

Dover, England refugees become focus of chauvinist campaign

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The south of England coastal port of Dover was the scene of violent confrontations between local youths and refugees last Saturday. The annual fun fair, held near the town centre, was the setting for the disturbances.

Kent police reported that clashes started after a group of local youths had baited male asylum-seekers the previous day. Six locals were admitted to hospital later with knife wounds to their arms and faces. Later that evening three young Kosovars were set upon and severely beaten by a gang of local youth.

Five more locals were admitted to hospital with stab wounds the following night after a group of refugees ran across the bumper car ride brandishing knives. A 15-year-old boy told how he was attacked after the refugees mistook him for one of those involved in the beating the previous night. Among the wounded was a 13-year-old girl who needed 40 stitches to her shoulder.

Dover is the temporary home of asylum-seekers from eastern Europe and Kurds from Turkey and Iraq who arrive in the port. Most are housed in run-down bread and breakfast hotels whilst their applications are processed.

Refugees fleeing war in their home country have been subjected to constant harassment upon reaching England. Over the last two years, refugees' windows have been smashed and graffiti daubed on the walls of their accommodation threatening arson attacks. Racist slogans such as "Slovakia scum" can be seen around the town.

Only last month, a Kurdish refugee and his landlady were beaten up on the steps of a hotel by a gang of white men. The editor of the twin local papers, the *Dover Express* and the *Folkestone Herald*, was threatened with prosecution for racial incitement unless it stopped publishing inflammatory articles. Last October the paper ran an editorial describing refugees as "human sewage." Its letters page has continued to provide a platform for immigrant baiting. A regular contributor, writing under the unassuming description of a "local resident", later turned out to be a former Immigration Officer.

The fascist National Front has moved into the area and attempted to stage a series of demonstrations calling for the deportation of all refugees.

Such antagonisms are by no means exclusive to Dover. On Sunday, Kosovar refugees in the west of England were attacked by an axe-wielding gang. One man described how he had been watching television at his home in the Rose Hill district of Oxford when a huge stone came crashing through the window, showering him with glass. Another refugee explained that the ordeal lasted several hours: "It was terrifying. We couldn't go outside because we would have been killed. The mob used iron bars and axes to hit four cars parked outside. They were yelling at us."

The despair this aroused was summed up by another: "We left our country because of things like this and now I am here it is the same. I thought Britain was going to be a safe place, but it's worse. I feel like I would have to go to the moon to find peace."

The racism that encourages such violent outbursts was all too evident in the daily newspapers on Monday. The *Daily Mail* ran with the headline "Fears as Asylum Seeker Clashes Erupt", "Dover explodes in refugee violence" and the *Daily Telegraph* with "Razor mob town 'set to explode'".

Whilst virtually ignoring the catalogue of abuse and harassment meted out to refugees, the media seized upon the weekend's events to brand asylum-seekers as criminals.

Resentment and prejudice was portrayed as a legitimate response by the local population. Such bigotry has been deliberately enflamed by the media with their claims that refugees are overrunning Britain. Adjectives such as "tides" and "floods" are routinely used to describe the rate of new entrants. Similarly, the reports sweepingly dismiss the conditions that the refugees are seeking to escape. Epithets such as "bogus" or "illegal" have become semi-permanent prefixes to the words "asylum-seeker" or "immigrant".

While such depictions are by no means new, they have become frenzied in the last weeks. The media has been dominated by images of refugees sheltering in makeshift camps in the French port of Calais—supposedly waiting to enter Dover concealed in lorries. Britain is described as the "soft touch" of Europe—taking those refugees that no other country on the continent will accept.

A fortnight before the recent disturbances, the leader of Tory-dominated Kent County Council sent a letter to the new Immigration Minister, Barbara Roche, demanding action against the refugees. In the three page letter, Sandy Bruce-Lockhart complained: "The area has virtually no prior history of multi-cultural diversity, local people feel increasingly 'swamped' and resentful—and this is leading to increased confrontation and incidents, some of which are violent and probably racially motivated.... It is no exaggeration to say that in parts of Dover it is a tinder box atmosphere and we are increasingly fearful that it could culminate in a fatal confrontation or arson attack."

Statistics on the number of refugees living in the town and county are subject to vast exaggeration. According to official figures quoted in the *Daily Express* newspaper (August 16), there are currently 442 asylum-seekers in Dover and approximately 1,500 in the whole of Kent. The census taken in 1991 put the population in Dover at 103,216 and 1,508,873 for the Administrative County of Kent. Taken as a percentage of the total population, the number of refugees amount to less than 1 percent, yet Bruce-Lockhart maintains that this is intolerably high. The underlying xenophobia was even more

transparent with the deputy leader of the County Council, Keith Ferrin, who stated: "I think the locals have simply been asked to cope with too much. There are too many of them. There are now a lot of people who are obviously different, who look different and act different."

