

Home Secretary's speech on immigration: 5 March 2026

5.3.2026 - Shabana Mahmood | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Home Secretary Shabana Mahmood's speech at the Institute for Public Policy Research on immigration reforms.

[Political content redacted]

Thank you very much Harry, for that kind introduction.

It is a pleasure to be here...

And to be hosted by the IPPR, Britain's leading progressive think tank...

A fitting host to set out not just what this government is doing on asylum and migration...

But why.

There is no denying that we meet at a difficult time [...].

It is a time when who we are and what we stand for is contested, sometimes bitterly.

And nowhere is that contest more keenly felt than in the politics of migration.

[Political content redacted]

Which is where my story comes in.

People like my parents who came to this country in search of a better life.

They found work here, laid down roots...

[Political content redacted]

Those traditions are different...

But they are united by a shared set of values.

First and foremost, fairness...

And a recognition that, in this country, the dice are loaded against working-class communities.

Alongside that, a belief not just in greater equality in general...

But that contribution, specifically, must be rewarded...

And that rights flow from our responsibilities to one another.

We are also united by an enduring decency and tolerance towards others...

Informed by a quintessentially British desire to live and let live.

We are, and have always been, internationalist in outlook.

Alongside a quiet but profound patriotism.

As I have said before, it is a patriotism best defined by George Orwell.

A love of this country for what it is, always has been, and always will be...

But also for its capacity to change.

As Orwell wrote in 'The Lion and the Unicorn':

"What can the England of 1940 have in common with the England of 1840?"

"But what have you in common with the child of five whose photograph your mother keeps on the mantelpiece?"

"Nothing, except that you happen to be the same person."

Ours is a patriotism that unites timeless tradition...

With an acceptance - a welcoming - of change.

As [...] Home Secretary, it is my job to ask:

With those values in mind, what should our migration system look like?

Well, it would surely start with levels of migration that are, first and foremost, fair.

Fair to those living in this country today...

[...]

Fair also to those seeking a new and better future in this country...

With skills to bring, and a contribution to make.

And what of our asylum system?

It would surely mean delivering the noble intentions of the drafters of the original, 1951 Refugee Convention.

Providing safety to genuine refugees - shelter from the storm until they are able to return safely home.

That, as the convention clearly states, the right to protection...

Must come alongside a responsibility to live by the laws and values of this land.

And finally, that our asylum system is not abused...

By unscrupulous people smugglers...

Who profit from false promises...

And trade in human misery.

[Political content redacted]

There is ample space for a migration system that is fair, but – where it needs to be – firm.

There can be both compassion and control...

In a system that rewards contribution...

And those who play by the rules.

Against that bar, how does migration and asylum in this country fare today?

Are we living up to those values?

The answer, quite clearly, is no.

We are not even close.

On legal migration, [...] Between 2021 and the 2024 General Election, [the previous government] oversaw net migration of two and a half million...

To put that in some context, at least 1 in every 30 people in the UK today arrived in that time.

In just 4 years, this country experienced levels of migration it had previously seen across 4 decades.

It was not just the scale, but also the nature of that change that was so destabilising.

This was most evident in the scandal of lowering the skills requirements...

For some of those who arrived on the Health and Social Care visa.

As we now know, fraud was rife - with phoney care providers created to draw people to this country on a false promise of work.

Absent action, over the next 5 years some 350,000 low-skilled workers and their dependents will qualify for settlement.

At that point, they will gain access to welfare, free healthcare and social housing.

We must be honest about the scale of this.

We have never, in the history of this country, had so much low-skilled migration in so little time.

We estimate, based on findings from the Migration Advisory Committee...

That the lifetime cost to the taxpayer will be £10 billion.

That figure would be paid for by working people in this country.

It would mean ever longer waits for the 1.3 million people in this country on the social housing list...

And yet more pressure placed upon our National Health Service.

It is an affront to the idea of fairness within our migration system.

Our asylum system is [political content redacted].

Criminal gangs are profiting from their vile trade in human beings.

People have travelled the world, with untold suffering in the process...

And over 180 people have died in those final miles across the Channel.

Our own system has faced immense pressure.

Since the small boats first arrived, nearly 200,000 people have come to this country across the Channel.

Today, over 100,000 people live in asylum accommodation, paid for by the taxpayer.

This includes both those awaiting an asylum claim or an appeal...

And also thousands who have failed their claims...

But cannot be returned to their home country.

The pressure on the taxpayer is vast:

Last year alone, £4 billion was spent on asylum accommodation.

And I can tell you - as someone with 3 asylum hotels in my own constituency - that the pressure on local communities is considerable.

It is worth pausing on that thought...

On what this system looks like to those outside of rooms like these...

Hard working people across this country...

Engaged in the daily struggle to make ends meet.

They see a state that they pay taxes towards...

Yet it is proving unable to stop a flow of dinghies across the channel.

And they see a state that is paying billions towards hotels like the one near them.

It doesn't look fair...

Because it is not fair.

And it erodes their trust in government.

That erosion in trust matters.

