

# Independent Asylum Commission

CONDUCTING A NATIONWIDE REVIEW OF THE UK ASYLUM SYSTEM

IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE **CITIZEN** ORGANISING FOUNDATION

**PRESS RELEASE**

**30.11.07**

## **GOVERNMENT'S TOUGH TALK AND TREATMENT OF ASYLUM SEEKERS IS DAMAGING SOCIAL COHESION, CITIZENS' ENQUIRY TOLD**

The Government has been accused of damaging social cohesion by its policies and rhetoric on asylum. The criticisms were made by a wide range of witnesses at the final public hearing of the Independent Asylum Commission on November 29<sup>th</sup> at Lambeth Town Hall in Brixton. The hearing focused on the impact of the Government's asylum policies on social cohesion in communities in London.

Six of the Commissioners chosen to lead the enquiry, including former High Court judge Sir John Waite, President of the Association of Muslim Lawyers Ifath Nawaz, Bishop Pat Lynch, the Earl of Sandwich, and Canon Professor Nick Sagovsky of Westminster Abbey heard testimony from witnesses including the UNHCR (the UN refugee agency), local government representatives, leading thinktanks, and asylum seekers living in London.

Jill Rutter, Senior Research Fellow in Migration at leading progressive thinktank the Institute for Public Policy Research (ipprr) told Commissioners that the Government was responsible for increasing public hostility toward asylum seekers by their use of language.

Dr Rutter said:

“Pejorative language used by Ministers makes the situation much worse. Talking tough simply constructs a social problem in the minds of the public and reinforces a vicious circle of tabloid headlines, leading to public hostility, leading to ever tougher pronouncements.”

Dr Rutter launched a broadside against the Government's asylum policies, criticizing the quality of decisions made by the Home Office, the 'canteen culture' among caseworkers who reinforce negative prejudices towards asylum seekers in the staff canteen, lack of access to legal advice, and she condemned the planned restrictions on primary healthcare for asylum seekers.

Dr Rutter said:

“The New Asylum Model has ameliorated the situation a little, but some asylum decisions are still shocking – such as the rejection of a Somali woman’s claim on the basis that her skin looked too dark for the ethnic group of which she claimed to be a member. The Home Office’s interpretation of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees is inhumane and in breach of pretty much all human rights standards.”

Jacqueline Parlevliet, UK Deputy Representative for the UNHCR (the UN refugee agency) mounted a robust defence of the 1951 Convention, which is the foundation of international refugee protection. She criticized the Convention’s treatment by both politicians and the judiciary.

Ms Parlevliet said:

“UNHCR regularly comments on UK legislation relating to refugees. Unfortunately the Government has been increasingly restrictive in its interpretation of the 1951 Convention. For example, the UK has just passed a law which allows for the automatic deportation of a refugee – that is a person who has been deemed in need of sanctuary – after just one year of imprisonment. And if judges try to subject international law to minute legal dissection, then the spirit and ethical values of refugee protection may well be eviscerated.”

The Government’s asylum record was also criticized by the right-of-centre thinktank, the Centre for Social Cohesion. The Centre’s Director, renowned author and commentator, Dr Douglas Murray, blamed the Government for the threat to community cohesion by allowing mass immigration to the UK.

Dr Murray said:

“There is a big confusion between asylum seekers, who have humanitarian needs, and economic migrants who come here to work. Asylum seekers suffer when it is in fact legal economic migrants who are a big part of the problem. This has damaged social cohesion to the extent that I fear that if the British public were asked to host a large number of refugees, as they were with the Bosnians in the 1990s, people would be much more unsympathetic.”

Dr Murray suggested that negative attitudes towards asylum seekers resulted from the Home Office’s failure to deport Islamist extremists who had claimed asylum.

Dr Murray said:

“Some Islamist extremists like Abu Hamza and Abu Qatada were not fleeing persecution – they were seeking somewhere to plot terrorist activities and preach hate. Rashid Ramda was granted asylum but was involved in planning the Paris Bomb Plot. Yet it took ten years for the Home Office to deport him. These people give the public the impression that it is easy to abuse the system to stay in the UK. It seems clear to me that the failure to deal effectively with a small number of genuinely bogus asylum seekers is causing problems for genuine asylum seekers.”

