

British Home Secretary pushes through scheme to disperse asylum-seekers

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25 August 1999

Britain's Labour government is fanning the flames of racial prejudice in an effort to justify its Asylum and Immigration Bill and outdo the Conservative opposition.

Home Secretary Jack Straw arrived back from his holiday on Monday to announce an "emergency" scheme enabling him to set a limit on the number of asylum-seekers that each individual Local Authority in England and Wales must accommodate. Those refugees who wish to live in areas that have already reached their limit will be dispersed to other parts of the country. Labour's Asylum Bill, due to take effect next April, already contains this provision, but Straw has deemed that the current situation warrants its introduction as early as possible—from November when the Bill receives Royal Assent.

The "schedule eight" provision will apply to all asylum-seekers who do not claim refugee status the moment they arrived in Britain. It empowers Straw to direct them to live in particular towns and cities, and to allow their transfer from "overburdened" Local Authorities to other towns.

The document outlining the new measure is designed to establish "clusters" of refugees based on a proposed ratio of one asylum-seeker to every 200 members of the "resident population".

The move follows several months of highly publicised diatribes by the local media in Kent and from Tory politicians against "floods" of asylum applicants "swamping" the southeast of England. These xenophobic remarks led to a series of attacks on asylum-seekers in the Dover area, culminating in a weekend of violent fighting between immigrants and white youths.

The national media and the political establishment went on to portray the clashes as the inevitable result of disrupting "monocultural communities"—i.e., white

towns—by introducing different ethnic groups. The deputy leader of Tory-dominated Kent County Council, Keith Ferrin, put it most bluntly, saying, "The locals have simply been asked to cope with too much.... There are now a lot of people who are obviously different, who look different and act different."

Straw concurred with Ferrin's sentiments in his first interview on the subject, with BBC Radio on Monday. Having visited Dover some three weeks ago, he explained, "there is no question" that Dover's immigration staff and its "citizenry" are "under very severe pressure". His emergency scheme would alleviate such pressures, he claimed.

Some representatives of the Local Authorities have accused Straw of issuing dictatorial orders and of fuelling anti-immigrant hysteria. Sir Jeremy Beecham, chairman of the Local Government Association, said Straw "has perhaps inadvertently fed the hysteria that's being promoted in certain sections of the press and by certain opposition politicians. We haven't got a huge crisis in terms of the country being overrun with refugees and asylum-seekers." Rachel Rees, Communications Director for the Refugee Council, said, "What's deeply worrying is first the daily knee-jerk reactions which further vilify asylum-seekers and secondly that politicians continue to pour petrol on the debate when their responsibility is to take the heat out of it."

Emboldened by Labour's response, the Tory Party demanded even tougher measures against refugees. Speaking on BBC1's *Breakfast with Frost* programme on Sunday, Shadow Home Affairs spokesperson Ann Widdecombe said: "The signals that have been sent out over the last couple of years are that Britain is now a soft touch, that things have been relaxed from how they were, and that if you come here it is going to be a fairly

easy place to disappear because it is a fairly easy place to work illegally.

"The thing to remember is that of the 44,000 applications we are now getting, about 80 percent will not make a case not only for asylum nor even for compassionate leave to remain. It is not that we have an enormous influx of genuine people. We have some genuine people who are suffering from being clogged up in the system with bogus applicants."

The Immigration Service Union (ISU) also jumped on the bandwagon, releasing figures claiming to show that applications for asylum would be up by nearly 50 percent this year "to a record 68,000". Martin Slade, ISU General Secretary, said, "The point of immigration control is to control immigration. We don't think that we're controlling anything.... It is like the Dutch boy with his finger in the dyke. We are shipping people from one end of the country to the other but people are still pouring in." He went on to reiterate Widdecombe's claims that "easy" access to benefits and illegal work was encouraging "bogus" refugees to descend on Britain.

Keen to disprove the "soft touch" charge, Straw countered by showing that there had been 24,000 applications in the first five months of this year—including refugees from Kosovo—as against 46,000 for the whole of last year. He boasted that the UK was ranked eleventh out of 15 European Union countries in terms of asylum-seekers as a proportion of the population, and that the new Asylum Bill would further deter applications. Under the bill, all asylum-seekers will receive vouchers—rather than cash benefits—for food and clothing.

Conservative-controlled authorities have complained that the new measures would increase the proportion of refugees in their towns. The 1 to 200 ratio in the Kent area, for example, would mean the authority almost doubling the number of asylum cases it must take responsibility for—exposing the claim that it is over-saturated. Stripped of the hysteria and false figures, the root demand of such authorities is for a "whites-only" residency policy. Sections of the media have even warned that the target of 1 per 200 would "spark protests by local people", demanding that Straw keep asylum-seekers out. Pandering to the Tory councils, Labour has made clear that its "dispersal" plans will focus on those areas that already have large ethnic

minority populations—the more working class and poorer districts in large towns and cities.

Such arguments are not new for the Tory Party, which is notorious for playing the "race card". In the 1960s, Conservative MP Enoch Powell made his infamous "rivers of blood" speech, directed against newly arrived Asian immigrants. Tory Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher claimed that immigrants were "swamping Britain" in the 1980s. The party has been unable to recover from its wipe-out in the 1997 General Election and exists as a divided and largely ineffective political rump. This makes it ever more reliant on racism as a means of mobilising the most backward and reactionary social forces.

More noteworthy is the Labour Party's willingness to compete on the same agenda. Its response testifies not so much to electoral considerations—it currently holds an overwhelming majority in Parliament—but to the full extent of its right-wing degeneration.



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