last terribly long and that they are not really keen on working in the industry.

We must ask how such a crisis has come about and what can be done to help. The catering industry as a whole is not a favoured career choice for young school leavers. Despite its vast size and economic clout, the curry industry does not have a desirable career path to offer potential young would-be chefs.

Jim Armstrong, chief executive of the Professional Association for Catering Education, says that the hospitality and catering departments find it hard to fill their cooking courses in general and to recruit students of Asian origin. He says that the latter group is more likely to be found doing courses in information technology or business. The reluctance of second-generation Bangladeshis to follow their parents into the family restaurant is readily admitted by both the business and the catering trades.

Any young person who wants to study catering at college with an eye to working in a Bangladeshi or Indian restaurant would have little option but to do a national vocational qualification in general cooking. Mr. Armstrong, who used to run hospitality and food management at Thomas Danby college in Leeds says:

*“The awarding bodies and the curriculum authority do not see any difference between cultures. If you are peeling a potato you’re peeling a potato. The fact that it’s for a different culture’s cuisine is by the by. The curriculum doesn’t necessarily meet the market’s needs.”*

That is at the heart of the problem. Some colleges have tweaked the NVQ with a module slanted towards international cuisine, but an NVQ can only be adapted so far, according to Gordon Sibbald, Thomas Danby’s assistant director of vocational skills. Therefore, the catering industry recognises that training must be both tailored and specific. Current training programmes are just not doing the job.

In 2008, the Prime Minister said:

*“We will make it possible for people who are in this country to be trained to be either chefs or restaurant workers in the industry... We are doing far more to train than ever before. We know there are people who, if trained, could make a contribution to the industry.”*

That is patently not the case. Skills are not being delivered and there is not the degree of specialism that is needed for a highly skilled chef. The industry recognises that and has been pressing the Government on the matter. It does not want to keep importing talent. It recognises that doing so is unsustainable, but restaurants do not want someone with an NVQ in general catering skills; there is a mismatch. The industry wants to set up a London catering college for curry. It is prepared to offer training courses and work placements. It recognises that such courses have to be of a high standard, because they would then be attractive to young people who wish to gain qualifications.

Having listened for so long to such problems, the Minister must make a commitment today. We have unemployed people in this country who could fill a skills gap if there was somewhere for them to train to get the necessary skills. We also need a temporary solution, because such colleges cannot be set up overnight. I am asking the Minister to revisit the points-based allocation system to ensure that people can bring in staff and to work with restaurants and the industry to come up with a short-term solution. We have an industry in crisis and a skills set that has not been found for young people. At the moment, the Government and the Prime Minister are saying that they will make it possible for more people to be trained. I suggest that that is not the case.

I hope that the Minister will say today that he will work with the curry industry. He must not cause it more problems, by cracking down and raiding restaurants, but offer advice and concrete assistance to help the industry set up the training college. Moreover, he must help it to work out a temporary solution, so that it can bring in chefs to fill the gap. I am not talking about bringing them in permanently and getting round the immigration system. If he does not provide such help and make a commitment to act now, this industry will see many of its restaurants close over the next year or two.

**11.14 am**

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Innovation, Universities and Skills (Mr. Siôn Simon):** It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mrs. Walley. I congratulate the hon. Member for St. Albans (Anne Main) on securing this important debate. I hope that I can shed some more positive light on the rather gloomy picture that she has painted. The story is a rather more positive one, and I hope that she will bear with me so that I can explain why.

This year is the 200th anniversary of the opening of the first-ever Indian restaurant in London. In the intervening years, south Asian cooking has come to occupy a progressively bigger role in British culture and life. I myself have the privilege to represent a constituency in the city of Birmingham, in which I grew up. Birmingham is widely acknowledged as the curry capital of Christendom and the birthplace of balti. I have been well acquainted with such matters from an early age. Although the hon. Lady's constituency may be better known for its Roman ruins than its rogan josh, I know that she is an advocate of such matters.

**Anne Main:** I have about 30 curry restaurants in St. Albans. Indeed, one was the runner-up in the Tiffin curry cup, so I ask the Minister to mind his words.

**Mr. Simon:** I was just going on to say that I know that she represents many Indian restaurants, including the famous Chez Mumtaj. I do not minimise the significance of this debate. Such matters are important both culturally and economically, and I do not underestimate our need or ability to assimilate in a multicultural society and turn such components into part of our national identity. Moreover, the industry is a growing economic and industrial phenomenon. As the hon. Lady said, the curry industry is worth £3.5 billion a year to our economy and offers jobs to some 80,000 people—although I put it closer to 100,000 people. Those are all good reasons why the health of the curry industry should, and does, matter to the Government. We take the issues seriously, and I will try to address some of the points that the hon. Lady has rightly

raised. I can assure her that such a commitment has also been taken on by the Border and Immigration Agency.

The hon. Lady talked at some length about the points-based immigration system. I understand that the introduction of the system last year caused a lot of concern in the industry. I do not propose to mount a detailed justification or explanation of the changes to the immigration rules this morning, as that is properly an issue for my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary. None the less, I remind the hon. Lady that these are sensitive matters. Even the hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), in his capacity as the Conservative spokesman for home affairs, recently called for

*“an explicit annual limit on the number of people coming here.”*

One cannot have this argument both ways. It is true that British business must have access to the skills it needs to trade profitably and to build for the future, and that some of those skills will come from abroad. However, in my view, the Government’s view and, indeed, the view of the hon. Member for St. Albans, as expressed this morning, too many skills and talents of our own people who are already here lie undeveloped.

