

Asylum Support Contracts [Westminster Hall] 10th February 2016

The debate began at 9.30 am

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm160210/halltext/160210h0001.htm#160210107000504>

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That the House has considered contracts let by the Home Office for the provision of asylum support.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Mr Stringer, and it is also a pleasure to be joined by many colleagues from across the House to consider this important issue this morning.

It is my hope that this debate today will generate some better answers from the Home Office in response to the serious concerns that have been raised by many Members from all parties in the House about the provision of support to asylum seekers under contract to the Home Office.

I begin by paying tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough (Andy McDonald) and my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff Central (Jo Stevens), who have done an excellent job, alongside many others, in bringing concerns about the practical implications of the failures of companies providing asylum support service across the UK to the attention of the House and the country.....

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Regarding how these properties are let, was he as amazed as I was to discover that different people can be put into a single bedroom quite inappropriately? A young man in my community who is gay and who has come to this country is having to share a bedroom with somebody who was once a member of the Taliban. Does my hon. Friend not find that an utterly ridiculous state of affairs?

Andy McDonald: My hon. Friend [Stephen Doughty] is eloquently analysing the structure of the contracts. Does he share my frustration that Jomast, a subcontractor in my area, has some 3,000 properties? If they are paid £11.50 per person per night, the back of an envelope calculation shows an income of £12 million a year. Such **access to taxpayers'** money could surely provide a better service than the one we are currently enjoying.

Main speech

Andy McDonald (Middlesbrough) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Stringer. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) for securing this incredibly important debate. My constituency has the highest concentration of asylum seekers anywhere in the United Kingdom. In December 2015, we had 1,042 asylum seekers, which is way in

excess of the cluster limit. The Minister may say that the number has been reduced by some small amount, but the figures are clear. In some communities, there is an asylum seeker for every 18 residents, and I hope the Minister will take that fact on board.

I am terrifically proud of Middlesbrough's long history of compassion and support. We have Justice First, the Churches—Methodist Action, the Catholic Church and the Anglican Church—and other faith groups, charities and individuals. A fantastic network of love and compassion underpins all that work, and I am delighted to celebrate it.

It was the red doors issue that brought this matter into focus. While I do not criticise Andrew Norfolk of *The Times* for his excellent piece of work that brought the issue into the light, I do not agree that the local contractor, Jomast, deliberately set out to mark the properties occupied by those seeking sanctuary, but it was clearly known to the contractor. They were its properties and it painted the doors red, so for it to plead ignorance of the issue is indicative of the arrogance that characterises how it goes about its business. However, it was not deliberate so let us paint the doors in other colours and move on.

G4S is the main contractor in my region. It has no record of running housing contracts and yet it still got the contract. The local subcontractor, Stuart Monk of Jomast, then had them over a barrel. He held out for the best deal that he could possibly extract, because he had the properties and G4S did not, and he has made a mint. G4S says it does not make any money out of the contract. Well, diddums. If it does not like it, let us bring the contract to an end and get G4S out of the picture as quickly as possible. It has demonstrated that it should be nowhere near Government public service business. Just look at what it did in our prisons. We only have to cast our minds back to the dreadful fraud it perpetrated on the taxpayer over the prisoner tagging contract. It is not a fit and proper company and the sooner it is out of our national life, the better.

The arrogance and **contempt that characterises so much of G4S's behaviour** was never more evident than when John Whitwam, a managing director, recently appeared before the Home Affairs Committee. He quite deliberately tried to leave the Committee with the impression that the local authority was totally engaged throughout the process, but that is simply not true. Indeed, the problem is that local authorities have no standing in the business of housing asylum seekers and have **been cut out of the loop.** Following Mr Whitwam's suggestion that local authorities are somehow involved in the approval and inspection of properties, I trust that the Minister will speak to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee because I think that Parliament was grossly misled and I hope that action follows.

What on earth are we doing as a country? Why do the Government think that the right thing to do in response to a humanitarian crisis is to create a structure that is all about making money—**profits created by handing over taxpayers' money to private companies?** There is something wrong here. Of course, we want to carry on providing succour and support for our sisters and brothers, but the Government simply abuse

our good nature. That support and sanctuary should come with a commitment to support the local services that have to respond. My town has been hammered by the lunacy of austerity. My local authority has suffered cut after cut, so that I am now questioning whether it can even begin to discharge the barest of statutory functions.

In addition, what do we learn today on the back of the abolition of the revenue support grant, which will cripple communities up and down the country? In *The Guardian* this morning it is laid bare: again, the Tory Government punish Labour councils and give support to their Tory boroughs. **The Government's behaviour is partial, inequitable, grossly discriminatory and ill-becoming a party that purports to govern for the entire country. It is beneath the contempt of the shires and City bankers to trouble themselves with such matters—leave it to the northerners, the Scots and the Welsh—because those in their cosy world do not want to be troubled.**

It will escape no one's attention that in the Prime Minister's constituency we will not find a single person seeking sanctuary, even though areas such as his receive the favourable local government finance settlement transitional relief, while areas that take asylum seekers get nothing at all. The unfairness is stark. Perhaps the Prime Minister's mother should write him a letter. Understandably, the Tories will say, "Look to the regions, look to the Labour heartlands. They won't protest, they won't complain, so we can get away with it." Therein lies the dilemma.

We are proud of our compassion and of the welcome given to strangers in our communities—many of us and the people we represent have been strangers too. We try to recognise our good fortune and to be generous to those who have not been so fortunate. Yes, we will not walk by on the other side of the road and we will try to treat people as we would like to be treated ourselves, but we look to the Government to behave in a patriotic, fair and balanced way. That means that we respond generously as a nation and we do not leave it only to those parts of our country that are already facing immensely difficult times.

We look proudly at our history as a nation. We are rightly marking the 71st anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz-Birkenau. We rightly remember the Kindertransport of the 1930s as a positive response to the crisis faced by thousands of children throughout Europe. It therefore pains me to hear the Prime Minister of Great Britain and Northern Ireland describing the modern-day Kindertransportees as a **"bunch of migrants"**. **I want better from our country's Prime Minister and so do millions of our fellow citizens.** I am afraid that that laid bare the true thinking of this cruel and pernicious Government.

If every town and city in the United Kingdom welcomed 5% of the distressed, vulnerable and persecuted people that my wonderful town of Middlesbrough does, no one would even notice that they were here. What happens instead? The whole exercise has been turned into a profit-making, value-extracting one for the likes of Stuart Monk and his company Jomast to make millions of pounds of profit from.

The Minister is a decent man and I look forward to further discussions with him about how things might be progressed. However, I met with him in November 2014 and

many of the issues that are being raised now were raised with him then. I regret to note that absolutely no progress has been made since. I hope that he takes on board the comments of hon. Members from throughout the United Kingdom today and accedes to the request for a formal review of a rotten contract. Let us start behaving properly.