



## Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

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President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

## LD4SOS POST SPRING CONFERENCE 2021 NEWSLETTER

### LD4SOS FRINGE ON FAMILY REUNION

#### **Brexit and Covid19 double whammy: refugee family reunion in the UK**

On Saturday 19 March 2021 LD4SOS hosted a conference fringe event with Enver Solomon, CEO of the Refugee Council, and Baroness Sally Hamwee, Lords Home Affairs Spokesperson, interviewed and moderated by Dr Ruvi Ziegler, Associate Professor in International Refugee Law at the University of Reading.

The event considered three main themes:

- (1) the concept of what refugee family reunion means and why it is needed;
- (2) current UK [policy](#), the effect of the discontinuation of the Dublin regulations, and the status of Sally's Refugee Family Reunion Bill;
- (3) the dangers posed by the new government's immigration plan (the so-called 'sovereign borders' bill) and the opportunities for making the case for progressive refugee policies in the year of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Convention (signed on 24 July 1951).

Enver highlighted the need for two key reforms to family reunion: allowing refugee children to sponsor family members; and allowing refugee parents to bring young adult children (18–25-year-olds) to the UK. He noted that the Home Office resists the first reform claiming that it will lead to more children coming on dangerous routes – but there is no evidence from countries that do allow for such sponsorship that this is the case. In response to Ruvi's question, he said that there is no substantive objection from the Home Office to the second reform, and so predicted this may end up happening. He highlighted the challenges arising from the legal aid rules put in place in 2012 which render family reunion cases ineligible bar exceptional cases. As per the discontinuation of Dublin, Enver explained in response to Ruvi's question that the UK is seeking to reach bilateral agreements to replicate Dublin with European countries, but none have been signed to-date.

Sally noted that her [Family Reunion Bill](#) received its Second reading in December 2017, and that the chances of it being given Lords' time for debate in the present Parliament are slim. Asked about community/guardianship sponsorship, Sally and Enver voiced their support, building on the Canada model. They emphasised the role of local authorities and, on the one hand, the tension between centralised decision-making curtailing local understanding, and, on the other, the need for government funding. Both expressed support for expanding resettlement (as per the 'safe and legal routes' motion that was passed the following day) as well as for humanitarian visas (a successful amendment to that motion, drafted by Ruvi and supported by LD4SOS). Both are needed to deter people traffickers and smugglers.

Enver called for support for the campaign that the Refugee Council will launch against the new Government plan for immigration, [published for consultation on Wednesday 24<sup>th</sup> March](#), which he labelled 'the most serious assault on the right to claim asylum ever'.

## **POLICY MOTION ON RESETTLEMENT AND HUMANITARIAN VISAS**

At the Liberal Democrat Spring Conference members passed a motion calling for the resettlement of refugee children and families in the UK and for the [creation of pathways to humanitarian visas](#).

There are an estimated [26 million refugees in the world today](#), half of them children. In 2016, Liberal Democrats in Parliament passed a cross-party amendment that forced the Government to offer sanctuary to unaccompanied refugee children from elsewhere in Europe. But, after resettling just 480 children, the Government has closed the 'Dubs scheme' entirely and has no plans to replace it. Meanwhile the Government has not replaced the Syrian Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme which ended last year, the equivalent of only 6 people in every Parliamentary constituency each year, and halted all refugee resettlement schemes in March 2020.

The adopted Party policy, amongst other things, calls for:

- Immediately restarting refugee resettlement and make a new, fully-funded commitment to **resettle 10,000 vulnerable refugees** each year
- Introducing a new Dubs scheme, and **resettle a further 10,000 child refugees** from Europe over the next ten years.
- Advancing Sally Hamwee's Family Reunion Bill, to allow refugees to sponsor their family members to join them here. If passed, the Bill would pave the way for refugee children and their families to live together, in safety, in the UK.
- Committing the Party to creating pathways for applications at embassies, consulates and border crossings for humanitarian visas for refugees to come to the UK – the first such commitment for any UK party. This was an LD4SOS-supported amendment to the motion, moved by Drs Ruvy Ziegler and Bradley Hillier-Smith.
- Advancing a full rollout of a system of independent guardians in England and Wales to represent, support, and safeguard child victims of human trafficking in their interactions with different agencies and processes (Liberal Democrat Christian Forum amendment)

You can see the whole policy [here](#).

