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(Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab)

I am in favour of a number of amendments, but for the purposes of time I will largely keep my comments to new clauses 12 and 13 in my own name and new clause 14 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Streatham (Bell Ribeiro-Addy). New clause 12 would provide recourse to public funds to everyone holding a valid UK residence permit. New clause 13 would repeal the sections in the 2014 and 2016 Immigration Acts that restrict undocumented migrants' access to work and services. New clause 14 seeks to abolish the immigration health surcharge. I am pleased these new clauses have received lots of support from Members across the House.

It will perhaps be obvious to colleagues that these new clauses are about addressing the unjust suffering caused by the Government's hostile environment, a term used to describe all the policies that make life difficult for migrants living in the UK by explicitly and deliberately treating them as less deserving of dignity and humanity than British citizens.

My new clause 13, in particular, seeks to overturn the denial of basic human rights. Members will know from their constituency casework that the consequences are brutal and wide-reaching. The hostile environment deters people from reporting crime to the police or from calling out unsafe conditions and exploitative practices at work. It undermines trade union rights and pushes people into poor-quality and dangerous accommodation and homelessness. As new clause 14 highlights, the hostile environment even denies access to healthcare by scaring people from going to the doctor for fear of being charged or being reported, detained and deported.

No recourse to public funds, which new clause 12 addresses, abandons some migrants to having no safety net. It leaves children hungry, it pushes families into poverty and unsafe, overcrowded housing, and it means women, in particular, who flee abusive partners are not entitled to access mainstream refuges. It is breathtakingly cruel and unjust.

The disproportionate suffering that has been inflicted on migrants during the pandemic is well known, if apparently forgotten by this Government. Not only does the hostile environment produce a culture of fear that often risks the NHS being unable to do its job, but it puts all our communities in danger. Although such policies try to incentivise us to be suspicious of one another, they are not in the interest of the majority of people. It should be no surprise that the Bill is another horrifying extension of such an approach. It undermines human decency and must be opposed in every way.

The fact this is all in the context of the ongoing tragedy of people drowning in the English channel is chilling. That such people now potentially face jail sentences if they survive such precarious journeys, as well as an even more hostile environment, is catastrophically wrong.

I emphasise the humanity that runs through the amendments I am supporting today. We have to stop the political immigration game of misinformation and cynicism that has such horrendous human cost. There is no doubt that one of the reasons we are seeing scenes of desperate people trying to cross the channel is the lazy but deadly anti-migrant political agenda that closes off safe routes to the UK.

One of the biggest myths perpetuated by politicians is that they are too afraid to talk about migration when, in fact, the opposite is true. The more politicians talk about being tough on migration, the more they just talk about being tough on migration. For decades the rate of lawmaking in this area has exceeded the rate of lawmaking in every other social policy area.

When people repeat half-truths and inaccuracies and attempt to utilise society's fears, prejudices and anxieties for opportunistic so-called political gain, a climate of acceptance is created for such ideas at all levels of society. The mainstream media must also reflect on the role of their focus on numbers and their use of words such as "flood," "influx" and "waves." I am sorry that the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash) used the word "tsunami," which is a disgrace.

Yet it is simply untrue that Britain takes in more refugees than everywhere else, and research shows that two thirds of asylum seekers crossing the channel in boats, for example, are finally granted asylum by the Government's own measurements. Yes, we need solutions to the soaring inequality, the suffering and the frightening covid death toll over which this Government have presided, but we do not need suspicion and scapegoats. Wherever we are from, we all need a roof over our head, food to eat, healthcare and basic human kindness and solidarity. Surely the true measure of a civilised society is not in its hostility but in its humanity.

I commended these new clauses to the House.