

Britain's "New Plan for Immigration": Priti Patel and the Death of Asylum

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Nothing makes better sense to the political classes than small time demagoguery when matters turn sour. True, the United Kingdom might well be speeding ahead with vaccination numbers, and getting ever big-headed about it, but there is still good reason to distract the voters. Coronavirus continues to vex; the economy continues to suffer. In February, the Office of Statistics [revealed](#) that Britain's economy had shrunk by 9.9%. The last time such a contraction was experienced was in 1709, when a contraction of 13% was suffered as a result of the Great Frost which lasted for three devastating months.

With Brexit Britain feeling alone, it is time to resort to mauling targets made traditional during the 2016 campaign to exit the European Union: the asylum seeker, the refugee and anyone assisting in that enterprise. And the person best suited to doing so is the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, who outlined the government's [New Plan for Immigration](#) on March 24th. It has three objectives with one overarching punitive theme "to better protect and support those in genuine need of asylum." The authenticity of that need will be aided by deterring "illegal entry into the UK, thereby breaking the business model of criminal trafficking networks and protecting the lives of those they endanger". Those with "no right to be" in the UK will also be more easily "removed".

It is in the nature of such policies to conceal the punitive element by extolling virtues.

"The UK accepted more refugees through planned resettlement schemes than any other country in Europe in the period 2015-2019 - the fourth highest resettlement schemes globally after the USA, Canada and Australia," [reads](#) the policy statement. "The UK also welcomed 29,000 people through the refugee family reunion scheme between 2015 and 2019. More than half of these were children."

This self-praise ignores the inconvenient fact that the UK received fewer applications for asylum than European states such as France and Germany in 2020. According to the UNHCR, both countries received four times the number in 2020. "The number of arrivals in the UK in 2020," [remarks](#) academic Helen O'Nions, "was actually down 18% on the previous year."

It does not take long, however, to [identify and inflate the threats](#): people crossing the

English channel in their “small boats reached record levels, with 8,500 ... arriving this way” in 2020. Sinister imputations are made: 87% of those arriving in small boats were male. In 2019, 32,000 illegal attempts were made to enter the UK, but foiled in Northern France while 16,000 illegal arrivals were detected in the UK.

The Home Office laments the rapid increase of asylum claims; decisions cannot be made “quickly”; “case loads are growing to unsustainable levels”. Never mind the UN Refugee Convention and human rights: what matters is bureaucratic efficiency. To achieve that, Patel hopes to “stop illegal arrivals gaining immediate entry into the asylum system if they have travelled through a safe country - like France.” Any arrivals doing so could not be said to be “seeking refuge from imminent peril”. Stiffer sentences are also suggested for those aiding asylum. “Access to the UK’s asylum system should be based on need, not on the ability to pay people smugglers.”

Much of what the Home Office makes of this is nonsense. It entails a fantasy about a model cut, idealised asylum seeker: those with state documents from the persecuting state, clearly of the identifiable sort, all morally sound. The murkier reality necessitates deception as an indispensable part of the process. To not have documents makes travel impossible. Alternative routes and means are therefore required.

The threat to relocate and refuse those seeking asylum would also breach the UK’s own [Human Rights Act of 1998](#), obligating the state to prevent people from being returned to places where they are at the risk of torture, inhuman, degrading treatment or cruel and unusual punishment. That principle is also a cardinal feature of the Refugee Convention.

The view from those who actually have more than a passing acquaintance with the field is vastly different from Patel’s. Politely, some 454 immigration scholars in the UK have told the Home Secretary in an [open letter](#) that she does not know what she is talking about. The New Plan, for instance, may have 31 references, but “there is just one reference to research evidence, a research paper on refugee integration.” The undersigned scholars suggest that Patel look more deeply, as the plans being proposed “not only circumvent international human rights law, but are also based on claims which are completely unfounded in any body of research evidence.”

The scholars also note that asylum seekers and refugees lack safe and legal routes, with countries across Europe, North American and Australasia going “to huge efforts and massive expense in recent decades to close down access to the right to asylum.”

The markings of the New Plan resemble, all too closely, the Australian approach of discrimination which has become an exemplar of how to undermine the right to asylum: an obsession with targeting those people smuggling “gangs” and associated business rackets, merely code for targeting those fleeing persecution; distinguishing the method of arrival in order to demonise the plight of the asylum seeker; the decision that, irrespective of the claims of asylum, no sanctuary would ever be given to certain individuals because they chose to jump a phantom queue and not know their place.

The open letter also notes the “distinct and troubling echoes” of “the Australian Temporary Protection Visa programme and the vilification of people with no option but to travel through irregular means to flee persecution and seek sanctuary.”

Another unsavoury aspect of the British turn in refugee policy towards the antipodean

example can be gathered by the possible use of offshore detention centres. Canberra relies on the liberal use of concentration camps on remote sites in the Pacific, centres of calculated cruelty that serve to destroy the will of those whose governments have already done much to encourage their flight. The official justification is one of killing asylum seekers with kindness: We saved you from almost certain drowning at sea, only to seal you within the confines of legal purgatory. In the New Plan, one senses a touch of envy for it.

In October last year, it was revealed that the UK Prime Minister's office was considering the detention of asylum seekers in places as varied as Moldova, Morocco and Papua New Guinea. According to [documents](#) obtained by *The Guardian*, the Foreign Office had been charged with a task by Downing Street to "offer advice on possible options for negotiating an offshore asylum processing facility similar to the Australian model in Papua New Guinea and Nauru". Patel herself had flirted [with the idea](#) of establishing centres at Ascension and St. Helena, though she has had to content herself with ill-suited military barracks on the mainland that [facilitated the spread](#) of COVID-19.

Alison Mountz, in *The Death of Asylum*, makes much of this transformation of the island from a point of transit to that of hostile containment. From field research conducted in Italy's Lampedusa Island, Australia's Christmas Island and the US territories of Guam and Saipan, Mountz argues that "the strategic use of islands to detain people in search of protection - to thwart human mobility through confinement - is part of the death of asylum." Officials such as Patel are happy to help matters along.

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Featured image: Priti Patel speaking at a fringe event organized by Brexit Central, during the Conservative Party annual conference. Source: Empics Entertainment

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