

The Sanctuary Pledge

Immigration Minister Damian Green to CITIZENS for Sanctuary: an end to child detention 'within weeks'

There follows a transcript of remarks made by the immigration minister, Damian Green, at a Citizens UK / Citizens for Sanctuary event last night at Westminster Abbey. He gives details of the process by which the detention of children will end, following the pledge given at the Citizens UK General Election assembly on 3 May. More details at www.sanctuarypledge.org.uk.



Securing justice for people fleeing persecution.
Rebuilding public support for sanctuary.

DAMIAN GREEN

Thank you for inviting me to one of the most splendid venues I've ever spoken in -- also a slightly surreal venue, with statues wearing hats facing the other way. I've spoken to some tough audiences in my time, but at least they normally look at you.

You are right to turn this into a celebration event, not least because this is clearly one of the most effective lobbying organisations ever. Formed relatively recently, with a clear focus as to what you want to achieve, and you're now achieving significant parts of it; and I'm very pleased not just to be here but to be perhaps a significant part of the means by which what you want to happen will happen in practice. I'm delighted to discover that the UK Border Agency, for which I'm now responsible as minister for immigration, has a good history of working with Citizens UK in very practical ways. When I, in opposition, visited Lunar House in Croydon, the UKBA big office there, they said they were worried about their entry point, where people actually turned up, to claim asylum, and they asked me what I thought of it; and I said it reminded me of nothing so much as Ashford cattle market in my constituency because that's what it looked like. And I understand that Citizens for Sanctuary had some big input into the redesign of that; and I'm pleased to say that when I went there last week it now looks like an entry point for human beings rather than cattle. So that's one significant thing you chalked up even before the issue of children in detention.

I just want to talk about that this evening, and one other commitment that the coalition Government has made. But let me start with what is the big one, children in detention. It has been clear to many of us involved in this area that it would make any civilised being very very uncomfortable to see children locked up behind bars. I visited Yarl's Wood a couple of times when I was the opposition spokesman for immigration, and although conditions there improved quite considerably in the last few years, there is no getting away from the fact that if you are a civilised decent human being the sight of young children locked up behind bars should

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make you feel profoundly uneasy. It made me feel uneasy. So I'm not just ending the detention of children out of a sense of duty or because I'm instructed to by the prime minister and deputy minister – it is actually a pleasure as well as a duty to end this. I think this will be a better country when we don't detain children for immigration purposes (applause).

And that's one of the reasons why we're getting on with it so fast. I thought it might be helpful if I went through some of the nuts and bolts, because it is proceeding very fast. We've set up a review which is being run at the official level by David Wood, who is the chief director of criminality and detention at the UKBA. The review started on 1 June and will run for six weeks. And what we're doing now is talking to as many partner organisations as we can in this period. I've been in Glasgow today talking to one of the Scottish groups who are most concerned with the welfare of asylum seekers, essentially seeking a practical answer to what is the difficult point which is that in the end there are people who apply for asylum in this country who are genuine refugees and deserve our help and deserve sanctuary; and there are others who don't qualify. And we have to have the capacity to remove them when all the legal processes are gone through – and doing that in a humane, civilised way, lies at the heart of what we want to do, but we must still have the ability to do that; and that's the most difficult question, let's not kid ourselves – we can solve many of the other practical questions quite easily, but it is a genuinely difficult question about how we are going to achieve that. But what the new Government is seeking to do is to ensure that all those who have the most knowledge of the asylum process should play a significant role in guiding us onto the right path and so we do find a practical solution to this, and we're particularly grateful to the Diana Princess of Wales Memorial Fund who are helping the review by co-chairing a working group of the various NGOs who are involved in this; we think that's a significant and very welcome commitment from them.

So we will be having these talks over the next six weeks or so. There will then be a report to me as the responsible minister in July and I hope that very, very soon – certainly weeks, rather than months, after that – we will be able to announce the solution and then we will have got to the point where children are not detained for immigration purposes in the UK. So this will be I hope one of the first big steps forward of the new Government and I'm sure it will be welcomed by everyone in this room.

But I should say this is only one of the steps we want to take because we're also having a general review of the asylum system and what we're doing is looking at ways of reviewing that system to ensure that decisions are right first time, because much of the misery in the current system, as many people here will know, is caused by the sheer length of time it takes time to come to a decision. It's not good for the individual asylum seeker, but it's also not good for the taxpayer, and it's not good for the general confidence in the system. So we want to solve that

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and we're looking particularly at the way other countries do it so that where other countries do aspects of it more efficiently than we do it in the UK then we will ruthlessly steal their ideas and put them into practice here. We want to make that process fast, efficient and humane.

And as a final thought, because I think it was Neil who said that one of the difficulties of the election was the proliferation of extremist views and extremist candidates, it seems to me two things are very important – I did this in opposition, and will continue to do this now I'm in government, which is that the general question of immigration should be treated separately as far as possible from the question of asylum. They are separate political issues and need to be treated as such. And also that it is very important for mainstream politicians to talk about these issues, and for Government to do so, because if we try to sweep them under the carpet then we leave the field clear for unpleasant extremist politicians who can then purport to represent the views of the mass of the British people. In fact the mass of the British people are perfectly sensible and humane on this subject and their views need representing. And Citizens for Sanctuary reflects many of those views and as I said at the start, represents them very, very successfully. I think you're a tremendously successful lobbying group and you should all congratulate yourselves and pat yourselves on the back this evening. Thank you very much for inviting me.

Neil Jameson (executive director, Citizens UK): Minister thank you very much for that, thank you for the schedule and all that you've done. Obviously we have a long relationship with you when you were shadow minister too. But it would not be a Citizens UK event were we not to pin you down a little bit more on the detail. I heard the schedule through the Autumn which is wonderful, and the working party which we're very glad to be a part of, but can we say – unlike last year, when I think Nick [Sagovsky] went to Yarl's Wood dressed as Father Christmas – certainly there was a Father Christmas – to try and give Christmas presents as part of this campaign to ask that there be no more children in detention by Christmas 2010.

DG: There should be no need for anyone to dress up as Father Christmas this Christmas at Yarl's Wood this year. If anyone has to, I will.

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