

Johnson government announces “pushback” policy in stepping up of anti-immigration agenda

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The UK government is stepping up its anti-immigration agenda by rolling out a “pushback policy” to turn away migrant boats attempting to enter the UK via the English Channel.

The Home Office has utilised a spell of good weather, and consequent increase in the number of migrants and asylum seekers seeking to enter the UK, to announce it will intercept and turn around migrants’ small boats from France mid-Channel to prevent them reaching the UK. Around 1,500 migrants arrived on the UK’s shores this week, with the right-wing media dedicating blanket coverage to demands to stop the “flood”.

According to the *Telegraph*, “The Home Secretary has secured legal advice for Border Force vessels to start redirecting migrant boats away from UK waters and back towards France, where the French will have to return them to shore.”

Turning back migrant boats has “already been extensively trialled for months by Border Force at sea,” notes the newspaper, “overseen by the Royal Marines, [and] is due to conclude this month, weather permitting. Sources said that the tactics were ready to deploy as soon as practical and safe.”

Due to the fact that the “refoulement” that Patel proposes is illegal under the international law of the sea, she has commissioned, according to the *Telegraph*, “robust and detailed” legal advice from Michael Ellis, the Attorney General, and expert QCs”. The *Times* reported, “She told law officers to rewrite Britain’s interpretation of international maritime law to allow the Border Force to intercept boats as they tried to enter British territorial waters. Officers would then contact the French coastguard to inform it that vessels in French territorial waters were in need of rescue, which would put the legal responsibility for the migrant boats on France.”

Times, According to the government the is on the basis that “There would be a ‘limited’ legal window to deploy the tactics and only if certain conditions were met. These would include ensuring that the migrant boat in question was not in danger of sinking or capsizing, was not over capacity and was able to return to the French coast.”

No-one should believe that such legal niceties will be adhered to. Given the perilous nature of the Channel crossings, with many migrants often crammed onto small unsafe boats, the policy must result in more deaths.

The Home Office announcement was timed to coincide with a meeting in London Wednesday between Patel and her French counterpart Gérald Darmanin. Patel insisted in “very tense” talks that France had been lax in preventing migrants reaching Britain from its shores and must step up the enforcing of a previously agreed policy of stopping them at the French coastline. It emerged that Britain has even offered to provide the French state a plane to increase its shoreline monitoring.

On Monday, Patel told Tory MPs that she was ready to cut or withdraw the tens of millions of pounds the UK gives to France to prevent migrant crossings. A further £54 million in funding was agreed between London and Paris in July.

Patel said, “We’ve not given them a penny of the money so far and France is going to have to get its act together if it wants to see the cash. It’s payment by results and we’ve not yet seen those results. The money is conditional.” The *Times* reported that Patel committed to withdrawing funding “if they [France] failed to stop three in four crossings by the end of this month.”

The mood among Tory MPs was, if anything, even more vociferous, with the *Guardian* reporting that Craig Mackinlay called for the “immediate removal back to

France of all who arrive via this illegal route” and for the UK to “disregard diplomatic niceties.” Lee Anderson agreed, declaring, “I said we should drop these illegal immigrants, not migrants, off on a French beach and send the French government a bill for the cost of the journey.”

The following day, Darmanin sent Patel a letter declaring that the existing system could be enforced and boasting that “the rate at which small boat crossings are thwarted stands at 57.3%, i.e. a higher level than that recorded over the same period in 2020.”

He complained that the increase in migrants landing in the UK “is mainly due to a new strategy by people smugglers of using larger boats which can now hold up to 65 people”. While admitting disappointedly, “These groups of migrants are made up of particularly vulnerable people (infants, young children and elderly or disabled people), which limits our means of action,” Darmanin made the sinister accusation that their “behaviour is increasingly violent.”

He “noted the use of military-style detection technology you [Patel] are proposing” and insisted “All available intervention capabilities are permanently mobilized along the Channel coastline”, promising that the number of security personnel on the French Channel coast would be doubled.

Darmanin emphasised that his main concern was stopping migrants getting into France via the Mediterranean in the first place. He wrote, “Migration pressure at our internal borders has never been greater... The mobilization of our forces at our southern borders, as well as at the EU’s borders through the Frontex Agency, must not weaken, when we know the risks of migratory movements which the crises in Afghanistan and Belarus are likely to generate.”

The French minister of the interior made a contemptible effort to cloak this falling out among Gestapo officers in a claimed concern for human rights, declaring, “Safeguarding human lives at sea takes priority over considerations of nationality, status and migratory policy”. He tweeted Thursday, “France will not accept any practice that goes against maritime law, and will not accept any financial blackmail... The UK must hold up its commitment.”

What passes for Britain’s liberal media responded with extraordinary complacency to Patel’s proposals, essentially writing them off as unworkable. This is despite the fact that her Nationality and Border Bill, which is presently going through Parliament, contains, as the *Guardian* noted, “provisions to set up offshore processing

centres and turn suspected migrant boats away from the UK.”

The newspaper cited the comments of Lucy Moreton, a professional officer at the right-wing Immigration Services Union—a splinter union founded to campaign for stricter immigration and border controls. Moreton claimed, “In practical terms, if this happened even once I’d be surprised... There are understandably a lot of constraints around it and you cannot do this with a vessel that is in any way vulnerable and more importantly you need the consent of the French to do it.” Another cited by the *Guardian* was Conservative MP Tim Loughton, who said, “It sounds good pushing them back but it’s not going to work in practice.”

The fact is that pushback policies are routine at the borders of “Fortress Europe” and internationally. Patel is basing much of her anti-immigration policy on that being enforced by Greece’s conservative New Democracy government, which she visited only last month to learn from its latest brutal measures. Greece has just completed the sealing off its northern border with Turkey with a massive 40km (25-mile) steel fence and new electronic monitoring system.

This is why the *Telegraph*, among the firmest backers of Patel’s border strengthening policies, could write Thursday, “UK is only following EU’s lead on controversial migrant pushback policy”. The government’s “announcement that it will push back migrant boats trying to cross the Channel has striking parallels with tactics used by both Greece and Italy.”

The article cited Felipe González Morales, the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants, who said recently that Greece has engaged in “the summary and collective expulsion of tens of thousands of migrants and asylum seekers.”

Italy, notes the newspaper, “has essentially adopted pushback by proxy. Along with other EU countries, it gave training, financing and equipment to the Libyan coast guard, which essentially carries out the dirty work of intercepting migrant boats and driving them back to the coast.”



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