the real headline about immigration into the United Kingdom is not what a disaster it has been, but what an enormous success. Our society has assimilated immigration and multi-culturalism with a degree of tolerance that is somewhat overshadowed by extreme cases and occasional flashpoints.

Where conflict has been stirred up, it is often over a question of race rather than immigration per se. Compared with the great Caribbean and Indian sub-continent inflows of the 1960s and 1970s, the free movement of labour within the enlarged EU is a dawdle in sociological terms; no matter how hard the promoters of fear and hate try to stoke the embers.

For our own area, immigration on any significant scale is a very recent phenomenon and it has proved to be an overwhelmingly beneficial one. Large parts of the Highlands and Islands economy are now dependent on labour recruited from elsewhere in Europe. There would not be many fish farms, for example, operating without them while Polish plumbers and Bulgarian builders have permeated the further corners of the west, to mutual benefit.

So I don’t think we should be worrying too much about the spectre that is conjured up by avuncular Central Europeans descending upon us in unprecedented numbers. It just isn’t true. Indeed, I am happy to acknowledge my own small part in making it possible, from my days in Government early in the previous decade.

At that time, I was on a cross-Departmental Whitelaw committee which was looking ahead to the implications of EU enlargement. The Home Office paper on immigration advocated restricting it (insofar as it was within their powers to do so) to the professional classes.

This seemed to me entirely inequitable and I took the view that ordinary working people should equally benefit from the free movement of labour within the EU – just as our own ordinary working people should be able to do so in the other direction. Along with

benign areas, if that balance changed, it is a phenomenon we would handle with any greater equanimity than the rest of the UK. We should be too certain until we experience it.

And that takes me on to the proposed “different immigration policy” in which more people would be allowed to enter Scotland and to remain. This is probably possible if one accepts the inevitability of border controls. But without border controls, it is a complete non-starter and it says little for the quality of debate that this is even a matter of dispute.

All the evidence suggests that every ten immigrants who arrived in new-liberalised Scotland, nine would turn south for the otherwise “more difficult to enter” state below, with its economic magnets in the south-east, for every one who turned north for the cosmopolitan delights of Inverness or the work-rich rural idyls of the north-west.

The idea that the state to the south would stand idly by while this transpired, and while the same illegal immigrants were doing the same thing in the north, is simply absurd. It is no credit to anyone to deny that there is a choice between a “more liberal immigration policy” than what remained of the UK and border controls between the two (by then separate) jurisdictions.

And the problem with border controls is that if they exist for one, then for a lesser or greater degree they exist for all. Borders create the incentive for illegal trades, otherwise not existing, as well as smuggling, in both goods and people. Unless we had exactly the same immigration laws as the rest of our small island, that too would have to be protected against by our neighbours to the south.

If Scotland wanted to promote a more liberal immigration policy, then the best way to do it is by influencing the attitudes and philosophy of the UK as a whole. We can testify to the fact that we can do it, despite the evidence presented to me by Daily Mail headline writers but has done no harm, I think, to the economy and bloodstock of the West Highlands and Islands.

Every airport operated by Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd — with the exception of Sumburgh — recorded a fall in passenger numbers last month.

The latest figures show that HIAL’s 11 airports recorded 99,039 passengers in November, a drop of 2.6 per cent on November 2012. Barra Airport recorded a 14.5 per cent drop, largely because the local council axe the aircraft’s air link with the rest of the Western Isles. Benbecula suffered a 10.3 per cent drop because the council halved the number of flights to and from Stornoway, while Stornoway saw a 1.7 per cent reduction. Sumburgh recorded an increase of 11.9 per cent.

Inglis Lyon, managing director of HIAL, said: “Last month’s result were not unexpected following the conclusion of the Chevron helicopter contract at Wick John O’Groat, which has fuelled significant growth. The team at Wick have worked tremendously hard to establish the airport as a hub for the energy sector and the presence of Chevron has been a fantastic shot in the arm for the airport, and for the local community.

Having proved that it has the ability to service the oil and gas sector, we are confident that the airport can continue to attract new energy-sector business to the area and we are working closely with local business groups to achieve this ambition.

Elsewhere, passenger numbers in the Western Isles airports have been affected by reduced capacity on inter-island services, while the reduction in scheduled services to London City, introduced last month, was felt at Dundee.”

Ledgowan Estate seek to justify heavy-handed approach to security

Ledgowan Estate in Wester Ross have confirmed their policy of requesting contact details for people walking on the property, saying security concerns underlie existence of this heavy-handed approach.

Details of the estate’s access policy were included in an open letter handed to residents in Achnasheen recently, which also provided an account of a recent run-in with walkers.

The access policy states that all walkers met on Ledgowan will be asked for contact details, adding: “If this is not forthcoming or staff consider there is any reason for doubt they will take a photograph of the individuals and or their vehicle.”

The following points are also listed:

- no one is denied access – we abide by the law
- no one is allowed to walk in the cartilage of our property
- gates will remain locked due to security concerns (citing thefts and keeping security costs)

These policies are said to be in response to thefts, signs being pulled off gates, and the shooting of a rare black-throated diver by Loch Gowan in July which, the letter notes, “had nothing to do with the estate staff”.

Under estate policy, “in line with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code”, dogs must be kept on a lead or at heel during the ground-nesting bird season — from April to July.

In addition, safaris are available to take people on the hill roads “to view wildlife”, possibly explaining the use of 18 kilometres of track – measuring five-metres across – which have been dug into the hillside above Achnasheen.

The letter also states: “We are concerned that a stalker coming off the hill with a rifle is a vulnerable target for malicious people who may be out to cause trouble.”

In October, Glenmoriston resident Dr Ken Brown recounted how he and his wife, Maureen, were walking on the estate when they were attacked by a man later identified as Richard Simpson, son of Ledgowan owner Andrew Simpson – who demanded to know what they were doing on the property.

On seeing the estate policy, Dr Brown commented: “I have no idea whether the Ledgowan Estate’s own ‘access code’ is the result of ignorance about the existing official guidance on responsible access or contempt for it; the latter seems the more likely in light of our experience of Simpson’s behaviour. For instance, dogs have to be under control, not on a lead. Under control means that they will walk next to you when required to, not that they always must do so.”

“On 5th October, there was absolutely nothing to say that stalking was in progress that day, though on our return visit on 30th November we saw that stalking notices had been placed on newly-paddocked gates and we photographed them.”

Bridge Community Centre land award from STV Appeal

Stornoway’s Bridge Community Centre have received a £2,000 cash boost courtesy of the STV Appeal 2013.

The youth and community group aims to increase the amount of opportunities for young people to play and socialise and used the money to fund excursions.

Sophie Maclean, youth worker at the Bridge Community Centre, said: “With the money granted from the STV Appeal we were able to provide a wide range of free trips and activities for the youth club. These included ten-pin bowling, decorating ceramic plates and ornaments, using the golf driving range, arts and crafts activities, as well as sports, pampering and movie afternoons, all of which were really enjoyed by the young people and volunteers who helped out.”

He added: “Without the support of the STV Appeal we wouldn’t have been able to offer these free activities for the young people.”