The refugees also provide a convenient scapegoat for the underfunding of social services. Constant references have been made to the £11 million spent annually by the Kent County Council on asylum-seekers—creating the impression that this is being siphoned off from other cash-strapped areas of provision. However, the majority of the refugees have been sent to Kent from London Local Authorities, who are financially responsible for the refugees' housing and social costs, reimbursing other councils and authorities that take on their case loads.

Nationally, the Conservative Party has decided to use the issue of refugees and immigrants as a political football. They condemn the Labour government for opening the "floodgates" which they kept tightly closed when in office. Never ones for passing up the opportunity to stir up racial divisions, the party dispatched Home Affairs spokesperson Ann Widdecombe to Dover where she toured the fun fair denouncing Labour's supposedly weak border controls.

"The message this Government has sent out is that Britain is a soft touch, which is the reason for this massive rise in asylum seekers, which caused the current problems," she railed.

Widdecombe's "soft touch" is in reference to Labour's decision, following its 1997 election victory, to grant leave to remain to 20,000 asylum-seekers in cases where a decision was still pending. This charge is particularly fatuous, given the fact that it was announced alongside a raft of new measures against asylum-seekers more draconian in their scope than those implemented by the former Tory government.

Labour's Immigration and Asylum Bill, due to come into effect later this year, will further restrict legal rights and welfare provisions. Welfare benefits are to be replaced by a voucher scheme and a policy euphemistically entitled "designated housing". Rather than being permanently housed in areas with strong community ties, refugees will be dispersed around the country in temporary accommodation. This policy has already been practised by Local Authorities, particularly in London, that have sent refugees out to provincial town, cities or coastal resorts where accommodation is cheaper.

The measures will isolate refugees. It will also create difficulties for them in receiving the specialist help and experienced legal advice they require, as many of the areas to which they could be sent do not have the necessary facilities.

For its part, the Labour government has made clear that such circumstances are deliberately intended by the new legislation. They are the "deterrent" component of the new proposals, aimed at preventing asylum-seekers from looking for sanctuary in the first place.

A recent study conducted by the Institute of Race Relations and the Joseph Rowntree Trust has found a direct link between such policies and an increase in anti-immigrant violence. Research was carried out in 10 European countries—Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Holland, Spain, Belgium, Italy, Norway, Switzerland and Austria—which have already introduced similar measures.

The findings warned that the creation of "designated accommodation" for refugees invariably results in attacks by far-right groups. Its use in Germany has already led to neo-Nazis burning down asylum hostels. In one of the most notorious cases in 1996 at a hostel

in Lubeck, Schleswig-Holstein, 10 asylum-seekers were killed and 38 injured in an arson attack by the far-right.

Firebomb attacks have also occurred in Holland, Sweden and Norway. The report states that attitudes towards asylum-seekers have become more hostile in countries since the new laws were introduced.

In February this year, a proposed asylum centre at Limburgian Meersen in Holland was subjected to two arson attacks. In Denmark a centre designated for asylum-seekers was razed to the ground only weeks before it was due to be occupied.

The voucher scheme has also led to such a callous approach to refugees that they have been denied urgent medical treatment—with sometimes fatal consequences. In Belgium last year a 26-year-old Turkish Kurd died of acute tonsillitis after being denied medical attention because he had no health insurance. In April 1995, a baby died from lack of oxygen in Caserta, Italy. The doctor had refused to help the child's mother, a Zairean, while she was in labour, and told her to get a private doctor. Many other instances are cited in the report.

Despite this, the Labour government shows no qualms in pressing ahead with its plans. The plight of refugees in Dover is being manipulated to justify these harsh measures. The government response to events in Kent has been to evacuate hundreds of refugees to far-flung corners of the country. Local Authorities in many northern cities such as Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool have been urged to accommodate those being removed from the town.

Lord Bassam, a Home Office minister, stated, "We need to prevent the large numbers of asylum-seekers coming here that have in the past. We are very conscious of that and we've been working very closely with officials abroad, particularly in France, to try and see the problem off before it actually arrives on these shores."

Rather than counter the ugly racism being stoked up by the Tories, the Labour MP for Dover acted as an echo chamber. Gwyn Prosser stated, "There has been a tendency to label them as criminals or economic migrants, but it is a lot of people to absorb." He added that the Immigration and Asylum Bill would "allow the dispersal of asylum seekers around the country, and also speed up the whole process, putting off would-be economic migrants."

The governments attitude to anti-immigrant chauvinism is in marked contrast to the "anti-racist" values it espoused during the war against Serbia. During the bombardment of Yugoslavia, Prime Minister Blair justified the action on the grounds that this was necessary to put a halt to "ethnic cleansing." The government even rationalised its reluctance to accept refugees fleeing from the conflict on the grounds that it would "aid and abet" ethnic cleansing.

Subsequent events have further exposed official attitudes. When it comes to immigration and asylum policy, the driving out of peoples with a different culture, language or identity is defended by virtually the entire British establishment.



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