

The Small boats Bill

There was a strong divide in the Commons yesterday, with much better attendance than usual for the debate on the small boats bill. Labour, the SNP and Lib Dems were angry about the idea that people arriving on illegal boats should be asked to leave and will lose their right to apply for asylum here in the UK. They thought this would be against Human Rights law and were on the side of the people paying large fares to gain illegal entry.

Many Conservatives were only concerned about whether this Bill will be strong enough to act as a clear deterrent to people not to spend their money on dangerous crossings, lining the pockets of people traffickers. More concern was expressed about the risk to lives and less about the legal issues. There were questions about whether this Bill would be proof against endless appeals and legal claims against any rejection of an asylum application. The Home Secretary pointed out that many of those coming by illegal means come from safe countries. She told us that many Albanians have now been required to return to their home.

There was argument over the adequacy of existing safe routes. The Opposition spoke as if there were few or no such routes, and as if the UK did not take enough people in need. The government pointed to the Afghan, Syrian, Ukrainian and Hong Kong schemes which are much used. It also reminded the House that there are schemes for people from any qualifying country around the world, with the family reunion route, the Community support route and the general UNHCR scheme. The UK has found homes for a large number of Ukrainians and Hong Kong citizens in recent months.

There was an unwillingness by the Opposition to accept the idea that the country should set a maximum for the numbers of asylum seekers we can take in any given year, given the need to provide good homes, schools, health care and the rest for new arrivals. Most did agree that migrants occupying more and more hotels at taxpayer expense was not a good model, though there was less agreement over how much such emergency accommodation was needed and to what standard. This is going to be a major divide in Parliament over the next few weeks, and will pose a challenge to the Lords.