

May government ends limited scheme allowing lone child refugees into Britain

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Theresa May's Conservative government has reneged on any commitment to provide asylum in the UK to lone child refugees languishing in desperate conditions near the port of Calais in France.

Last year, at the height of Europe's refugee crisis, thousands of children and teenagers were living unaccompanied in the Calais refugee camp known as the "Jungle." Such was the public outcry that Labour peer Lord Dubs proposed an amendment to the Immigration Act 2016, to bring 3,000 Calais children to Britain.

A child refugee himself, Lord Dubs came to England via the Kindertransport, a scheme organised by Sir Nicholas Winton between the years 1938, after Kristallnacht—the beginning of the pogroms and incarceration of Jews in Germany—until the start of World War II. Lord Dubs was one of thousands of Jewish children, taken by train from Prague, Czechoslovakia, to the safety of Britain to avoid almost certain death in the Nazi concentration camps.

Parliament finally allowed a hollowed out version of the original amendment, which just scraped through by 294 votes for against 276. While the number of children to be helped was left open, the government was to make arrangements with local authorities to relocate and support a "specified number" of unaccompanied child refugees from Europe to the UK.

A total of just 350 children will be accepted—meaning another 150 by March, when the scheme will close—as 200 are already in the UK.

The government ditched the amendment on the eve of the last parliamentary recess. Dubs condemned the closure by saying that the bad news was buried "while most eyes were focussed on the Brexit debacle ..."

This inhumane decision is of a piece with the government's policy of lining up with the xenophobic, nationalist and protectionist administration of US President Donald Trump.

Even before the announcement to end all assistance to refugees, the Help Refugees charity took out a judicial review against the government, on the grounds that "The

government has failed to lawfully calculate the number of available places for unaccompanied children, because it failed to properly consult with local authorities as the statute required it to."

The government tried to justify the reduced figure of 350 places for refugees by saying the figure was calculated on the basis of local council constraints. This was a lie.

Councils such as Hammersmith and Fulham, West London, had offered to take in more refugees, but the government ignored their offer. Council leader Stephen Cohen declared that he "wrote to Baroness Williams just last week to point out that we have offered to take in an extra 15 more children, but despite our offer and despite our pestering they have only given us 13."

Announcing the measure, Home Secretary Amber Rudd said that taking in more child refugees would be a "pull factor" and encourage child trafficking. "We don't want to incentivize journeys to Europe," she cynically declared.

Such language is designed to appeal to the pro-Brexit forces among Tory MPs and the Tory party, with the government committed to slashing immigration and opposing the free movement of labour in Europe, as part of its strategy of exiting the European Union.

Theresa May has boasted about government aid of £2.3 billion to build what would be in effect concentration camps to resettle 20,000 refugees back into the Syrian region over the next five years. Britain's pledge, like those of the other imperialist powers, is in order to keep the millions of refugees they have created with their wars away from their doors.

Barbara Winton, daughter of the architect of Kindertransport, Sir Nicholas Winton, was among many who berated the government for abandoning children fleeing war zones. Nicholas Winton is often compared with the German industrialist Oskar Schindler—who saved the lives of 1,200 Jewish children and their families under the noses of the Nazis, by employing them in his factory in Poland.

It should be pointed out that the British government only agreed to the Kindertransport scheme—whereby

unaccompanied children fleeing the Nazis, whose parents agreed to stay behind, would be temporarily admitted to Britain—because all the financial costs would be borne by private, not public monies.

In an open letter to May, Barbara Winton reminded the prime minister of May's own words to her father at a memorial meeting, that “his life will serve as an inspiration to us all” and will “encourage us to do the right thing.” Winton added, “As the world once again teeters on the edge of dark times, I ask you to remember those words.”

Some of those who arrived in Britain on the Kindertransport joined in condemning the government's decision.

Susi Bechofer and her twin sister were three years old when they were evacuated from Germany, on one of the Kindertransport's earliest missions. “There were 10,000 children and every child had somewhere to go. ... Today's numbers are only 3,000 so it is not really beyond our capabilities to help them,” she said.

The heartfelt sympathy of the Kindertransport children contrasts with the crocodile tears of leading Labour MPs, Diane Abbott, Yvette Cooper and Stella Creasy.

Labour has mounted no campaign against the government's decision, and has accepted as a fait accompli that only 150 more lone refugee children will be allowed in. Labour's Shadow Home Secretary Abbott asked in Parliament, “How does the secretary of state [Rudd] plan to find, screen and process” what Abbott described as “this 150 extra children,” and “from which countries will the remaining 150 Dubs children be transferred?”

This is from the same party that in the 2015 general election advertised its policies with the words, “Controls on Immigration” proudly emblazoned on its merchandise.

In a *Channel 4 News* TV interview, Creasy said that 50 children a day are turning up in Calais, and that meanwhile “the British and French government are playing chicken over who should take responsibility.” She told Home Secretary Rudd, “These children are our responsibility.”

Although Creasy did not mean it in this way, successive governments including Labour, Conservative and Conservative/Liberal Democrat are indeed responsible for the refugee crisis, which is a product of the imperialist-instigated wars in the Middle East and North Africa.

There are up to 95,000 unaccompanied migrant children in Europe who have fled the mass sociocide orchestrated by the major imperialist powers and their regional allies in their homelands—including Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, the Yemen, Somalia, Eritrea, Ethiopia and Sudan. The war aimed at toppling Syrian President Bashar al-Assad alone has resulted in the mass exodus of 4.8 million people, while 6.6 million are displaced within the country.

Since the French authorities demolished the Jungle refugee camp in Calais last year, dispersing the 9,000 refugees to centres throughout France, Calais remains a focal point for refugees seeking to come to the UK.

Charity workers in Calais estimate there are about 200 refugee children sleeping out in the open and existing in near-feral conditions in the woodlands near the demolished camp. Amanda Burr of Help Refugees told the *Guardian* that night-time temperatures in January were around a perishing 5 below zero Celsius, so they gave the children sleeping bags and blankets at night. She said, “When we came back the next day, the blankets (were) frozen.”

The French police told student volunteers not to give tents to the children because it was illegal, so the children have to sleep without shelter, many ending up in hospital with hypothermia.

The persecution of the refugees has continued unabated at the hands of the Paris authorities. Police have seized food and blankets from the children, screaming at them to get out of France. Some children have been beaten or tear-gassed, according to the *Independent*.

The *Guardian* reports that in Serbia refugee children are likewise sleeping rough on the streets in sub-zero temperatures. Up to 10,000 children may have disappeared, many no doubt into the hands of traffickers.

In Greece, there are more than 1,000 children on waiting lists for places in children's shelters. Some boys are prostituting themselves to keep alive.

Facing numerous practical barriers imposed by the European authorities that prevent their right to legal entry into fortress Europe and the UK, refugees are forced to embark on hazardous sea journeys that too often have fatal consequences. Last year alone 5,000 refugees including children drowned in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas.



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