

# Labour Government sets out to close Britain's borders to refugees

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The Labour Government's White Paper, published on July 27, denies fundamental democratic rights to tens of thousands of refugees living in Britain. It goes much further than the draconian measures introduced under the previous Conservative government.

Home Secretary Jack Straw said the new policies were 'faster, fairer and firmer'. In reality the measures place more restrictions on the movement of asylum seekers than those governing the activities of Jews in the early days of Nazi Germany. Labour claims its decision to grant 30,000 refugees leave to remain in Britain represents progress. But 10,000 of these are applicants whose asylum claims date back to before 1993 and who can claim the right to remain in any case. A further 20,000 who applied between 1993 and 1995 will only be granted four years' stay if they are not presently subject to removal orders. This is an attempt to clear a backlog of an estimated 75,000 asylum applications.

The remaining asylum seekers are to be dispersed to approved hostels and bed-and-breakfast accommodation throughout Britain. They will have no say regarding where they are sent. Their accommodation will no longer be provided by local councils but through private provision and voluntary organisations opening them up to exploitation by unscrupulous landlords.

Extra Home Office officials are to be drafted to Manchester, Glasgow, Leeds and Bristol to oversee the dispersal of asylum seekers to these areas. The impact of this will be to isolate immigrants from their relatives and long-established communities, as well as limiting their access to legal advice and translation services.

Refugees living in London could be forced to lodge applications in areas such as Scotland, at their own expense. The previous Conservative government first

proposed the measures but they were shelved following protests and opposition, including from the Labour Party.

Home Secretary Straw has modelled these measures on procedures that exist in Germany. There, the deployment of refugees into isolated immigrant hostels made them easy targets for fascist assaults, including fire bombing causing several deaths, including children. Labour's plans can only encourage such attacks in Britain.

Many will be banned from working during their appeal. They will not receive normal social security benefits while their cases are decided. Minimal cash payments will be made, but most refugees will be forced to live on food vouchers.

Changes proposed to the appeals process will further curtail the rights of immigrants to challenge unfair decisions. Asylum seekers will be given just five days, instead of the 25 days at present, to make representations after their first interview. At present an asylum seeker can appeal to the Home Office against an unfavourable decision regarding their claim. They can also appeal against an order made to deport them, and as a last resort can seek a judicial review in the courts on a point of law.

Under the new proposals, a refugee will have only one appeal, to the Home Office, the department responsible for making the original decision, and will lose any right to have their case reviewed in a court of law.

Straw claims this is fair on the spurious grounds that those deported can re-enter within three years and make a new claim. Needless to say, those deported to repressive countries will have no chance of returning in three years time. Some refugees will no longer have the right to make an oral appeal, and decisions can be made

on written applications alone. The government plans to deal with applications within 2-6 months. One of the reasons cited by Straw for this 'fast-track' approach is that an extended process of appeal increases the likelihood of 'bogus' applicants marrying and having children, making it more difficult to throw them out.

Other measures include:

- Those who wish to visit their family in Britain for specific events will need to post financial bonds, refundable once they have left the country.

- Statutory legislation to curb 'unscrupulous' immigration advisors and the implementation of a code of practice in checking illegal working. Without producing any evidence, Straw claims that immigration advisors have links with organised crime and help asylum seekers concoct their reasons for staying.

- Extending police powers to immigration officers, including greater use of finger printing. Immigration officials will now have the same powers as prison officers.

- An increase in the number of detention centres, with the sop of providing a bail hearing within seven days and written explanation for detention.

- The creation of airline liaison officers at foreign ports. British officials will be sent overseas and asylum seekers will be forced to make their applications to these officers at the point of departure. However, as many refugees are forced to leave their own country under a false identity and in great personal danger this measure will open them up to attack if they are turned down.

The Labour government preceded these measures by making wild claims that immigrants are 'swamping' Britain as it is regarded as a 'soft target'. Michael O'Brien, Minister for Immigration, said in Parliament last week that there would be the equivalent of a jumbo-jet full of asylum seekers flooding into Britain each day unless something was done.

Statistics reveal a different story. Immigration control is already so stringent that the majority of refugees are denied access. Of the 32,000 asylum applicants in 1997, 29,000 were refused.

Immigrants are regularly blamed for placing a strain on public spending for vital social services. Straw said of the new measures, 'What the genuine asylum seeker needs is food and shelter, not a Giro cheque.' Yet the costs of providing basic services for refugees is

minuscule, estimated at £450 million a year, inclusive of benefits and appeals.

The potential savings each year by slashing the welfare rights of immigrants cannot resolve the pressing social needs of millions throughout Britain for decent housing, education and health. Labour's policies are ideologically driven. For all Labour's claims during the last election that it was the party of social inclusiveness, its programme is creating ever-deeper social divisions between the 'haves' and the 'have-nots'. The assault on the democratic rights of immigrants is coupled with the destruction of democratic and social rights of all working people. The witch-hunt being mounted against immigrants is aimed at preventing a united struggle against this.

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