



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

30th November 2020

New Content

RE: MIGRANT CHANNEL CROSSINGS.

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of the distressing issue of migrants crossing the Channel; your comments upon which I have read with great interest.

Like you, I was deeply shocked, and saddened, by the recent loss of life in the Channel as a boat carrying migrants sank in French waters near Dunkirk. My thoughts at this terrible time are with the loved ones of those who died. This awful incident highlights the danger of crossing the Channel by small boat and the ruthlessness of the criminals who are exploiting vulnerable people.

The French authorities are leading the law enforcement response and the UK Government is fully supporting this. We are determined to bring to justice the ruthless criminal people smugglers whose actions endanger lives. The Home Secretary has been clear from the beginning that the criminals exploiting vulnerable people will be stopped and I offer my complete support to this important work. The fatalities were especially sad because the crossing being attempted was unnecessary – the family were already in a safe country, France, and they could have claimed asylum there.

I entirely agree with you that the number of small boat crossings is unacceptable. The Home Secretary has said that we must make this route unviable in order to secure a long-term solution to this issue.

The National Crime Agency, Border Force and the Police have been engaging closely with the French authorities to crack down on the criminal gangs who facilitate these crossings. Firm action is needed to protect our border and save the lives of migrants who are being so cruelly misled by criminals and people smugglers.

The Home Secretary has outlined a two-part plan to stop the entry of migrants to the UK across the Channel. I welcome the work taking place to stop the boats from leaving France in the first place. Ministers are urging the French authorities to move migrants, who are caught attempting to reach the UK by boat, away from Calais and the UK is funding patrols on the beaches of northern France to prevent migrants crossing in the first place. The second part of the plan is to intercept and return anyone who attempts to make a crossing. I understand that the Government has asked the French to consider interceptions at sea and has offered to work with the authorities in France on joint exercises to highlight how boats can be returned safely.



Importantly, once the occupants of the boats arrive on our shores, they do not automatically receive the right to remain in the UK. I agree with the argument that France is a safe country with an established asylum system. It is equally clear those coming across the Channel should claim asylum in the first safe country they reach.

This has never been about escorting boats across the Channel. Once an unseaworthy small boat reaches the sea, the first priority is to save lives - this is something I agree with and will not apologise for. The Channel is one of the busiest shipping lanes anywhere in the world and those on board the small boats are not wearing suitable life jackets despite the rough waters. It is important not to forget that these people are desperate and will put their own lives and those of their children at risk rather than go back to France. This is a complex and extremely challenging issue.

If the occupants of small boats are intercepted by the Border Force or the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), they are medically assessed and transferred for interview by immigration enforcement officers. At this point they may make a claim for asylum and will be processed in the usual way. However, if an individual is known to have made a claim in another country, the Home Office will look at the process of returning them as promptly as possible.

I welcome the fact that the Home Secretary has appointed a Clandestine Channel Threat Commander to help lead the UK's response to Channel crossings. Together, the Home Secretary and Dan O'Mahoney will have the primary responsibility of making the Channel route unviable for small boat crossings. I am pleased that the Government has appointed an individual with such a wide range of experience, including service in the Royal Marines.

I hope I can also reassure you that measures are in place specifically to deal with Coronavirus risks. Since the Government introduced quarantine measures in June, those who have come to the UK by small boat have been placed in facilities where they must self-isolate for 14 days. You may also be reassured to know that anyone who is symptomatic will be taken to designated accommodation and tested according to Public Health England guidance.

More broadly, the UK continues to be one of the world's leading refugee resettlement states. As a country, we resettle more refugees than any other in Europe and are in the top five countries worldwide. Since 2015, the Government has resettled more than 25,000 vulnerable refugees in need of protection through our refugee resettlement schemes, with around half being children. These refugees are resettled directly from conflict zones - such as Syria - rather than from safe European countries such as Italy or France, as the previous s67 Dubs amendment did. We believe that it is most important to prioritise those refugees in dangerous situations, not those already in Europe. I should also add here that we make an enormous contribution to tackling this difficult issue through our aid budget - a contribution that eclipses that made by many of our near neighbours in Europe.

There are also safe and legal routes for those refugees seeking to be reunited with their families. In the year ending March 2020, over 7,400 refugee family reunion visas were issued to partners and children of those previously granted asylum or humanitarian protection in the UK. This is 37 percent more than in the previous year. From the 1st January, these very effective and fair family reunion rules will also apply to relevant family members of UK



refugees where the family member is in an EU state, replacing the EU's Dublin rules, unless an alternative agreement can be reached with the EU in the meantime.

I understand that many people feel that the current asylum regime is open to abuse. Until the UK leaves the transition period with the EU later this year, there are limits to the action that can be taken on the current asylum system. I agree that the system as it stands is too inflexible and rigid. I also appreciate the frustration felt by many across the country regarding vexatious claims in the asylum system. After speaking to Home Office Ministers, I am encouraged by the commitment to the development of a new balanced and fair asylum system. The key elements will be to ensure that it is protected from abuse, while providing protection to the most vulnerable people who need our help.

I hope you can see from this response that the Government is taking firmer action to stop these dangerous crossings. I am encouraged by this work and will continue to support the Government to continue to act fast to make this route unviable and end the cruel and dangerous people smuggling between France and the UK.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

With best wishes,
Tom

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