

Britain Wants to Save Refugee Children - So Why is the Government Shunning These Helpless Infants?

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It is now several months since the Immigration Act became law. It contained one crucial amendment, that the UK should take an unspecified number of unaccompanied child refugees from Europe. So far very little seems to have happened.

Save the Children had identified that there were a large number of unaccompanied child refugees in Europe; their most recent estimate was 95,000. Equally alarming was the fact that some 10,000 are believed to have disappeared. These young people are clearly in danger, liable to be dragged into criminality, [to be trafficked and forced into prostitution](#). The need to find them safety is urgent.

The government's original objection was that taking in these unaccompanied child refugees would act as a magnet and attract others to make the dangerous journey to Europe. However, given the dangers facing these young people in Europe it seemed clear that leaving them without any hope of safety was surely quite wrong.

The amendment was originally passed in the Lords by a large majority. The government then pulled out all stops to prevent it passing in the Commons. Indeed at one point Theresa May, then the home secretary, tried to persuade me to withdraw the amendment, in return for which the government would take more refugees from the region. I declined this.

When the Immigration Bill got to the Commons it was narrowly defeated. In the meantime I was pleasantly surprised that several government ministers stopped me in the corridor to wish me luck with the amendment.

The Lords passed a similar amendment with an even bigger majority and before it reached the Commons again the home secretary told me that the government proposed to accept the amendment.

What made the government give way? It was fairly clear that [more Tory MPs were now prepared to ignore their whips and support the amendment](#). And the reason for this was public opinion. It was becoming clearer that many British people had strong humanitarian feelings and wanted us to do something about the refugee crisis that was being shown so graphically on our TV screens. And there was increasing pressure on Tory MPs from their constituents to vote in favour.

Ministers assured me that the government would accept the letter and the spirit of the

amendment. The government stated that they would take unaccompanied refugee children from France, Greece and Italy who had arrived in Europe before March this year. Nobody has ever suggested that all the unaccompanied child refugees in Europe should come to the UK. We should, however, take our share. Some EU countries have done well in this regard: others not at all. A British example could be very influential.

I have had a long phone conversation with the new immigration minister, Robert Goodwill, and am due to meet him in early September. I went to Calais some weeks ago and intend to go again next month. On my first visit I met nine Afghan refugee children and was given documentation about them – which I forwarded to the Home Office on my return. It appears that four of them subsequently got to Britain on the back of a lorry, a very dangerous thing to do, especially as some children have been killed through attempting this. The remaining children may still be in Calais.

All over the country there are now voluntary groups set up to welcome refugees and bring pressure on local authorities to make arrangements to identify suitable foster parents. There are some active NGOs working to achieve progress: Citizens UK, Help Refugees and others. Some local council leaders went to Calais a few days ago, visited the “Jungle” and met the Mayor of Calais. It appears the French authorities are threatening to bulldoze the camp and there is widespread concern lest this should happen before adequate arrangements are made for the people living there, especially the children.

We all want the children to start coming to Britain as soon as possible, hopefully some by September so they do not miss another year of education.

There are of course other children who are eligible to come here. They are young people who have close members of their families already here and again the process is taking a long time.

Such long delays are surely unacceptable. Together with the French, Greek and Italian authorities we must overcome the bureaucratic log jams and show some real political will.

Alf Dubs is Labour member of the House of Lords. He came to Britain on the Kindertransport programme for Jewish children.

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