The Government’s policy of dispersing asylum seekers to ethnic clusters across the UK also came in for heavy criticism from Dr Murray:

“There are parallel communities growing up across the UK where asylum seekers are sent to places where their compatriots live – if you are Somali you get sent to Cardiff, for instance. This has led to entrenched ideas and entrenched sectarianism remaining unchallenged. This really does not help the cause of community cohesion in Britain.”

The Commission heard evidence from Ben Lea, of Hillingdon Borough Council, who explained that a recent Council Tax rise of 1% was entirely due to the shortfall in central government funding for the care of 900 unaccompanied asylum seeking children who had arrived at Heathrow.

Mr Lea said:

“It costs Hillingdon Council £190 a week to look after one young asylum seeker, yet the Government only reimburses us £100 per person, which is paid up to eighteen months after the service has been delivered. We have tried to absorb the cost by making all our other services more efficient, but in the end the local taxpayer is having to pick up the tab for young asylum seekers – it is a difficult message to sell to local people.”

Mr Lea was representing the Local Government Association’s High Ethnicity Special Interest Group – twenty-four local authorities in England with large minority ethnic populations – who are calling for the Government to fully reimburse them for the cost of supporting young asylum seekers. They currently receive no reimbursement for those young asylum seekers whose claims have been refused by the Home Office yet are still in the country and require care.

Mr Lea said:

“The 200 young people whose claims have failed but have not left the UK and are living in Hillingdon cost the Borough £1million per annum. The number is so high purely because of the location of Heathrow in the Borough – it is unfair for our communities to foot the bill. We don’t blame the asylum seekers – it is not their fault – it is the Government’s fault for not making up the shortfall in funding.”

Femi Adefolaju of the Barking and Dagenham Asylum Support Group described the state of social cohesion in the borough where the BNP won twelve council seats at local elections dominated by fears about asylum and immigration.

Pastor Adefolaju said:

“Barking and Dagenham is a very sensitive and volatile area. The BNP is growing in strength and asylum seekers – or those who look ‘foreign’ - are being targeted. Foreigners are slaughtered on the altar of political expediency.”

Femi blamed the media for exacerbating community tensions in Barking and Dagenham:

“The BNP put leaflets through doors telling residents that asylum seekers and immigrants are being paid to get housing in the area – and then ITV ran a documentary which blamed asylum seekers for our housing shortage and this resulted in attacks on asylum seekers. I read the appalling things written in the newspapers about asylum

seekers, then look at the asylum seekers I work with and think, these people are the opposite of what the media say they are. Remember, they are all human beings.”

The Hearing closed with a testimony from Yeukai, a Zimbabwean whose claim has been refused and is living destitute in London. Yeukai described being detained in three different detention centres during the course of her asylum claim, including with hundreds of foreign national prisoners awaiting deportation in Dungavel detention centre in Scotland.

Yeukai said:

“I came to England because my political activities in Zimbabwe meant my life was in danger. But when I was locked up in Dungavel, having committed no crime, with six other women and hundreds of convicts, I wasn’t sure whether this was Britain or Mugabe’s Zimbabwe.”

On her release from detention, Yeukai found herself destitute – not permitted to work, denied benefits and accommodation, and told by the Home Office to return to Zimbabwe voluntarily.

Yeukai said:

“I am still in limbo. The Home Office is not responding to my fresh claim and I live hand to mouth in the capital. I can’t go back to Mugabe’s Zimbabwe, and in the meantime even getting access to vital healthcare is difficult.”

Sir John Waite, Co-chair of the Independent Asylum Commission, said:

“At this final hearing of the Commission, we took a broader perspective on the asylum system and heard about the impact of policies and pronouncements on social cohesion. My fellow Commissioners and I will be looking for ways to improve social cohesion when we publish our recommendations for reform of the asylum system in Spring 2008, and the evidence we heard today gives us a lot to think about.”

Commission Co-ordinator, Jonathan Cox, said:

“This final hearing of the Commission fulfilled our mandate to listen to all sides of the debate, as we will continue to do before we publish credible and workable recommendations next year.”

**For further details contact Jonathan Cox, IAC Co-ordinator: 07919 484066.**

#### **Notes for editors:**

- The Independent Asylum Commission is conducting a nationwide review of the UK asylum system.
- The IAC is independent of government and the voluntary sector, and is accountable to citizens.
- The Commission is keen to hear from any individual or organization who is concerned about the asylum system – from those who believe it is too generous to those who

believe it is not providing adequate protection for refugees. Information on can be found at [www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk](http://www.independentasylumcommission.org.uk)

Transcripts and photographs of the London Hearing are available on request.

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