

Robert Kilroy-Silk writes...on Asylum-Seekers (Labour's Failing Policies)

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He doesn't change much does he? Tony Blair is still up to his old tricks. He still believes that he can make an eye-catching announcement and fool us all into thinking that serious action is being taken to solve a major problem whereas he is in fact engaging in misleading gimmickry.

Having made a momentous mistake by obstinately refusing to get off his sunbed in Egypt and return home to be with his people as they searched for their relatives and friends and buried their dead, as a leader should, he is now trying to wriggle his way back into the voters' good books by trailing a new policy on asylum seekers.

The Prime Minister is going to suggest that failed asylum seekers will have to work in the community to cover some of the cost of their board and lodgings during the six months or more while they are waiting for their appeals to be heard. Apparently they will be required to do a full thirty-five hours on community projects like removing graffiti, collecting litter and cleaning up the neighbourhood.

Sorry Tony, but it won't work. It will be yet another of the Governments expensive failures. What, for instance, will the Government do if a failed asylum seeker refuses to collect discarded cigarette butts and used syringes from the gutter. Stop her benefits? Put her in prison? Take her children into care? The Government has enough of a problem trying to get our work-shy into jobs. Why should it believe it will be more successful with foreigners?

And the asylum seekers will refuse to do these menial jobs, believe me. Some of them insist that they have a right to be in this country and to be in receipt of benefits. I know this because they have publicly told me so. Others argue that their professional status as doctors, accountants, architects and craftsmen prevents them from carrying out unskilled tasks. They are very conscious of their dignity. I know this because they have told me so, some of them in very pompous terms. There is no way that they will go along with Tony Blair's project.

Moreover, if there is work to be done, and there is, why isn't the Government marshalling our own unemployed? Why isn't it using the money spent on the maintenance of failed asylum seekers to encourage people to leave the benefit system?

But putting all that to one side, forcing those awaiting appeal on their already failed application for political asylum to work is not the answer to the asylum problem. Tony Blair is not addressing the real issue.

The real question he should be asking is why are so many attracted to this country in the first place? Is it because they know that they will be allowed to

stay, even though their claim is bogus, or that they will be able to disappear into the general population? Why, indeed, are four out of every five who are turned down never removed?

If the Government actually got on top of the problem and processed the applications fairly, and effectively but rapidly, we would not have thousands here costing us over £200m a year in legal aid to cover their appeals, and several hundred million pounds more in maintaining them and their families. And Tony could concentrate on helping the poor of southern Asia instead of ill-thought-out schemes that all of us can see through.

