Global collaboration on border management

Tony Smith

I decided to join the board of BORDERPOL upon my retirement from public service because I know how important it is for border control agencies to work together globally on border management and border security issues.

Having served as head of Ports and Border Management in Canada from 2000–03 (spanning the 9/11 period), and as head of UK Ports in the UK Immigration Service from 2005–07 (spanning the 7/7 period, when London suffered its worst terrorist attack in history) – I have spent a lot of time discussing border security issues with heads of ports and borders authorities in other countries.

Uniquely, BORDERPOL seeks to bring together border leaders from all corners of the globe behind a common purpose – to make the world a safer place by improving intelligence-led border controls. BORDERPOL’s motto is ‘we extend our fame by our deeds’ – as such we work tirelessly to bring border agencies together to share intelligence and best practice.

In the world of border control we are all facing the same challenge. Globalisation means that more people are travelling to more countries than ever before. Air traffic is growing year on year. Ships get bigger and bigger. Transnational rail links continue to grow.

In many ways it is good that more people and more goods are moving across our borders. This helps our economic and cultural growth. But, sadly, border control agencies still face significant challenges from groups and individuals that want to harm us. Criminals and terrorists do not respect borders. Their aim is to undermine us to further their own personal motives, causing misery and suffering to innocent people. Our mission is to stop them – but without inhibiting the movement of genuine traffic.

Furthermore, most border agencies have felt the force of economic recession. Governments have been cutting resources. Staffing levels have not kept up with increases in traffic in many countries. We are being asked to do more with less and to find new solutions to long-term problems.

Many governments are also reviewing their border structures in a constant search to find the best operational model to deliver border controls effectively and efficiently. Agencies come and go.
New ones are formed and old ones discontinued. Leaders move on, to be replaced by the next generation. But through all this, the challenge remains. So, how can we work together on a higher level to promote safe and secure borders across the world?

The key lies in closer cross-border collaboration. One country’s inbound traffic is another country’s outbound traffic. One country’s imports are another country’s exports. We face common enemies – smugglers, human traffickers, international criminals and terrorists. And we share the same mission: to facilitate genuine traffic and to stop harmful traffic. These are the foundations upon which BORDERPOL is built.

Of course, this does not mean that all countries are the same. We all have our own geographical and political dimensions to contend with. In today’s world, the modern border cannot be ‘controlled’ or ‘owned’ by any one person or agency. A country’s border is owned by its people and controlled by their leaders on their behalf. The people demand high standards. They expect their border to be the first line of defence in keeping them safe. If a border is penetrated by criminals and terrorists, then border agencies will be held to account. At the same time, people want to be able to cross their border freely and easily. Security and border checks will be tolerated, but there is a threshold. If queues get too long, or delays accrue, people get agitated. So we need to keep the queues moving without compromising security.

If we fail in this mission, the repercussions are significant. The 9/11 report suggested that as many as 15 of the 19 hijackers were potentially vulnerable to interception by border authorities. By contrast, the attacks on the London transport system on 7/7 were perpetrated by ‘home-grown’ terrorists who were themselves UK nationals. Some of these individuals had travelled to other countries to attend terrorist training camps. In response, both the USA and the UK took significant steps to ensure much closer operations in different regions of the world.

Fortunately though, global collaboration is also on the increase. Standards are getting better. Following the excellent work done by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), there are now universal machine-readable travel documents, which greatly aid security and facilitation at borders. ICAO is now extending its remit to look at global passport issuance standards and to improve the security of passport checks. The International Air Transportation Authority (IATA) has joined forces with Airports Council International (ACI) to develop ‘smart security’ as a follow up to the ‘checkpoint of the future’, using passenger data to inform security risks at airports. The excellent IATA/Control Authorities Working Group (CAWG) – which developed the original framework for document checks by airlines – continues to thrive. The World Customs Organization (WCO) continues to lead best practice for Customs Agencies. And there are now regional groups, such as the Five Country Conference (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the USA), APEC, the EU and ASEANAPOL, with a mission to share best practice and intelligence across international borders.

However, only BORDERPOL covers all regions of the world in driving best practice in border controls. What’s more, BORDERPOL has a leadership board with vast experience of leading border operations in different regions of the world.

As international liaison director at BORDERPOL, it is my aim to bring together as many border leaders as often as possible to promote mutual discussion and support. Experience shows just how valuable this can be. BORDERPOL believes that we are stronger together than we are alone. And by our deeds, we will extend our fame.

TONY SMITH is international liaison director for BORDERPOL (www.borderpol.org). He retired as director general of the UK Border Force in 2013 after 40 years of distinguished service in the UK government. He holds the unique distinction of being head of ports and borders in two different countries – Canada and the UK. He was awarded the prestigious order of Commander of the British Empire by HM Queen Elizabeth II for his services to border security during the London 2012 Olympic Games.