

UK: Labour plans to streamline Tory crackdown on asylum seekers

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Britain's Labour Party is considering detailed plans for processing asylum claims offshore.

Leader Sir Keir Starmer admitted for the first time in a speech early in December that the party would “look at any scheme”. On December 25, *The Times* published an extensive account of the discussions at Labour HQ, under the headline, “Labour plots ‘watertight’ alternative to Rwanda migrant plan”.

Rishi Sunak's Conservative government is seeking to implement legislation which would see all those who arrive in the UK illegally permanently barred from ever claiming asylum and deported to Rwanda, whose government would process asylum claims. Those with successful claims would be settled in the African country, with the rest deported back to their home countries.

The scheme has been repeatedly delayed by legal challenges and threatens to widen the divide between the UK and the European Union, whose cooperation the British government needs to help police its border.

Labour intends to solve these problems. *The Times* writes, “Shadow ministers and party officials working on Labour's asylum policy have set three tests that must be met,” including cost-effectiveness, deterrence and avoiding the “main legal hurdles that have stalled the government's Rwanda scheme.” These are the United Nations Refugee Convention and the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR).

Although “specific destinations for offshore processing schemes had not yet been drawn up,” the options on the table are indicated by the involvement of former Labour home secretary under Tony Blair, David Blunkett, now a Lord. Starmer's current Shadow Home secretary Yvette Cooper and Shadow Immigration Minister Stephen Kinnock have both discussed Labour's proposals with him.

During his time in office in the early 2000s, Blunkett drew up his own plans for the offshore processing of asylum seekers, officially opening talks with Tanzania in 2004.

This much was already publicly known. But on December 29, Cabinet Office documents from the period became available revealing the far-reaching assault on the democratic right to asylum being considered by the early 2000s Labour government behind the scenes.

A direction given by Blair to the civil service to “search out even more radical measures” prompted a “brainstorming” session with officials and advisers from across government which produced a 2003 report titled, “Asylum: The Nuclear Option.”

Chief of Staff Stephen Powell wrote in the report, “The AG's [attorney general's] office suggested we set up a camp on the Isle of Mull [a small island off the coast of Scotland, population 3,000] and detain people there till they could be returned.” Worrying that “the nimby factor” (not in my backyard) might be a problem, he went on, “we have commissioned work to look at tagging, detention, etc to help deter people and ensure we are able to return them as soon as their appeals have been heard.”

The Falkland/Malvinas Islands 8,000 miles away in the South Atlantic, sovereignty over which led to Margaret Thatcher's 1982 war with Argentina, were suggested as an alternative.

The paper references the “great success of the Australians”, whose brutal system of detention on the islands of Nauru and Manus is infamous. Officials involved in administering the Australian scheme have been invited on the strength of their record to advise the Tory government on asylum policy in recent years.

Powell's report also suggested “regional safe

havens” to which failed asylum applicants could be returned, allowing for far more applications to be denied since they would not have to be deported back to a country where they would be deemed at risk: like Algeria, Iraq and Somalia. “We would be able to return Iraqi asylum seekers to a centre in Turkey, Zimbabweans to a centre in South Africa, Somalis to a centre in Kenya.”

The Foreign Office believed Turkey to be the best bet, in return for financial support. Essentially the same scheme has since been established by the European Union to deal with Iraqi and, predominantly, Syrian refugees fleeing imperialist wars and proxy-wars.

Though these plans were not enacted, other draconian policies were implemented to “deter” migrants from travelling to the UK, including legally distinguishing asylum seekers from refugees, restricting their entitlements and encouraging their segregation from society; creating mass detention centres; reducing rights of appeal; and stepping up deportations.

The Times says of Starmer’s latest plans that there would be a “key difference” with the Tory government’s policy, that “Those with genuine claims for asylum would be granted the right to come to the UK” rather than settled in a third country.

The released Cabinet Office documents show that Blair’s Labour government was entirely prepared to “legislate incompatibly with the ECHR to allow us to remove people (Iraqis, Somalis, Algerians, Chinese) despite the risk that they might subsequently be persecuted.” The paper continued, “We would like to try to extend this to return any illegal immigrant regardless of the risk that they might suffer inhuman or degrading treatment.”

Acknowledging that “We would almost certainly lose this case when it got to Strasbourg [the location of the European Court of Human Rights],” Powell countered, “But we would have 2-3 years in the meantime when we could send a strong message into the system about our new tough stance.

“And we would make it clear that if we lost in Strasbourg we would denounce the ECHR and immediately re-ratify with a reservation on Article 3.”

In handwritten notes on a guidance document from Home Office ministers warning that this would breach the UN convention on refugees, Blair wrote, “Just return them. This is precisely the point. We must not

allow the ECHR to stop us dealing with it.”

Starmer would continue this reactionary legacy, taking back the anti-migrant baton passed from Blair to the Conservatives.

The European Union is no bulwark against this process. Blunkett, *The Times* writes, “was close to agreeing an EU-wide deal” in his time. Today, “Leaders in Austria, Germany, Italy and Denmark have said they are exploring proposals to process asylum claims outside the EU, while President Biden is considering sending illegal migrants attempting to cross the Mexico-US border to safe third countries where their asylum claim would be processed.”

There is not a single faction of the ruling class anywhere which is not hurtling to the right on questions of migration and democratic rights. The moves in Germany and Denmark have been initiated by Social Democrat-led governments, and those in Austria and Italy by Conservative and far-right governments. Green parties are coalition partners in Germany and Austria.



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