

British government refuses asylum for refugee children

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The Conservative government defeated a cross-party amendment to its Immigration Bill calling for the UK to accept just 600 unaccompanied refugee minors a year for a five-year period. The children are mostly from Syria, now stranded in mainland Europe.

Last week's vote means that Britain is open to homeless dogs and cats being brought in from Europe, but not refugee children.

Home Office minister James Brokenshire opposed the amendment, arguing cynically that the government could not support a policy that would “inadvertently create a situation in which families see an advantage in sending children alone, ahead and in the hands of traffickers, putting their lives at risk by attempting treacherous sea crossings to Europe which would be the worst of all outcomes.”

The Home Office claimed that it was doing enough to help child refugees in Syria and neighbouring countries by providing humanitarian aid. In January Prime Minister David Cameron said 3,000 vulnerable and refugee “children at risk” currently in refugee camps in the Middle East would be allowed into Britain, but not those in Europe. This would be in addition to the paltry 20,000 over five years that the UK agreed to accept from camps on Syria's borders in the aftermath of the international outrage over the death of Aylan Kurdi, the three-year-old Syrian boy whose body was washed up on a Turkish beach.

Given that barely a handful of the 20,000 have as yet actually been allowed to enter Britain, such promises are no more than a cynical public relations exercise.

The amendment was tabled in the House of Lords by Labour Party member Lord Alf Dubs, himself a beneficiary of the British government's agreement to the *Kindertransport* (Children's Transport) that admitted temporarily unaccompanied Jewish children

following Kristallnacht, the Night of Broken Glass, in Germany and Austria on November 9-10, 1938. This grudging agreement was made only because relief agencies promised to fund the operation and find homes for the children at no cost to the state. They were even forced to pledge to finance the children's eventual repatriation back to Germany, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and the Free City of Danzig—although the outbreak of war made that impossible. While no limit on the number was ever announced, less than 10,000 children came to Britain under the program.

Under new rules established by the Immigration Bill, those deemed “illegal immigrants” will face up to six months in prison for working in the UK. Takeaways and off-licenses (food and alcohol vendors) are to be closed if employers are caught using undocumented foreign workers, while employers could have their businesses closed, have their licenses removed, or face prosecution if they fail to report foreign workers. UK border officials are to be given powers to temporarily close businesses that break the law.

After its defeat in the Commons, ministers buried the amendment via a parliamentary manoeuvre, attaching a label of “financial privilege” and making it impossible for it to be referred back to the House of Lords, which does not have the power to override legislation with cost implications.

The government's refusal to accept even a few hundred children follows its attempts to use the courts to prevent unaccompanied minors trapped in Calais, France from being re-united with their families in Britain. Prime Minister David Cameron infamously branded the refugees in Calais a “bunch of migrants,” while earlier he said there was a “swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean” to seek a better life in Britain.

So far, the Home Office has let in just 20 unaccompanied children under the 2014 Dublin agreement allowing children with relatives in the UK to seek asylum. This is despite a court ruling last January that paved the way for family reunification, which the government sought to overturn. At the same time, it has deported 740 people since the Dublin III regulations came into force. According to lawyers, there are 157 children in Calais legally entitled to be reunited with their families in Britain.

Conditions for the thousands of refugees from war-torn countries in Europe are heartbreaking. Children of all ages have trekked for hundreds of miles through the Balkan route, with just the clothes they were wearing, exhausted, in need of food, water and medical care.

It is estimated at least 95,000 unaccompanied child refugees applied for asylum in Europe last year. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism, who contacted 29 governments for statistics, this was four times the number for 2014.

Sweden registered the most asylum applications by lone children in 2015—35,369. This was followed by Germany with 14,439, Austria 9,331 and Hungary 8,804. The UK registered just 3,043.

The real number of children seeking asylum will be even higher. As the Bureau noted, “It is the first time any concrete figure has been reported for the actual scale of migration among unaccompanied minors during last year’s refugee crisis.” It added, “Only 17 of the 29 countries we approached provided any data. Spain refused to cooperate with us, while France said we must wait for publication of official data later this year.”

Eurostat, the official European Union (EU) data agency, has still not compiled any figures on this human tragedy.

Many of these children live in terrible conditions and are subject to abuse. In January, Europol, the EU’s criminal intelligence agency, estimated that 10,000 children had gone missing after arriving in Europe, and warned that many had been taken by criminal gangs for sexual exploitation and slavery.

In March, the 28 EU heads of government reached a sordid agreement with Turkey aimed at hermetically sealing off Europe’s borders to the millions of refugees fleeing war zones in the Middle East and North Africa. Refugees arriving on the Greek islands by crossing the

Aegean Sea have been returned to Turkey, following a farcical asylum review procedure in Greece.

The price of subcontracting to Turkey the task of keeping asylum seekers out of Europe was the acceptance of one Syrian refugee for every Syrian sent back to Turkey from Greece and €3 billion by 2018 in addition to the €3 billion already offered to Ankara thus far. Turkey was also offered the prospect of visa-free travel within the EU and the opening of a new chapter in negotiations over Turkish EU membership.

The deal effectively means the EU’s abrogation of the 1951 Geneva Convention on the protection of refugees, and the abandonment of any commitment to the right to asylum. The Convention sought to make concrete the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which guarantees a “right to seek and enjoy asylum.” This is generally interpreted to mean that someone has the right to apply for humanitarian protection. Governments are also banned from returning migrants to a country where their lives would be in danger, a process known as “refoulement.”

The callous indifference on the part of the European powers is inseparably linked to the growth of militarism, nationalism and great power conflict, fuelled by the deepening economic breakdown of world capitalism. Just as in the 1930s, governments everywhere are promoting anti-immigrant racism and national chauvinism to intimidate and disorient public opinion and overcome broad anti-war sentiment, as part of the preparation for a new world war.



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