

British Immigration and Asylum Bill

Labour government averts backbench rebellion

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As British Home Secretary Jack Straw addressed a specially convened meeting of Labour MPs Wednesday evening, confirmation had just been received that the Yugoslav government had agreed to the peace terms laid down by the G8. After 78 days of NATO's non-stop bombing, British Prime Minister Tony Blair was trumpeting the victory of this great "humanitarian effort" on behalf of displaced Kosovar Albanians.

Straw's job was to disperse the storm cloud gathering on the horizon threatening to spoil the government's celebrations. The new Immigration and Asylum Bill is due to be debated next week, and backbench Labour MPs were threatening a revolt against its draconian provisions. This promised to be bigger than that in May, when 65 voted against plans to restrict disability benefits.

The new bill further restricts the right to asylum and withdraws legal rights and welfare payments to asylum-seekers. The ability to seek a Judicial Review of decisions on asylum applications is to be eliminated, leaving only an appeal to the immigration department, the same authority that refused the initial asylum request. The period for making an appeal will be reduced from 28 to 5 days, effectively preventing fresh evidence being gathered. The bill also calls for detention to be the norm "where removal is imminent". Asylum-seekers will be dispersed around the country and denied disposable income, with a voucher system largely replacing cash benefits. This will leave adults with just £1 a day and children with 50p.

Immigration Officers are to be given powers normally reserved for the police, including fingerprinting and the right to enter property on the pretext of suspected "immigration offences". The bill recommends that

checks on status at work by Immigration Officers first introduced by the previous Conservative government in 1996 be retained. All those from ethnic minorities can expect to be subject to harassment under the guise of such checks.

Around 100 Labour MPs had indicated that they might possibly support an amendment to the bill proposed by Neil Gerrard. This did not challenge the substance of the proposed measures, but sought to exempt asylum-seekers with families from the voucher system and restore their right to benefits. Nevertheless, its passage could have led to the government's first defeat in the House of Commons since it was elected. Straw was entrusted with preventing a public embarrassment for the Blair leadership due to so large a section of the parliamentary party complaining of a lack of compassion towards asylum-seekers—90 percent of whom come from war zones like Bosnia and Kosovo.

It did not cost him much to ensure the return of the majority of the "rebels" to the fold. Judas cut a better deal.

Straw merely had to promise an extra £3 a week for adult asylum-seekers and to pay the same £10 weekly amount for each child. This involves no extra expenditure, as it will be paid for by a corresponding cut in the value of food and clothing vouchers. The entire package is set at 70 percent of Britain's minimal welfare levels, meaning asylum-seekers will be paid *below* the official poverty line.

Straw's other supposed concession to the concerned voices within the party was more ominous—he promised to speed up the processing of family asylum requests. He announced that implementation of a "fast-track" system already planned for family cases would be

brought forward by 12 months, to April 2000. Under the new procedure there is a six-month limit on the completion of all hearings and appeals. This “humanitarian gesture” means that most asylum-seekers will be kicked out of the country all the sooner. Straw also moved to tighten present regulations in order to make it easier to return asylum-seekers with no right to stay in Britain to other countries in the European Union.

The response to Straw's slight modification to the combination of xenophobia and authoritarianism contained in the new bill was exemplified by Gwyneth Dunwoody, MP, who said he had “managed to deal with the very urgent worries we have had”. Another unnamed Labour MP said, "There was a widespread view that Jack has met our concerns."

There will still be a token protest next week by some on the “hard left” rump of the party, but the bill will likely pass into law. Buoyed by the utter lack of principle and backbone amongst his own backbenchers, Blair declared, “There's no doubt at all we are going to carry on reforming asylum and immigration in this country.”



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