There are 500,000 vacancies in the UK economy. It is our responsibility to do everything that we can to give British people, which includes Bangladeshi British people and every other kind of British people, the chance to fill them. I am not alone in that belief. Last November, the hon. Lady herself tabled early-day motion 268, in which she said that the curry industry

*“needs assistance to ensure that young people and skilled chefs are encouraged to enter the industry.”*

As she said this morning, that means young British Bangladeshi people and skilled chefs of any kind, as well as those from abroad. I can assure her and the hon. Member for Ashford that that assistance is precisely what my Department and I are committed to try to give the industry. I am talking not only about sending people to go to college or university, but about helping them to gain practical skills in the workplace. We are already putting in £1 billion a year in employers’ hands to support skills development through the Train to Gain programme.

**Anne Main:** The Minister said that it is not necessarily just about going to college or university. Does that mean that he is not actively considering supporting the setting up of a London curry college?

**Mr. Simon:** No, I do not mean that at all. I simply meant that, as well as all the work that we are doing to send people to college and universities to train, including people in the catering industry, we are putting £1 billion a year into training in the workplace through Train to Gain.

**Anne Main:** The college is the crux of the matter. Does the Minister accept the evaluation of the existing courses that they are not suited as they stand, and that they cannot be tweaked to deliver what the curry industry needs? People are being trained, but they do not deliver the skills that the industry needs.

**Mr. Simon:** I understand the hon. Lady's point, but I do not accept it entirely. I shall come on to discuss the matter in more detail if she will bear with me.

The extra money that we put into Train to Gain and the extra flexibilities that we introduced which were announced just before Christmas—the £350 million—were all focused on providing practical, flexible training support to small and medium businesses. Level 2 and 3 qualifications will help companies with between five and 250 employees and, obviously, most of the businesses that we are talking about today fall into that category. In principle, they stand to benefit from the changes. The restaurant industry—not just the Bangladeshi restaurant industry but the industry as a whole—remains male-dominated. The hon. Lady will be aware, as I am, that many women in the British Bangladeshi community would welcome the opportunity to take up a job, and that many are very skilled cooks. Sometimes, they are held back by a lack of basic language skills. I hope that she will join me in welcoming the fact that women of Bangladeshi origin are one group that has benefited from the recently introduced reform of provision of English training for speakers of other languages. I hope that she will join me, too, in calling on the Bangladeshi restaurant industry not to overlook the potential of those women as a source of recruits, nor the help with training from the Government that would be available to them.

**Anne Main:** I am a little disappointed with that. The fact someone is a good cook does not make them a top chef. Very few London restaurants would employ my mother, who is a very good cook. I do not think that that is the way forward. I encourage Bangladeshi women to train, but—and I keep going back to this—where are they going to train? They cannot just turn up at a restaurant to get a job and say, “I make a wonderful taka dhal”. It does not work like that.

**Mr. Simon:** The hon. Lady's position is noted. My position is that it would be nice to see more women, including Bangladeshi women, in employment in the restaurant industry. The fact that she is not convinced about that is on the record.

What I said so far does not imply that there are not specific problems facing the restaurant industry and ethnic restaurants in particular. That is why, for example, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills, and People First—the sector skills council for the leisure and hospitality industry—signed a compact last June which, among other things, is specifically directed to help supply ethnic restaurants with highly trained chefs. Through the compact with the industry, we will support the preparation and training of more than 1,000 new chefs for ethnic restaurants. Specifically, we will help employers by funding the development and training of members of ethnic communities to get to level 3—the equivalent of A-level standard—in courses run through a virtual strand of the new national skills academy for hospitality. We will also support the expansion of the number of apprentices in ethnic catering, building on the group training association approach now under way in London.

How do we balance the need to ensure that south Asian and other ethnic restaurants can develop the skills of staff already resident here against the importance of not allowing, say, Bangladeshi cuisine in this country to be cut off from the culture in which it originated? As the hon. Lady is aware, chefs and cooks were included on the list of skilled occupations that the Government published last November, as

undertaking an occupation in which we consider there to be shortages in the labour market that could sensibly be filled by people from outside the European economic area. We took that decision based on advice from the Migration Advisory Committee, which is reviewing the evidence on skilled chefs.

Before that review concludes, the Government and key industry partners will attend a summit called by People First—the sector skills council for the industry, run by the industry—to discuss how to manage the transition from imported to indigenous skills. Our aim is to develop a partnership plan to ensure that we have the required skills and qualifications to meet the industry’s needs. The Guild of Bangladeshi Restaurateurs will be invited to the ethnic chef summit. Specific ethnic chef training is available. Employers can work with Train to Gain brokers to develop accredited qualifications, and the summit will look at developing further the work that is already being done. I accept that it will always be beneficial for ethnic cuisine in this country to refresh itself through the skills of people from the countries where it has its roots. Likewise, there will always be benefits in home-grown ethnic chefs gaining opportunities to hone their skills abroad. The state of the curry industry matters deeply to the Government and to the vast majority of people. I can assure the hon. Lady and the House that, in our efforts to safeguard British businesses and jobs—

**Anne Main:** Is the Minister going to support the curry industry’s desire to set up a specialised catering college in London?

**Mr. Simon:** I am happy to use my offices to ensure that the question of a London catering college is on the agenda of the Government-sponsored, but industry-led, ethnic chef summit, which is planned later this year.

On that note, may I conclude by restating how important the issue is, and that the Government are committed to getting it right? We are committed to supporting and developing the ethnic restaurant industry in this country, and I again congratulate the hon. Lady on bringing the matter to our attention.

**11.28 am**

*Sitting suspended.*