

UK plans to detain refugees on prison ships

Robert Stevens
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Britain's Tory government is drawing up proposals to remove migrants and asylum seekers to remote offshore locations—either within other countries or in UK waters—the moment they reach the UK.

Documents seen by the *Financial Times*, the *Times* and *Guardian* reveal that the government's "hostile environment" against immigrants and asylum seekers is to be stepped up with a raft of sadistic proposals.

Under one of these, asylum seekers would be sent to the Ascension Islands, a volcanic rock in the Atlantic 4,000 miles away from Britain. Other locations under consideration include Moldova, Morocco and Papua New Guinea, with detailed "cost estimates" submitted for each, according to the *Guardian*.

Asylum policy will be closely modelled on the Australian system of "remote detention", the leaked documents make clear, with refugees forcibly sent to offshore islands. The Australian policy—described chillingly as the "Pacific Solution"—has been enforced by successive Labor and Liberal governments since 2001.

Australia's refugee prison camps have been condemned by refugee and human rights organisations. In the years from 2010 to January 2019 there were 37 deaths in its detention centres, both at "offshore" facilities on Manus Island and Nauru and "onshore" camps on the mainland and Christmas Island, an Indian Ocean outpost.

Commenting on the UK documents, Rossella Pagliuchi-Lor, UK representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, said, "This is the Australian model and I think we have already seen that the Australian model has brought about incredible suffering on people who are guilty of no more than seeking asylum."

Home Secretary Priti Patel has already announced a post-Brexit Australian points based system aimed at

massively restricting immigration.

The new proposals are of a piece with Boris Johnson's recent decision to appoint former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott as a Brexit trade adviser to his government. The *Financial Times* notes that Abbott, who oversaw Australia's asylum seeker offshoring policy as prime minister (September 2013-September 2015), recently held discussions with Patel.

Johnson is involved in framing the new anti-migrant proposals, with the *Guardian* reporting, "the request for advice on third country options for detention facilities came from 'the PM'." It was Patel who reportedly suggested Ascension Island as a detention site.

For months, the government has been ramping up its anti-immigrant agenda, seizing on the arrival of a few thousand desperate people in small boats and dinghies via the Channel between France and the UK. The vast majority making this perilous journey are from countries devastated by imperialist wars and proxy wars supported by the UK, including in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and Sudan. The government's rhetoric is backed up by a daily stream of filth vomited up by a venal tabloid press denouncing "illegal" migrants and the need to prevent their "invasion" of Britain.

Included in the documents prepared for Downing Street are plans to requisition disused ferries, turning them into floating "asylum-processing centres" moored off the UK coast. The *Times* noted, "A disused 40-year-old ferry can be bought from Italy for £6 million. It could house 1,400 people in 141 cabins. A disused cruise ship, at present moored in Barbados, would cost £116 million and could accommodate 2,417 people in 1,000 cabins."

Nothing is off the table, with the *Times* reporting the "Home Office held discussions about moving migrants to decommissioned oil platforms in the North Sea for processing." Such are the plans of the British ruling

class against defenceless migrants and asylum seekers.

The Johnson government's proposals for offshore detention camps would go even further than Australia's barbaric system in nakedly denying asylum seekers their rights under international law. While Australia's "deterrence regime" sees refugees intercepted before they reach Australian waters, Britain's proposals would see asylum seekers "offshored" after they have arrived in the UK, in defiance of its obligations under the European Court of Human Rights and Human Rights Act (1998).

The Foreign Office proposals amount to jackboot diplomacy against potential destination countries or territories, with Whitehall officials noting, "In relation to St Helena we will need to consider if we are willing to impose the plan if the local government object" [emphasis added].

Proposals to repeal legislation in order to "discourage" and "deter" migrants from entering the UK—and to kick them out as soon as they enter—are also revealed in the documents. A document seen by the *Guardian* reveals Home Office legal advice to Downing Street that this would require, "disapplying sections 77 and 78 of the Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 so that asylum seekers can be removed from the UK while their claim or appeal is pending."

In what is described as a "likely legislative change" by the *Guardian*, another document reveals Home Office advice that a new law would require "defining what we mean by a clandestine arrival (and potentially a late claim) and create powers allowing us to send them offshore for the purposes of determining their asylum claims".

The documents were conveniently "leaked" to the media just before the Tories annual conference, with Patel's speech on Sunday—titled "Fixing our broken asylum system"—a centrepiece. Patel referred to "illegal" migrants no less than eight times in her speech to the Tory faithful, with the *Financial Times* noting that the Tories' right-wing base supported sending asylum seekers 4,000 miles away by a nearly two-thirds majority.

Repressive anti-immigration policies, in Britain and Australia alike, have been built up over decades by all the political representatives of the ruling class.

The Tories are building on a reactionary framework

already established by the European Union. According to the *Financial Times*, "Patel's team looked at the idea, considered by the EU, of creating a centre for processing asylum claims in north Africa so that migrants could be screened before making the hazardous trip to Britain."

Also being considered, according another document leaked to the *Financial Times*, is the construction of "floating walls in the English Channel to block asylum seekers in small boats." The Home Office has consulted "Maritime UK, a trade group, to discuss erecting temporary 'marine fencing' in one of the busiest shipping lanes in the world." Similar fencing is being considered by Greece's government, which already has in place a series of concentration camps on its mainland and islands—in agreement with Turkey and the UK—in which tens of thousands of refugees and asylum seekers are detained in horrific conditions.

The *Financial Times* drew attention to the fact that the first British government to consider sending asylum seekers to foreign countries for "processing" was Blair's 1997 Labour government. "Tony Blair's government considered a similar idea—including a potential processing centre in Tanzania—in the early 2000s, but quickly concluded it was unfeasible."

In every country, the ruling class is responding to the breakdown of capitalism as it did in the 1930s, befouling the world's atmosphere with the poison of racism and nationalism as it seeks to divide the working class and prepare the ground for war. The defence of immigrants and refugees is a fundamental duty of the working class and is a central component of the fight for the international unity of the working class for socialism.



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