



Liberal Democrats for Seekers of Sanctuary

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President Lord Roger Roberts of Llandudno

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FAMILY REUNION AND THE IMMIGRATION BILL

There were three amendments on Family Reunion debated in the House of Lords, all strongly supported by our Liberal Democrat Peers, but not in the end successful.

In seeking to defend in the Commons, Lords Amendment 4B on family reunion and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, Alistair Carmichael said: "How bad have things got to be before any parent would consider the possibility of going to sea at this time of year, knowing the possible consequences that we saw in the Channel so very recently? My colleagues and I will never pass up an opportunity to put the case for the creation of safe and legal routes".

Tim Farron added: "I often hear people talk about the pull factor, but there is a push factor, for pity's sake. Those people will try to find a way to our shores by a safe and legal way, or by utterly brutal and dangerous ways, unless we provide those safe routes." It is Liberal Democrat [policy](#) to do so and has been for years. We will carry on pushing for this until it is Government policy too.

Although the Government defeated the Lords Amendment by 331 to 261, it did make new concessions. In particular it committed to a comprehensive review of safe and legal routes to the UK, looking at family reunion for refugees not just in Europe but globally. The Minister also committed to assess Home Office guidance for the UK's family reunion immigrant rules that will apply after 31 December 2020.

What happened is complex, but well explained [in this article](#) by Sally Hamwee, where she sets out what the Minister actually said. As Sally notes "The review has no objectives. It has no timetable (the three months mentioned is just the period within which the Government has to publish details about how the review will be undertaken). It doesn't provide for consultation other than regarding unaccompanied children (of course I don't deny the importance of that)."

A timely [report](#) from the British Red Cross "The Long Road to Reunion: making refugee family reunion safer" sets out a number of recommendations which should be enacted as part of the Government review. Our policy can be found [here](#).

LIBERAL DEMOCRATS CONDEMN TORY INACTION ON CHANNEL CROSSINGS

The Liberal Democrats have [condemned](#) the Conservative refusal to address Channel crossings after Tory MPs voted down an amendment to secure safe and legal routes for refugees and asylum seekers. Despite this amendment having cross party support in the House of Lords, Conservative MPs voted to remove it from the Bill by 333 votes to 264.

SAFE AND LEGAL ROUTES

Following [devastating news](#) of another tragedy in the Channel, Asylum Matters report on how organisations are arguing on national and regional media for both the creation and re-opening of safe and legal routes to sanctuary including a [new blog](#) by IMIX.



Refugee Action has launched a [new campaign push](#) calling for the relaunch of the currently on-hold refugee resettlement programme. They have recently been running an [Email Your MP action](#) and have [a graphic](#) showing that the only piece of the resettlement jigsaw missing is political will.

Earlier this month Baroness Williams, the Home Office minister in the House of Lords, [told Peers](#) that the UK's Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme would restart "as soon as possible" when "safe to do so". This is welcome news but a long-term commitment is still required.

Refugee Rights Europe have updated their [briefing document on the need for safe and legal routes](#) which highlights the need for solutions for those arriving spontaneously at the UK border in northern France but who would not fit family reunion criteria. They are also exploring the possibility of a new cross-Channel civil society forum focused on safe and legal routes comprised of both French and UK groups. If interested, you can get in touch with Refugee Rights Europe at info@refugee-rights.eu.

RESET has launched the [Communities for Refugees campaign](#), aiming to reach 5000 people to sign up to sponsor refugees to reach safety. The [first video of the campaign](#) gives a snapshot of Abdullah Alkhalaf's experience of being sponsored to Oxford.

RIGHT TO WORK

It was a good [question](#) from Tim Farron asking the Minister "when she plans to (a) complete and (b) publish the review on asylum seeker right to work." The answer was "ongoing" - keep on asking, Tim!

In a debate last [week](#), it was so right of Christine Jardine to speak out for the Right to Work for Asylum Seekers. It would give people living on a pittance dignity and the ability to use their skills to contribute to the economy, which would benefit by £42million.

Ireland, after giving asylum seekers the right to work in 2018, have announced plans to reduce the wait from 9 to 6 months. So it works there, why not here? It is Liberal Democrat [policy](#) to give asylum seekers the right to work three months after arrival.

SCHOOLS OF SANCTUARY

This is something for everyone reading this, not just in areas where there are asylum seekers and refugees. Here is the [first newsletter](#) from the Schools of Sanctuary network.

Liberal Democrat policy is to support Schools of Sanctuary. If you have any connection to a school in your area why not find out more and see if the scheme can be promoted?

LEVEL OF ASYLUM ALLOWANCE

This [researched report](#) from Asylum Matters highlights just how hard it is for Asylum Seekers to manage to live a life on the allowance that they get. The extra 3p is pathetic. Without a doubt it is an insult, not an increase. It is Liberal Democrat Policy for asylum seekers "that support rates should go up in line with benefits," and there is no good reason why not. If asylum seekers could work, many would not need the benefit anyway.

EVICCTIONS

The situation continues with disputes between the courts and Home Office, but at the time of writing no asylum seeker with a decision, positive or negative, should be being evicted. Turning people into the streets is bad enough, especially in winter, but in the current situation is a public health hazard. Destitution will be an issue after the present pandemic and we support moves to end it.

