

# Britain: Labour introduces ID cards and routine detention for asylum seekers

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This week Britain's Home Secretary David Blunkett announced new anti-asylum seeker legislation that poses dangers to the democratic rights of all UK citizens.

Blunkett was aided in announcing the new legislation by a supportive media, which focused attention on the decision to abandon the heavily criticised voucher scheme for asylum seekers and the system of dispersing refugees around the country.

Payment of living costs in vouchers instead of cash has stigmatised asylum seekers, while their dispersal away from London and Southeast—usually to poor housing estates owned by local councils or housing trusts—has led to racial attacks and even deaths.

But Blunkett's alternative scheme does not represent a progressive alternative to Labour's previous failed and divisive policy. Instead he has largely adopted the proposals of the Conservative opposition, leading former shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe to describe Blunkett's measures as a "Damascene conversion".

Labour is to set up a national network of induction, accommodation and removal centres, alongside the introduction of "ID smart cards" for all asylum seekers that will include the bearer's photograph and fingerprint.

The induction centres will accommodate new applicants for two to 10 days, enabling screening and health checks. Afterwards, accommodation centres will house those allowed to pursue their asylum claim. It is this intent to isolate refugees that in fact removes the need for vouchers, rather than a reinstatement of cash benefits. Those refusing an accommodation centre place will not be eligible for any further support.

Removal centres will accommodate those who are about to be deported, as opposed to prisons—the use of

which has been subjected to censure by civil rights groups.

Blunkett called the new system "more robust but less socially divisive". It certainly falls within the first category, but not the second. The government intends to build four accommodation centres to house 3,000 asylum seekers and an unspecified number of short-term induction places. The number of removal centre places will rise to 4,000 from the present 2,800.

The Home Secretary told parliament, "At the heart of my asylum proposals is the resumption that from the moment someone presents themselves, they will be *tracked* as well as supported" (emphasis added)

He tried to gloss over the element of compulsion within the proposed accommodation centres, with promises that asylum seekers "will not be detained". However he added that they would "be subject to a residence requirement and they will not be offered alternative forms of support", repeating himself for emphasis minutes later with the words, "Those refusing to take up such a place will disqualify themselves from support."

Blunkett also made clear Labour's intention to speed up the removal of refugees found to have no valid claim for asylum, by further restricting their legal rights. He would "cut out multiple opportunities for delay [and] streamline any further right of appeal, limited to a point of law."

The Tories naturally sought to make some political capital, since Labour had adopted their proposals. For their part, the Liberal Democrats gave full backing to the changes, Home Affairs spokesman Simon Hughes said they deserved a "huge welcome".

In Edinburgh, the Scottish Nationalist Party's Kenny Gibson created an outcry when he called the proposed smart ID card the "modern equivalent" of the yellow

star used in Nazi Germany to identify Jews. Gibson was attacked for this reference, but there is little doubt that the proposed ID card will stigmatise asylum seekers. And it will do more than this. As Blunkett indicated, the smart card is intended to enable an asylum seeker's every movement to be tracked.

Labour has previously been thwarted in its efforts to establish a national system of ID cards. It last mooted the idea as a proposal to combat terrorism, following September 11, which it then ditched. So the government regards their introduction for any section of the population as setting a welcome precedent. Simon Hughes showed he was aware of this, when he asked Blunkett, "Does the announcement of the replacement of vouchers with smart cards herald a general movement to entitlement cards not just for immigrants but for people as a whole?"

Concern has been expressed over some aspects of Labour's proposals by asylum and civil rights advocates, though most congratulated Blunkett for abandoning the voucher system and tended to give the government the benefit of the doubt over the non-compulsory nature of the proposed accommodation centres.

Oxfam's Justin Forsyth applauded "the Government's good sense in recognising the inhumanity and unfairness" of the voucher system, while expressing his hope that residence in accommodation centres "should not be compulsory... Asylum seekers should be able to choose to live in the community with friends or relatives" with "full access to cash benefits".

The Refugee Council also praised the removal of the voucher system, but stated its concerns "that the introduction of these so-called smart cards will exacerbate the problems that asylum seekers already face in accessing basic services to which they are entitled." The Council also had concerns over the "degree of independence" of asylum seekers within accommodation centres and how long they would be held.

John Wadham of Liberty, the civil rights group, said of the proposed ID cards, "The danger is that yesterday's proposals envisage a wider requirement for these cards. It must not become a requirement that people need them to access essential public services such as health, nor must the police be able to stop

people and demand to see the card. Any such wider use would risk generating further discrimination against non-white people, including millions of British citizens... The proposed smartcard must adhere to these clear guaranteed restrictions. This must not become a backdoor route to introducing national ID cards."

Sue Willman, a solicitor at Hammersmith and Fulham Community Law Centre, and co-author of *Support for Asylum Seekers: A Guide to Legal and Welfare Rights*, warned, "The emphasis on speeding up asylum claims and appeals also raises the question whether people are going to get an Article Six fair hearing under the Human Rights Act 1998 because quicker decision making tends, when the Home Office is involved, to mean poorer decision making".

Sam Newman, the lead officer for asylum seekers at Devon County Council, said of the proposed accommodation centres that while locations had yet to be finalised, it is understood they could include former airforce bases. He warned, "Dumping hundreds and hundreds of such people into ex-military camps will create great difficulty for them and the local community. With them living in these centres, which could be miles from a town or city, it may be difficult to get access to the services they need such as health care and English tuition."



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