Because people ask, fairly:

If we cannot deal with so visible a failure, what can the state achieve at all?

[Political content redacted]

It is within that context that I am embarking on some of the most significant reforms to migration - both legal and asylum - in a generation.

On legal migration, that means ensuring we are attracting those who can and will contribute to this country...

That migration levels are manageable.

So we are attracting high-skilled workers...

While, at the same time, introducing new controls to migration routes...

Which has now seen net migration fall by nearly 70%.

For those who come to this country...

Who can contribute to our national life...

I am clear:

They should have a path to settlement, and ultimately citizenship.

I want people to put down roots in this country...

To contribute to our national life.

But it is essential that the privilege of living in this country forever is earned, and not automatic.

We are currently reviewing the responses to our consultation on the new the rules around settlement...

But let me be clear about the principles we put into that consultation.

First, the qualifying period for settlement should move - as a norm - from 5 years to 10.

Secondly, there will be certain conditions that must be met in order to qualify:

A clean criminal record...

No debt to the taxpayer...

A history of being in work and paying taxes...

And higher standards of English language.

In this week's rule changes, we made the first of these changes.

A year from now, those who arrived on a visa...

Now seeking settlement in this country will need to speak English as a foreign language to A-Level Standard.

I should also state, for the record, that we are talking about English as a foreign language.

A working knowledge of Shakespeare and Chaucer is very welcome, but will not be a condition of settling in this country...

Command of the English language itself, however, will be.

Our intention, subject to consultation, is that the point at which settlement is possible will now vary.

We have proposed that some will earn settlement at or earlier than 5 years...

Including public servants, like doctors and nurses...

And those who are contributing the most to the nation's finances.

Others will have to wait longer before they can apply for settlement.

[Political content redacted]

[We will] address the challenge posed by the impending settlement of the hundreds of thousands of low-skilled workers and their dependants...

Who arrived between 2022 and 2024.

That means applying any rule changes to those who are in the UK today...

But have not yet received settled status.

If we do not, we will see a £10 billion pound drain on our public finances...

And further strain on public services - like housing and healthcare - already under immense pressure.

That is an affront to the idea of fairness within our society.

It is an affront to every family currently waiting for social housing...

To those on who have already spent too long on an NHS waiting list...

And to British taxpayers, who will inevitably foot the bill.

We must restore fairness to our migration system.

In the asylum system, that means that we will always offer protection to genuine refugees.

This country has shown enormous generosity in recent years to those fleeing war or persecution...

Including over 310,000 Ukrainians granted leave on the Ukraine visa schemes...

And 184,000 Hong Kongers...

Who hold British Nationals Overseas status.

We will now open new, safe and legal routes...

Starting, this autumn, by opening a new student refugee route...

With the first arrivals in autumn 2027.

This will be the first of a series of new, legal routes...

Which will include a new work route...

And the expansion of community sponsorship...

Following the success of the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

But at the same time as showing that immense generosity of spirit...

We must wrest control over migration back from the smugglers...

And restore order and control at our border.

That means bearing down on illegal routes to this country...

Tackling illegal crossings...

And, as a result, reducing the burden of so many living in asylum accommodation.

Since launching the Border Security Command, we have made over 5,000 law enforcement disruptions of smuggling gangs...

And stopped more than 40,000 attempted crossings.

But clearly, it is not enough.

Crossings continue - up last year on the year before.

And while asylum claims have fallen across Europe...

They have been rising here in Britain.

We must remove the incentives that are fuelling the human trafficking trade...

And have left us with 100,000 people now living at huge expense to taxpayers.

Today, seeking refugee status in Britain is more attractive than in other countries in Europe.

A 5-year initial period of leave...

Leads, almost automatically, to settled status.

This means refugee status is, in effect, permanent from day one.

This fact encourages asylum seekers to pass through other safe countries...

In pursuit of asylum here.

Including the tens of thousands without a legitimate claim, who have - in effect - tried their luck here...

Considering the risk worth the huge reward.

This government will never step back from our responsibility to provide refugee status to those fleeing war and persecution.

But we will now restore this to the intention of the 1951 convention...

That refugee status is a temporary sanctuary...

A safe haven until a return home is possible.

Because refugee status shall - and I quote from the convention:

"Cease to apply to any person..."

Who "can no longer...

"Because the circumstances in connection with which he has been recognized as a refugee have ceased to exist...

"Continue to refuse to avail himself of the protection of his nationality."

That starts with a change to migration rules, which comes into effect this month.

This will see a reduction in initial leave to remain for refugees, from five years to two and a half years.

At that point, a refugee's need for protection will be reviewed.

If they still require it, their status will be renewed.

If they do not, and their home country is safe, they will return home.

This brings us into line with countries like Denmark...

Where I visited last week.

There, a Social Democrat government has introduced reforms that have ended their asylum crisis...

And saved social democracy in that country from resurgent extremes of the hard right and the hard left.

We should be proud of the protection we provide to those fleeing danger.

But we must also enforce our rules.

And those who come here must live by our laws.

