

THE LABOUR PARTY AND CLIMATE MIGRATION WHERE DOES LABOUR STAND?

At the start of COP30, the world's annual conference on climate change, Prime Minister Keir Starmer spoke about the urgent need for climate action. During [his speech](#), there was one brief nod to climate migration: as a problem inaction would only deepen.

"Inaction would only deepen these problems, drive prices higher, leave the call of opportunity unanswered, and leave our communities exposed to greater instability, flooding, rising food prices, growing migration flows, and growing threats to national security."

Both the SNP and UK Green Party have recognised the need for extending asylum protections for climate migration. In 2021, the Green Party pledged to [extend the refugee definition](#) to include global heating and environmental catastrophe, while the SNP-led Scottish Government has [considered a humanitarian visa](#) system for climate 'refugees'.

And here's the thing – so did the Labour Party.

During the run-up to the 2019 General Election, as part of its manifesto, the Labour Party developed a policy on 'Welcoming Climate Refugees & Preventing Displacement'. Now scrubbed from most parts of the internet – but still available through [this link](#), on our website, and [cited in academic articles](#) – Labour pretends it was never published.

The policy had a recognitional framework, arguing that

"policy concerning migration to the UK with a Green New Deal therefore necessarily begins with a recognition of the grossly disproportionate contribution made by the UK and other wealthy countries to the climate crisis ... accompanied by a recognition of the historic and continuing injustices of British colonialism and imperialism, through which the UK's wealth was generated, particularly through the violence of natural resource extraction"
(*Welcoming Climate Refugees & Preventing Displacement*, p. 2).

The migration-specific policy was part of Labour's larger proposal for a Green New Deal, which has, for the most part, been abandoned. It had argued that, based on the aforementioned reasons, a "Green New Deal must therefore commit to addressing the climate crisis through the lens of global justice and migrant justice".

From a justice lens, this policy suggested

"Climate justice is migrant justice, and a Green New Deal must therefore support both the right to move and the right to stay"
(*Welcoming Climate Refugees & Preventing Displacement*, p. 2).

To achieve these aims, the policy suggested:

- Reforming existing immigration laws, including ending mass deportation and detention
- Extending refugee status for those forced to move because of climate change
- Ending the Hostile Environment and dismantling 'Fortress Britain' and 'Fortress Europe'
- Supporting the right to stay through:
 - Promoting and funding adaptation measures,
 - Financial support to fund decarbonisation,
 - Trade agreements that facilitate the free transfer of climate mitigation and adaptation technologies,
 - An explicit ban on NETs, geo-engineering technologies, or offsetting schemes "that will sacrifice the rights of people in the Global South",
 - Increasing the voice, vote and power of developing countries in international institutions.

In particular, the party acknowledges that climate change often isn't the only, or main, reason why people are on the move. It argues the country must commit to "welcoming all migrants to the UK, especially people for whom climate change is a contributing factor in the decision to leave their home country".

This proposal was not from Starmer's Labour, but Jeremy Corbyn's. As the Labour Party has undergone dramatic revisions since Corbyn's leadership, so too has its vision for a climate migration visa.

CLIMATE MIGRATION IS A HUMAN RIGHTS ISSUE, NOT A THREAT TO NATIONAL SECURITY.

In its climate migration policy, the Labour Party had unequivocally stated that "displacement due to climate breakdown is a human rights issue" ('Welcoming Climate Refugees & Preventing Displacement', p. 2). Yet Starmer's COP30 speech still sought to frame it as a security threat.

This is nothing new. The UK has been at the forefront of the securitising narrative adopted by states in relation to the climate crisis. Ever since 2008, the UK has framed climate change as a "stress multiplier" that "will reshape the geopolitics of the world ... with important consequences for peace and security", with other Global North countries following suit.



Prime Minister Keir Starmer speaks at COP30 in Belém, Brazil.

Credit: "Prime Minister Keir Starmer attends COP30 Summit in Brazil" by Number 10, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0"

SO WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Starmer's Labour Party, the current government in the UK, has pledged £84 million to "address the factors that drive people into small boats", acknowledging that "[m]illions migrate every year due to conflict, climate change, and humanitarian crises" and that conflict and climate change are two of the leading causes of irregular migration. The government has also pledged £11.6 billion in International Climate Finance. However, £1.3 billion of this has been double counted, meaning money the UK has already pledged in official development aid (ODA), private sector investment and donations to the World Bank is also being counted as climate finance. Aid is not climate finance – as writers at Global Citizen have neatly phrased it: "Giving food to starving Afghans does not count as climate action just because Afghanistan is one of the countries most vulnerable to climate change".

It is also not enough. Climate finance requires trillions, not billions from countries coming together on mitigation and adaptation. Global South countries, which see the majority of climate-related displacement, called last year at COP29 for a 'scaling up' in climate finance from \$300 billion per year to an eventual goal of \$1.3 trillion per year by 2035.

Protecting and investing in the right to stay is the most essential part of climate justice – providing asylum to people who are moving with no choice is not the most just solution. However, it is worth noting that relying on climate finance alone allows the UK to maintain its hostile environment for all asylum seekers, including climate migrants.

There is a glimmer of hope, thanks to creative litigation and developments in the legal field. Earlier this week, a UK court recognised that climate-related movement falls under the protection of the European Convention on Human Rights (Article 8: right to private and family life), and upheld an asylum appeal from a 'climate migrant'. Over the summer, the International Court of Justice affirmed that the principle of non-refoulement applies in cases of climate migration – meaning that the UK cannot deport someone to a situation where they would face climate harm.

A response from Labour, led by former human rights lawyer Keir Starmer, remains to be seen. What is clear: **climate migration *is* human rights issue.**

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