CRITICISM OF ASYLUM ACCOMMODATION AND ADVICE SERVICES

A [new report](#) by the Public Accounts Committee is very critical of the performance of the seven regional asylum accommodation and transport contracts and the UK wide contract for a national helpline and support service known as AIRE (Advice, Issue, Reporting and Eligibility), particularly during the pandemic.

It recognised that Covid meant things had to be done at speed but found the Home Office's failure to engage adequately with stakeholders "unacceptable", and expressed deep reservations about the ongoing use of hotels to accommodate asylum seekers.

In particular it found that vulnerable people were living far too long in accommodation unsuitable for their needs and recommended that the Department should, within three months, set out a clear plan for reducing use of hotels and ensuring that accommodation met the individual needs of asylum seekers.

It highlighted a failure to put in place a safeguarding framework to ensure the safety of the vulnerable people it was supporting.

The Home Office had failed to prepare adequately for the move to new contracts, and specifically failed to forecast level of demand for AIRE, leaving many people unable to get through in the first months of the contracts.

HOTELS

A detailed report about the use of hotels is in the Public Accounts Committee report in the article above. Also this is a [powerful letter](#), by Baobab Survivors, passed onto us by an LD4SOS member, on asylum seekers in hotels being abused by the far right. The letter makes clear what the situation is and who is to blame for the housing crisis - not the asylum seekers. We would have signed in support had we known signatures were being requested.

LEGAL ADVICE AT PENALLY

Last month we reported on concerns about the camps at Napier Barracks and Penally. Tim Farron [asked](#) the Home Secretary about the adequacy of access to legal aid immigration advice for asylum seekers housed at Napier Barracks in Folkestone and Penally Training Camp in Pembrokeshire, and got an evasive answer from her Under-Secretary of State.

QUALITY OF INTERPRETERS

The quality of interpreters used in Home Office interviews needs to be better assessed. RAS Voice is [conducting a survey](#), which we are encouraging any asylum seeker who has had a Home Office interview using an interpreter to fill in. Crucial decisions are made as a result of these interviews and it is critical that every word is properly interpreted, both ways.

RESETTLEMENT SCHEME DELAYS

UNHCR [say](#): "In the UK, The Vulnerable Persons Resettlement Scheme has been a success. But it is nearly complete and needs are huge and growing due to the pandemic. We call on the Government for clarity and to confirm when a new, global programme will start."

We support what UNHCR says, what for the UK Government is just a bureaucratic delay putting off making a decision is a terrible issue for those refugees trapped in camps as winter approaches. Action is needed now. No refugees have been resettled in the UK since flights were suspended in March. Last week we heard the Home Office plans to restart flights soon but this only amounts to resettling a further couple of hundred people. It doesn't tell us if the government will fulfil its previous commitment to a longer-term resettlement programme. The Home Secretary must listen to the UN and act, now.

SCOTTISH LIBERAL DEMOCRAT CONFERENCE

We were pleased to welcome Graham O'Neill from the Scottish Refugee Council to our fringe meeting here, along with our own Alistair Carmichael. They led a good discussion on current issues affecting asylum seekers in Glasgow – plenty to say!

CAN YOU HELP?

Christmas will be different this year for all of us. We may not be able to see our families and friends and Covid has created financial hardship for many of us. But individuals seeking sanctuary in the UK have to cope with the challenges of Covid on top of having already left their families and homes with many risking a dangerous journey to find safety. Christmas is traditionally a time of giving and remembering those less fortunate. If you are in a position to donate perhaps you could consider one of the organisations supporting refugees. Bad as things are now for seekers of sanctuary, they would be so much worse without all those organisations constantly standing up for their right to be treated as human beings.

MAURICE WREN AND THE REFUGEE COUNCIL

We do not normally comment on organisations we are working with in the voluntary sector, but are today making an exception for the Refugee Council (www.refugeecouncil.org.uk), which has been working since 1951 to provide practical and emotional support to asylum seekers and refugees, and has been a leading voice in campaigning on their behalf.

Their well-respected chief executive Maurice Wren will be retiring next month after eight successful years at the helm. LD4SOS has appreciated working with Maurice at Detention Forum, which he founded in 2009 and which still leads the now popular campaign to end indefinite immigration detention in the UK. Maurice joined Refugee Council in 2013 from Shelter and previously Asylum Aid. He co-founded the ground-breaking Independent Asylum Commission in 2007 and co-chaired the National Asylum Stakeholder Forum at the Home Office. In 2017 he was awarded an honorary Doctorate at Edinburgh University in recognition of his `outstanding commitment, leadership and contribution to humanitarian support for refugees and asylum seekers`.

Enver Solomon will replace Maurice next month, coming to Refugee Council from Just For Kids Law, and bringing a wealth of experience of working on behalf of young asylum seekers and as a fellow trustee at Asylum Aid.

We wish Maurice a happy `retirement` and Enver many successful years at Refugee Council. If you wish, a very appropriate way to thank Maurice might perhaps be to choose Refugee Council for your Christmas donation this year.

[Donate to help refugees rebuild their lives | Refugee Council](#)