

# Britain: Government steps up attacks on asylum seekers

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The fifth Asylum Bill in the last decade or so has passed its second reading in Britain's parliament. The bill removes benefits from failed asylum seekers, including families with children, threatening to put their children into care if they refuse to cooperate with their removal. It also makes it a criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment, to arrive in the UK without proper documentation and reduces the right to appeal against unfavourable decisions.

In the run up to the bill's second reading Home Secretary David Blunkett argued in an article for the *Observer* newspaper, "I can't back down on asylum," in order to steal the thunder of the fascist British National Party (BNP) it was necessary to adopt their policies:

"The BNP rarely campaign these days on overt racism; instead, they focus on a sense of injustice borne out of poverty and insecurity; a sense that asylum-seekers, immigrants, everyone who looks different, is getting an easier time of it than hard-working, white families. That, in a nutshell, is why we must have the political courage to press ahead with the further reform of asylum and immigration that we know is needed."

In the same article Blunkett argued that in Europe right-wing parties have gained the upper hand due to the refusal of social democratic governments to take a stand on immigration. And he muttered darkly about the so-called "wilderness" years when Labour was in opposition to the Conservatives for 18 years, blaming militant workers struggles and concerns over tax hikes for keeping the party out of power for so long. The inference was clear: New Labour, having adopted right-wing policies on all these questions, would now embrace the xenophobia of the right on asylum.

Blunkett boasted, "One reason I am sometimes able to sleep at night is that we have begun to make progress

in all these areas and the previous tough reforms have worked. The fact that asylum applications have halved, the asylum backlog is the lowest for a decade, that initial decisions are being made very quickly and removals are at a record high enable us to turn down the political volume of these issues."

When the bill was put before parliament only a handful of MPs opposed the government—the bill's second reading was backed by 412 to 72, a government majority of 340.

Blunkett again insisted that his hard-line measures were aimed at preventing "racism and xenophobia". This absurd claim was backed up by Home Office Minister Beverley Hughes, who said that the parents of the children threatened with being taken into care bore responsibility for this because their claim for asylum had been rejected and they had been offered an assistance package by the British government to return home.

In a letter to the *Guardian* newspaper the day after the parliamentary vote on the bill, a handful of Labour MPs and interested parties made a mealy-mouthed appeal against the government's measures that said nothing against Blunkett's inflammatory arguments. They simply pleaded, "MPs must be allowed to make an informed decision ... not be rushed into supporting a policy that will have a detrimental impact on the lives of asylum seekers."

Currently someone who is denied asylum is allowed to appeal to an adjudicator and, in limited circumstances, to the immigration Appeals Tribunal. If an applicant believes the law has been improperly applied they can seek a judicial review in the High Court. The proposed system merges the two appeals into one hearing. The vast majority of appeals will be heard and decided by a single immigration judge, with

judicial oversight provided by the designated senior judge.

According to Amnesty International UK Director Kate Allen, “This Bill will be devastating for thousands of refugees seeking protection in the UK. When initial decision-making is so poor, the appeals process can be the only barrier between a refugee and the secret police waiting to torture them on their return.”

Refugee Legal Centre Chief Executive Barry Stoye explained, “The appeals system is being watered down. The proposed one-stop appeal tribunal will be unaccountable before any law court, reviewing its own decisions. The tribunal will make life-or-death decisions without anyone being able to question them.”

In a further move designed to further inflame public opinion against those seeking asylum, the Department of Health has said it will bar foreigners from receiving treatment on the National Health Service. Rules allowing people resident in Britain for longer than 12 months to get free NHS treatment are to be scrapped, impacting most harshly on those whose asylum claims have been rejected. Spouses and children of all those involved are also likely to lose free health care.

Ministers claim that what they call “health tourism” costs around £200 million a year, but have provided no evidence. Instead Health Secretary John Reid has employed the most inflammatory language to claim failed asylum seekers are “effectively stealing treatment from the people of this country.”

He went on to state that, “We are not mugs. There is a difference between being civilised and being taken for a ride.”

Health Minister John Hutton told the BBC that the NHS was for, “People who live and work in the UK, not for those who happen to be just passing through.”

The British Medical Association condemned the proposals, with its international committee chairman Dr Edwin Borman calling plans to deny treatment to failed asylum seekers “utterly unacceptable”.

He said that he did not want to see doctors becoming “state agents” for a discriminatory system. “I have a responsibility to any patient to treat their illness, and care for them as much as is possible,” he said.

“It is entirely appropriate that the citizens of the UK are treated to the very best extent possible by the NHS. But we also have an obligation to people who are visiting this country and who, quite reasonably, from

time to time might suddenly have an emergency, to treat them.”

In a further announcement, the government confirmed that the Dungavel Immigration Centre in Scotland is to be expanded to house more asylum seekers and their families. At a cost of £3 million, the capacity of the centre will be increased by 25 percent by adding a further 44 beds. Sally Daghliah, chief executive of the Scottish Refugee Council, said, “Asylum seekers are not criminals, they are people claiming protection from persecution under international law. The government should stop holding children and reduce its use of detention overall to bring it into line with international standards rather than increasing the capacity of a centre which should only be used as a very last resort.”



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