So this government will today introduce new, secondary legislation...

Which will remove the duty to provide asylum support...

Replacing it with a power to do so.

Those who require it...

And play by the rules...

Will rightly continue to receive asylum support.

But those who do not will have their support removed.

The generosity of the British people will become conditional...

On those seeking asylum following the law...

Living by our rules...

And not working illegally.

Taxpayer-funded accommodation will be reserved for those who:

Have no right to work...

And will otherwise be destitute.

Just as for any British citizen...

Rights must come with responsibilities.

And British taxpayers cannot be expected to fund the lives of those who refuse to meet them.

Once we have determined that somebody does [not] have a right to be in this country legally...

It is essential that they leave.

There is nothing fair about not enforcing our rules.

Particularly as we know many melt into illegal work...

Undercutting legal workers.

Since taking office, we have removed nearly 60,000 people with no right to live here...

That's up almost a third under this government.

But we must go further.

I have already announced that we will tighten our application of domestic law...

To ensure that legitimate removals cannot be thwarted by the abuse of human rights and modern slavery legislation.

I have also announced that we will reform our appeals system...

With a new body that echoes, once again, the reforms introduced in Denmark...

Where appeals are heard fairly and swiftly.

One of the great successes of the Danish model has been the use of incentives...

Which sees 95% of removals take place voluntarily.

This government will now pilot a similar model for families who are failed asylum seekers.

A small number of whom will now be offered an increased incentive payment...

Of £10,000 per person...

And up to a maximum of £40,000 per family.

To put that in important context...

Today, a family of 3 in asylum hotel accommodation costs up to £158,000 per year.

Should these incentives prove effective...

They will represent a significant saving to the taxpayer.

Where a voluntary removal is refused...

We will escalate to an enforced removal...

For those who can be returned to their safe, home country.

We are now consulting on precisely how the removal of families with children must take place...

In a way that is humane and effective.

For too long, families who have failed their claims have known that we were not enforcing our rules...

Which created a perverse incentive to make a channel crossing with children in a small boat.

It is now on the parents in these families...

Who can safely return to the home they came from...

To do the right thing...

By accepting an incentive payment...

Rather than face an enforced return.

[Political content redacted]

Enforcing our borders is not a unilateral process.

It requires a partnership with countries across the world.

Every week, planes lift off from this country to return those with no right to be here...

Returning citizens to countries across the world who play by international rules and norms – just as we do.

That partnership allows us to remove failed asylum seekers...

Visa abusers...

And foreign criminals.

All of whom are being removed from this country...

At a rate far higher than the one we inherited.

[Political content redacted]

We are not fearful of carrying a big stick.

Since I became Home Secretary, I have shown my willingness to do so.

I threatened visa sanctions on 3 countries who were refusing to take their citizens back.

All of whom, I am happy to say, are now playing by the international rules.

Today, I can announce that I am suspending certain visa routes for a further 4 countries...

Afghanistan, Cameroon, Myanmar and Sudan...

Where abuse has been unacceptably high.

I will also impose visit visas on Nicaragua and St Lucia...

As their visa-free entry has created a back door into this country.

I introduce all of these measures in an attempt to bring our systems of legal migration and asylum into line with this party's values:

Upholding our international responsibilities...

While securing our own borders.

Fair, but firm...

Compassionate, but controlled...

Rights earned through responsibilities fulfilled...

Integration expected and encouraged...

And contribution to our national life a necessity, not an option.

We can and we must restore order and control at our borders.

There is nothing inconsistent with Labour values in doing so.

But for those who continue to doubt that, I invite them to consider the consequences if we do not.

I know the people of this country are - by nature - open, tolerant and generous.

But I also know that there are conditions to that.

When people see small boat arrivals, at their current scale...

Or they experience the pace and scale of migration today...

They feel, with justification, that things are out of control.

That loss of control breeds fear...

And when fearful, people turn inwards.

Their vision of this country narrows:

Their patriotism turns into something smaller, something darker...

An ethno-nationalism emerges...

The idea of a greater Britain gives way...

To the lure of a littler England.

And other voices - [...] - take hold.

[Political content redacted]

That leads me back to where I began...

[This] means a migration system that welcomes those who come here and contribute to our national life.

But it means an end to uncontrolled migration...

That places immense pressure on strained public finances...

When it is working people in this country who pick up the bill.

[This] means offering safety and sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution...

But it also means not creating incentives that fuel international people smuggling...

It means enforcing our rules, and removing those with no right to be here.

[This] means showing that the nation state can function...

Starting with my duty to restore order at the border.

[...]

[This] means taking the decisions now that will ensure there always remains an asylum system in this country.

And, in doing so...

It means guaranteeing that it will always be true...

That those like my parents...

Who sought a new and better life here...

Worked hard...

Played by the rules...

And contributed to our national life...

Can find, in this country, a home.

And that, just decades later, children of theirs may unthinkingly call themselves English...

Or a Brit...

Or even a Brummie.

Just like me.

Thank you very much.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretarys-speech-on-immigration-5-march-2026>