

UK taps Alexander Downer for ‘independent’ oversight of asylum seeker deportation plan

Former Howard-era foreign secretary was involved in setting up controversial offshore processing regime in Australia

Ben Doherty *The Guardian* 4.10.2022

Alexander Downer has been appointed to a UK government panel to oversee its plan to deport asylum seekers to Rwanda, prompting criticism from refugee and asylum seeker advocates.

The new committee will provide “independent” oversight of the five-year deal between the UK and Rwanda under which asylum seekers who arrive in the UK would be sent to Rwanda on a one-way ticket – a plan critics have condemned as cruel and unworkable. The appointment was made by Priti Patel in one of her final acts as home secretary.

Downer, as Australia’s foreign minister for more than a decade and a former high commissioner to the UK, has been a regular and prominent defender of Australia’s offshore detention regime for boat-borne asylum seekers.

In April he appeared in a UK Home Office video promoting the British government’s immigration plan, and in February was handpicked to review the country’s border force – an appointment British unions described as deeply concerning, citing Downer’s role in Australia’s “inhumane” immigration policies.

Downer was appointed as an “immigration expert currently serving as Executive Chair at the International School for Government, King’s College London”, according to a government announcement.

“I am proud to be working with the Rwandan government on this world-leading policy,” Patel said, “and our new monitoring committee will play a key role in holding both governments to account so we can deliver on our commitments to the British public and save lives.”

The UK’s planned offshore processing arrangement with Rwanda – known as the UK-Rwanda migration and economic development partnership – is yet to move a single person offshore. The first scheduled deportation flight was cancelled in June after an the European court of human rights issued an injunction, and the scheme is now being challenged in the UK’s high court.

The UK’s plan is based on the “Australian model” – Australia’s offshore processing scheme, which has been running, in its second iteration, for nearly a decade.

Australia’s offshore processing regime endures only on the Pacific island of Nauru, after its detention centre on Papua New Guinea’s Manus Island was ruled illegal and Australia was forced to pay tens of millions of dollars to refugees in compensation.

The offshore system has been beset by controversy: including at least 12 deaths, including murder by guards and several suicides; violence against asylum seekers and refugees; systemic sexual abuse of children; as well as inadequate medical and psychiatric care.

More than 200 refugees and asylum seekers remain held within the offshore system: most have been held for more than nine years, with no immediate prospect of resettlement.

Downer was Australia's foreign minister during the 11 years of the Howard government when offshore processing was introduced. Under its first iteration people sent offshore were ultimately allowed to permanently settle in Australia. Now, however, it is Australian government policy that any person sent offshore will never be allowed to settle in the country.

Downer has consistently defended Australia's asylum policies and advocated for their adoption elsewhere. In a speech to the Henry Jackson Society last month he said he had advised the British government to prevent asylum seekers from physically reaching the UK, or removing them if they arrived.

"Put them onto stable craft and drive them back to France – that's the simple solution and would destroy the smugglers' business model in a week," Downer said, adding: "Short of that, making sure they can't settle in the UK under any circumstances – the [agreement the] government negotiated with Rwanda – is a good solution as well."

Eva Sêro Spiekermann from the advocacy group People and Planet was critical of Downer's appointment.

"In Australia he was a leading defender of a detention and deportation regime that locked up people on the move, rode roughshod over human rights, and cost lives. His appointment is meant to challenge abuse in UK border policy, but instead launders it," she said.

Nazek Ramadan, the director of Migrant Voice UK, said the UK's plan to create an offshore processing system for asylum seekers in Rwanda was deeply flawed.

"We should welcome people seeking safety, not force them onto flights to Rwanda," Ramadan said. "This ill-considered, deport-first-ask-questions-later scheme is a legal, moral, and financial disaster, which is why it is falling apart."

"It's a mark of desperation that the so-called independent panel includes someone who pushed a similar scheme to Rwanda with brutal consequences."

Australia's offshore processing system has been promoted as having "stopped the boats" bearing asylum seekers reaching Australian shores to claim protection.

But government figures show that in the first full year after offshore processing was reintroduced, more people arrived in Australia by boat seeking asylum than at any other time in history..

No new asylum seeker or refugee has been sent to offshore processing since 2014.