

British government appoints Australian immigration “offshoring” pioneer Alexander Downer to oversee its “pushback” policy

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18 February 2022

Home Secretary Priti Patel is accelerating the Conservative government’s drive to enforce a “pushback” policy in the English Channel, whereby flimsy vessels carrying migrants and refugees are to be physically forced out of UK and into French waters.

Patel has appointed Alexander Downer, a former leader of Australia’s Liberal Party from 1994 to 1995 and then foreign minister, to carry out a review of the UK’s Border Force. Downer was pivotal in developing Canberra’s anti-immigration policy of “offshoring” asylum processing. He negotiated Australia’s barbaric “Pacific Solution”, detaining refugees on Nauru and Manus Island. Amnesty International has denounced the policy of indefinite detention “in conditions which may be considered degrading or inhumane”.

Downer made his pitch in the UK in the *Daily Mail* last September, defending Patel, who “has been widely ridiculed on both sides of the Channel for suggesting that boats carrying migrants be physically ‘pushed back’ towards the French coast. Yet, from my experience as Australia’s former minister for foreign affairs, I know that a ‘pushback’ policy can work... I see no reason why this cannot be done in the Channel. My advice to Miss Patel would be to introduce the ‘pushback’ policy without fanfare, and to keep the French informed on a need-to-know basis only.”

The former Australian official will produce a report within months, potentially leading to “a complete overhaul of Border Force,” according to the *Mail*. The paper reports that “Proposals could include a merger with a separate Home Office agency—Immigration Enforcement—which deals with foreign criminals, visa-breakers and organised crime gangs.”

Downer’s appointment coincided with the release

Wednesday of a report by the right-wing Policy Exchange think tank, of which he is a trustee, arguing, “no one, even a genuine refugee” who arrives by small boat should “ever be granted a right to settle in the UK”. It advised that all those picked up in the Channel should be prepared for deportation within 48 hours of arriving in the UK to a “third country”. The report called for setting up asylum processing centres in Britain’s “Sovereign Base Areas” in Cyprus; Alderney in the Channel Islands; or, the favoured option of the think tank, Ascension Island, 4,000 miles away in the Atlantic.

One of the report’s authors, Oxford professor Richard Ekins, told the *Times* the situation in the Channel required a “game-changing” solution. “The crisis may well worsen as events in Ukraine unfold... If Plan A cannot be agreed with France, the Plan B outlined in this report is the way forward.”

In the years since Brexit, an increasing number of refugees and asylum seekers have traversed from mainland Europe across the Channel. Almost 29,000 migrants made the treacherous crossing in 2021, three times the total from 2020. Last November 27, people died after an inflatable dinghy capsized in rough seas, near to the French port city of Calais.

Many who are able to make the journey suffer terribly. Citing Freedom of Information data covering January to June 2021 “when about 6,000 people crossed the Channel in small boats,” the *Guardian* reported this week analysis by the Press Association which “shows that 4,075 were suffering hypothermia, a dangerous drop in body temperature, when they reached the Kent coast.

“Some 354 people had petrol or saltwater burns

sustained on the journey and 27 were taken to hospital with suspected broken bones shortly after arriving.”

The brutal “pushback” strategy is one element of the government’s response to this humanitarian crisis, pursued in blatant contradiction to international law. The *Guardian* disclosed in November that government lawyers advised the odds of successfully defending a challenge in the courts against the lawfulness of a “pushback” policy were no greater than 30 percent. Three separate legal challenges are currently being lodged against the practice, one of which will be heard at the High Court in May.

To enforce the policy, Patel has turned to the UK’s armed forces. At Home Office questions in Parliament on January 17, she declared she was transferring responsibility for combatting refugee crossings in the English Channel from the Home Office to the Ministry of Defence (MoD). The announcement was part of “Operation Red Meat”, a slew of right-wing policies launched by Boris Johnson to rally the support of Tory MPs amid the “partygate” scandal rocking his premiership.

Patel’s employment of the military as a “crucial operational partner to protect our Channel against illegal migration” effectively declares war on refugees and asylum seekers—innocent civilian men, women and children fleeing for their lives from wars, famine and persecution.

Rear Admiral Mike Utley, the commander of the UK’s aircraft carriers, was appointed to co-ordinate the plan. The *Daily Express* reported that he “will take overall control of Government-owned ships within weeks”. The government said there were as yet no plans to deploy warships in the Channel, and that the initial focus was making the existing Home Office Border Force fleet operate more efficiently.

The Home Office is moving so fast, in the face of overwhelming popular hostility, that its proposals have caused some consternation among the military leaders tasked with enforcing them. At the time of Patel’s announcement, sources reported “trepidation” within the MoD about getting involved in unfamiliar complex issues.

Patel was forced to tell MPs in February that Armed Forces Minister James Heappey had been wrong to suggest earlier that “pushback” was not being adopted by the MoD. Shortly after Patel’s intervention, the

MoD’s press officer released a tweet saying, “The Royal Navy and the Royal Marines will not be using pushback tactics in the English Channel”. However, they added the caveat that a “military commander will retain the existing ability to instruct Border Force to use them when appropriate.” This indicates for the first time that the MoD has the power to direct civilian Border Force vessels.

The main criticism of Patel’s plans within the Tory Party comes from even further to the right. Defence Select Committee chairman Tobias Ellwood, speaking on behalf of a now substantial and influential “warrior” faction within the Tory party who have served in the armed forces and have intimate connections to the military, called the plans a “massive distraction” for the military and not “what our navy should be doing”.

Ellwood has recently called for the deployment of thousands of NATO troops directly to Ukraine. He represents a faction concerned that the Royal Navy risks becoming tied up in the Channel when they are needed on the open seas for a war with Russia.

Downer’s appointment shows that the Home Office is nevertheless determined to find a brutal “solution” to the Channel crossings. Nothing, no matter how inhumane, is off the table. Downing Street policy experts have even investigated using sonic weapons to turn back refugee boats. The plan, initially reported by *Sky News*, was to use long-range acoustic devices. After consideration, the use of these sound cannon, which emit noise powerful enough to induce vomiting, was rejected by the Home Office. However, high-tech military assets, like British army Watchkeeper surveillance drones, will be used to monitor the Channel’s waters.



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