Alistair Carmichael MP said on the new policy. "Refugees are often in a desperate situation. If we do not provide a safe and legal route to sanctuary in the UK, we are leaving them in the hands of people smugglers, human traffickers - and we force them to make dangerous attempts to cross the Channel."

Tim Farron MP spoke on the need to think about how we would want us, and our children, to be treated. It was completely wrong that children were divided into the "deserving and undeserving".

Janet King, LD4SOS Council member, spoke on the huge problems caused by the overlong wait that many asylum seekers had in waiting for a decision, and the consequences of that.

Suzanne Fletcher, LD4SOS Council member, spoke of problems in the asylum hotels that could be eased by freeing up asylum housing in the community, by giving leave to remain to asylum seekers currently there. She also spoke of the problems created for asylum seekers

who had crossed the Channel, who had had phones confiscated and not returned for many months, if then. She added, "Seeking asylum is not illegal under International refugee law. There is no such thing as 'an illegal', a word being bandied around as one of the reasons why the Home Office plans to place over 80 women in a proposed detention centre at Hassockfield in County Durham that I am part of a cross party campaign against, upping the hostile environment this government is promoting, and instigating fear and unnecessary hostility in the public."

Other Liberal Democrat speakers spoke of the importance of justice and care; experience as a refugee; how awful the detention centre at Dungavel was, and reminded us how welcome it was that Liberal Democrats ended child detention.

(Note – the policy to end the detention of asylum seeking children was proposed at a Liberal Democrat Conference way back in 2005 by LD4SOS Council member Jacquie Bell).

## **GOVERNMENT'S NEW IMMIGRATION PLAN**

We were shocked to read the Government's New Plan for Immigration which effectively punishes people for seeking asylum and creates a two-tier system for refugees. Please use [this link](#) to see the full proposals and have your own say in the public consultation.

The key policies are that:

- the Government will aim to remove migrants who arrive here via routes deemed illegal.
- If it is not possible to remove them, those individuals whose claims are successful will receive a new temporary protection status rather than an automatic right to settle and endure regular assessment for removal. They will have (even more) limited family reunion rights and limited access to benefits. As Enver Solomon from Refugee Council [said](#): "This unjustly differentiates between the deserving and undeserving refugee by choosing to provide protection for those fleeing war and terror based on how they travelled to the UK".
- Other proposals include reception centres for asylum seekers while their claims are processed, which without a time limit for processing makes them detention centres; refining the standard on what qualifies as a "well-founded fear of persecution" making it harder for people to be granted refugee status, and stricter age assessment processes including a national age board. Granting indefinite leave to remain to all resettlement refugees from arrival is part of the distinction between good and bad routes but is welcome in its own right.

There is no basis in the UN Refugee Convention for treating how a person arrives in a country as having any bearing on whether or not they are entitled to asylum. As Tim Farron MP said in the policy debate reported above, migrants do not have the luxury of choosing how to seek sanctuary when they are fleeing terror and oppression.

If we had to uproot ourselves suddenly, we would all want to go to the country where our relatives and friends lived; even if that was not the first safe country we travelled through. The Government has yet to produce its own promised proposals for safe and legal routes.

## **DOMESTIC ABUSE BILL MUST PROTECT MIGRANT WOMEN**

Liberal Democrat Peers successfully backed cross-party amendments in the Lords to offer protection for some of the most vulnerable survivors of abuse, who are miserably failed by the current law.

These amendments included:

- blocking the Home Office from using for immigration purposes data gathered from survivors of domestic abuse seeking support;
- ensuring migrant survivors can access space in a domestic abuse refuge;
- ensuring that all survivors of domestic abuse are protected regardless of their immigration status, as required under the Istanbul Convention.

Ahead of the Lords debate, Brian Paddick said “We will ensure that the Domestic Abuse Bill protects all survivors of domestic abuse, no matter where they were born”. The amended Bill goes back to the House of Commons in April.

## **UPDATE ON NAPIER AND PENALLY**

Penally Barracks have now been closed; we understand that Napier is still open and at 1st March was accommodating 55 asylum seekers.

In response to a question from Liberal Democrat peer Roger Roberts the Minister said a formal response will be issued to the damning interim report of the Independent Inspectorate when the final report is received.

A cynic might ask if there will ever be a final report if both barracks are closed first.