

Asylum and refugee policy – still a political football?

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No group of people currently within the UK borders has less control of their own futures than people who have reached these shores seeking political asylum or fleeing as refugees. With the poll poised to open [Avery Hancock](#) considers the prospects ahead for them.



In a rare moment of cross-party agreement ahead of the second prime ministerial election [debate](#) last week, Gordon Brown, David Cameron, and Nick Clegg committed themselves to 'never play fast and loose' with the UK's commitment to offering asylum. The [Asylum Election Pledge](#), organized by a trio of civil liberties and refugee charities, has been signed by hundreds of other parliamentary candidates, who promise 'to remember the importance of refugee protection, even in free and wide-ranging debates about immigration policy...and to never play hard and loose with the proud tradition of a nation that must always offer succor to those in genuine fear of persecution.'

Fine words, but with the immigration debate heating up after [Bigotgate](#) and Nick Clegg's announcement of the Lib Dem's [amnesty policy](#) for illegal immigrants, it seems inevitable that the parties, the media, and most worryingly voters will continue to confound economic migration (legal or illegal) with asylum for refugees fleeing war or persecution.

As a signatory to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), Britain has a long history of granting asylum and is currently home to between 1 or 2 per cent of the world's 16 million refugees. However, the 'burden' of refugees on the UK is often overstated. A recent MORI poll showed that on average, the British public believes that 23 per cent of the world's refugees and asylum seekers are walking our streets. In 2008, the UK was actually ranked 17th in the league table of industrialised countries for the number of asylum applications per head of population.

In fact, Europe as a whole takes in just 14 per cent of refugees worldwide (that is, one in seven). Instead, most refugees are disproportionately found in poor countries. According to UNHCR about 80 per cent of the world's refugees are living in developing countries, often in overcrowded camps. Africa and Asia host more than three quarters of the world's refugees between them.

A [recent report from the Refugee Council](#) seeks to dispel the myths that asylum seekers choose to come to the UK over any other country, perhaps lured by promises of benefits or free housing. Asylum seekers, they argue, are primarily concerned with escaping persecution or war and finding a place of safety. It is more a matter of chance that they land on UK shores at all. Over three quarters of the asylum seekers they interviewed had no knowledge of UK welfare benefits and most did not expect to receive any assistance. Once here, asylum seekers do not get a free ride on the gravy-train of benefits. In fact, 'in view of the difficult economic climate' the [Home Office](#) has cut benefit support to asylum seekers to £5 a day, which is just over half of what the government says a person needs to live on in Britain

What is not a myth, however, is the huge backlog of the asylum cases in front of the UK Border Agency. A recent Home Affairs Committee [report](#) found there are currently 400,000 to 450,000 unresolved 'legacy' asylum cases, some dating back more than a decade. It seems unlikely the UKBA will clear these cases before its target of 2011. This year alone the backlog cost taxpayers an estimated [£600 million](#). It certainly doesn't benefit asylum-seekers. While waiting for a decision on whether or not they will be granted refugee status and be allowed to remain in the UK, they are unable to work, and some can face indefinite [detention](#) (along with any children they have) until their status is resolved.

So how would each of the parties address the troubled asylum process? Labour dubiously discusses asylum in the 'crime and immigration' section of their manifesto. They stress the record low number of new asylum claims – new applications were down 30 per cent in the 4th quarter of 2009 (at 4,765) compared with the same period in 2008 (at 6,775). Labour also emphasize the low cost to the taxpayer of the asylum system. The [cost](#) of handling new cases in 2007-08 was £176 million, of which £80 million (45 per cent) was accounted for by accommodation and welfare support. They will continue to aim to process all applications within six months, rightly claiming that faster decisions are often fairer decisions.

The Conservative manifesto doesn't mention any proposed changes but the party has condemned the slow

decision-making process and increasing backlogs. However, back in 2005 the Tories called for all asylum applications to take place outside the country, and for the UK to [withdraw](#) from the 1951 Refugee Convention (no other country ever has). Since then more progressive influences in the party, like Ian Duncan Smith's [Centre for Social Justice](#), have argued for more support for asylum-seekers in order to avoid destitution and promote voluntary return. Recently the [Daily Mail](#) was outraged by David Cameron's suggestion that homosexuals should be allowed to stay in Britain if their lives would be put in danger were they to be sent home.

The Liberal Democrats would establish an [Independent Asylum Agency](#), taking responsibility away from the Home Office (which they call a 'political hothouse'). They would push for an EU-wide plan to ensure that the responsibility is shared evenly fairly between European countries. They would allow asylum seekers to work. Their most radical and welcome change, however, would be to abolish the [imprisonment of children](#) in immigration detention centres, a policy which LibDem Shadow Home Secretary Chris Hume describes as 'unnecessary...inhumane....and un-British.'

To digress briefly here: almost half of the 1,065 held in our [detention centres](#) during 2009 were under five, and all but 200 were 11 or under. The emotional damage inflicted on children in detention centres like [Yarl's Wood](#) has been highlighted most recently by Sir Al Aynsley-Green, the Children's Commissioner for England. The [Green party](#) would also end the detention of children for all but the most exceptional circumstances, citing the [growing evidence](#) that families whose asylum claims have failed are no more likely to abscond when the threat of detention or removal looms.

Back to the Liberal Democrats – perhaps surprisingly, Nick Clegg's offer of 'earned citizenship' for illegal migrants who have been living illegally in Britain for more than 10 years has been criticised by refugees rights organisations. [Refugee Action](#), a charity that assists more than 10,000 asylum seekers a year, said the Liberal Democrat plan may "undermine" public trust in immigration policies. A spokesperson for the charity told the [Daily Mail](#): 'At a time when we are facing unique pressures on public spending, the priority must be to allocate resources towards those with the greatest need, rather than those with the longest period of unprocessed residency.'

Meanwhile, the far-right parties take a dimmer view of asylum. The BNP would automatically reject all asylum seekers who 'passed through safe countries' on their way to Britain. UKIP would withdraw from the 1951 Convention and replace it with a UK Asylum Act limiting the number of refugees the country would accept. In the meantime all asylum seekers would be held in detention centres.

All these proposal for tweaks or for major changes in the asylum process in the UK must be considered the broader context of refugee movements. Of course it would be a much better world if people did not have to move to escape extreme poverty, natural disasters, and war. What is needed not just on the UK side but a global effort to reduce the causes of desperate migration. Environmental policies- particularly mitigating the effect climate change in developing countries- are absolutely essential. The UN is already predicting there will be 50 million [environmental refugees](#) by the end of decade.

Better arms control and investment in governance is needed to stop fuelling deadly wars in Africa and elsewhere. Currently eight of the top ten UK asylum applicant nationalities are from fragile countries, including, let's not forget, [Iraq](#)- where the UK continues to flout international law by sending back failed asylum seekers- and Afghanistan. As the *Guardian's* [Gary Younge](#) put it, a responsible foreign policy that forgoes unnecessary wars would allow many people to stay where they would rather be – in their own homes.