

Is French nationality worth more than British?

A country's stability, freedom and opportunities count for a lot

By Michael Skapinker

For the first part of my life, I travelled on a South African passport. In those days, it didn't take you to many places. To show their opposition to apartheid, much of the world banned South Africans from visiting. You couldn't go to most of Africa, communist eastern Europe, China or many countries in the Middle East. The UK passport that I have held for 28 years opens many more countries' doors, often without a visa.

But the value of British nationality could be about to plunge, according to a Quality of Nationality Index published last week. This is because not only does UK nationality, at present, come with a passport waved through airports in much of the world; it also confers the freedom to live and work in the 31 other countries of the EU and the European Free Trade Association — and that right may be about to disappear, or at least be restricted, after Brexit. So which country's nationality is most valued?

France's, according to the index, and that has been true for the past eight years. Many of us enjoy a ranking. Most of them, like those that list the “most liveable cities”, are largely subjective, depending on what you value: quiet prosperity or crowds and cosmopolitan culture. I expected this nationality index to be the same, but as I delved I felt there was a little more to it. The compilers are Dimitry Kochenov, a European constitutional law professor at Groningen university, and Christian Kaelin, chairman of Henley & Partners, which advises governments and individuals in the controversial area of “citizenship through investment”.

They rightly consider that it is not only the freedom to travel and settle elsewhere that makes a person's nationality valuable. Nationality of a country also gives you the right to live there. Its stability, freedom and opportunities count for a lot, too. But the particular advantage of having a European passport is that if your country is in trouble, you can move to somewhere nearby. So the top 32 countries on the index are the EU and EFTA countries.

France does better than countries such as Germany and the Netherlands because its citizens can also live in some of the country's former colonies. This emphasis on mobility results in nationalities of even the poorer EU countries ranking higher than those from elsewhere. Greek nationality ranks higher than Australian because, while Australia is wealthier and economically more stable, an Australian passport admits you to live in fewer other places if you want to leave.

The wealthy non-European democracies do rank highly: the US, Japan, Canada and Australia sit just below the EU and EFTA countries. The bottom four slots are occupied by countries that are both in a dire state and offer passports that do not easily allow their citizens an escape: Syria, South Sudan, Afghanistan and Somalia. What might happen to the UK's position — currently eighth — after Brexit? It depends on what sort of Brexit it is.

A hard Brexit could deprive UK citizens of the automatic right to work and live in the EU and EFTA — “a collection of the most highly developed places on earth”, the report says. It is hard to argue with this. If you are a supporter of Brexit, you want freedom of movement to end. Even a relatively

permissive right to move within Europe after Brexit would be more restricted than what UK citizens currently enjoy.

As the authors say: “The UK may be about to establish a world record in terms of profoundly undermining the quality of its nationality without going through any violent conflict.” If an economic downturn follows Brexit, the value of UK nationality — freedom of movement plus prosperity — could decline further. But, I said to the people at Henley & Partners, if French nationality is so much more desirable than British, why do so many people risk their lives to cross the English Channel from France to the UK?

Those people are illegal immigrants, Henley said. They are not nationals of either country. This study is about nationality, not residence. All the same, whether because of the English language, the ease of working illegally or a relative tolerance for outsiders, Britain looks set to retain some attractions, regardless of Brexit.