

British government advances quota system for housing asylum-seekers

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The response of Britain's Labour government to clashes between local residents and asylum-seekers in Dover this month is a proposal to introduce a quota system regulating the housing of refugees by local authorities.

Home Secretary Jack Straw last week announced an “upper limit” on the number of asylum-seekers that each local authority in England and Wales will have to take—of 1 per 200 of the resident population. Asylum-seekers who apply to live in areas that have reached their limit will be sent to other parts of the country, he promised. Plans to disperse up to 20,000 asylum-seekers and their families around England and Wales would be moved forward six months and come into effect in November, as soon as the new Immigration and Asylum Bill comes into force.

Straw's proposed 0.5 percent limit follows a campaign by the Conservatives, the press and local authorities claiming that asylum-seekers are unduly burdening London and the Southeast. A chorus—led by Tory Home Affairs spokesperson Ann Widdecombe—has used events in Dover to claim that Britain is being “swamped” by bogus asylum-seekers from Eastern Europe and the Balkans. The Blair government's response has added fuel to the racist fire.

The port of Dover is situated in the county of Kent. Both the town and county authorities have been vocal in claims that the recent violence is due to them being “overburdened” with asylum-seekers. To Straw's obvious embarrassment, the Conservatives and the press were quick to point out that his proposed quota would mean Kent taking responsibility for more asylum-seekers, not less. At present, Kent has around 5,000 asylum-seekers, but using Straw's formula its quota would be around 7,800—2,800 higher. Dover, which has a population of 104,000, would be expected to take 539

asylum-seekers—more than its present refugee population of 442.

The Conservative leader of Westminster Council, Melvyn Caplan, immediately declared that the plan would not cut the number of asylum-seekers in Central London, and that Westminster's proposed limit of 1,060 asylum-seekers was very close to the current number of 1,100. Robert Goodwill, Conservative MEP for Yorkshire and the Humber, said of the plan to disperse Dover's asylum-seekers, “It seems they want to move the troublemakers out of the area and dump them on us.”

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Straw's immediate reaction was to suggest that the figure in his document was possibly a typing error and should have read one asylum-seeker per 500 residents. Then he said that the figure was only a guideline and special consideration would be given to Kent, Dover and other areas. “Other pressures”, “palpably” in evidence in Kent, would always be taken into account, he insisted. Straw followed this with accusations that it was in fact the Conservatives who had let too many asylum-seekers into the country, by conducting a “secret amnesty” allowing 37,000 to stay in Britain between 1992 and 1993 without notifying Parliament.

Labour's establishment of a seemingly diminishing quota—opening at 0.5 percent but negotiable to as little as 0.2 percent—for a supposedly “acceptable” number of asylum-seekers builds on the racist foundations laid down over the past weeks. The authorities in Kent and Dover have used the recent disturbances to lend credence to their demand for asylum-seekers to be moved, but the essence of their campaign is that the area is “too white” to sustain the presence of any significant number of immigrants. The advantages of

cities like Leeds, Manchester and Liverpool for housing asylum-seekers has been routinely cited in the press as their greater “ethnic mix”.

Refugees who came to Britain seeking escape from persecution will face the immediate brunt of the government's actions. The asylum-seekers who now face removal from Dover are to be scatted around the country, without adequate provision being made for their safety and well being. Places have only been made available so far for families, and it is proposed that single men from Dover be housed in a disused army barracks. In the longer term, the official sanctioning of racist sentiment will impact on the whole of Britain's immigrant population.



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