ASCENSION

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Could Britain Build an Offshore Alternative to the Small-Boat System?

I recently watched a video proposing what, at first sight, sounds like an extraordinarily simple answer to Britain's small-boat problem.

Acquire old cruise ships. Intercept those crossing the Channel illegally. Instead of bringing them into Britain, accommodate them offshore before transferring them to a British Overseas Territory such as Ascension Island. Process their asylum claims there and return those whose claims fail.

The video's central proposition is that if people knew that paying a smuggler thousands of pounds and crossing the Channel would never result in their reaching mainland Britain, the incentive to make the journey would collapse.

There are some serious problems with the proposal as presented.

Simply putting somebody aboard a British-controlled vessel does not place them beyond British legal responsibility. Ascension Island is not outside the reach of the European Convention on Human Rights simply because it is thousands of miles from London. Nor can Britain indefinitely imprison somebody merely because their country of origin refuses to take them back.

But what happens if we change the proposal?

What if they aren't imprisoned?

What if Ascension isn't treated as a detention centre at all?

And what if the fundamental principle becomes not indefinite detention, but indefinite non-settlement in mainland Britain?

That produces a rather different proposition — and one that deserves serious examination.

First, where is Ascension Island?

Ascension is a volcanic island almost in the middle of the South Atlantic.

It lies at approximately 8° south of the equator and covers around 88 square kilometres. It is roughly 1,600 kilometres from the coast of Africa, about 2,250 kilometres from South America and around 1,300 kilometres north-west of St Helena.

Politically, Ascension forms part of the British Overseas Territory of St Helena, Ascension and Tristan da Cunha.

It is not part of the United Kingdom. It has its own constitution, laws and fiscal jurisdiction, while the UK remains responsible for defence, international relations and internal security.

Perhaps most unusually, Ascension has no indigenous or permanent population.

People normally live there because they work there, or because they are dependants of somebody who does. In that sense Ascension is already effectively a working island rather than a conventional settled territory.

There are presently only around 800 people living there.

Yet the island possesses infrastructure completely disproportionate to such a tiny population because of its strategic importance.

There is Wideawake Airfield, used for military and civilian purposes, together with British and American military facilities. Georgetown is the principal settlement and there are roads, utilities and an existing pier and cargo-handling operation.

This is one of the important differences between Ascension and somewhere such as South Georgia.

South Georgia might look attractive on a map because it is British territory and extremely remote. In practical terms it would be an extraordinarily difficult place in which to establish a large population.

Ascension is different.

It already supports a functioning community.

It isn’t the bleak island you might imagine

There is another misconception worth correcting.

Ascension is not a freezing windswept rock in the South Atlantic.

It lies within the tropics.

The Ascension Island Government describes its climate as subtropical, with temperatures generally remaining warm throughout the year. Coastal temperatures commonly sit in roughly the mid-20s to low-30s Celsius.

Rainfall at sea level is remarkably low. Long-term climate research puts average annual precipitation at only around 165mm, although rainfall increases considerably with altitude.

The lower parts of Ascension consequently have an extraordinary volcanic appearance: dark lava fields, ash, barren hills and rugged coastline surrounded by clear tropical Atlantic water.

Then, in the middle of the island, something remarkable happens.

Green Mountain rises to 859 metres.

As the altitude increases, the climate becomes cooler and wetter until the barren volcanic landscape gives way to lush vegetation. Around the summit is a mist zone which is frequently enveloped in cloud.

The contrast can be dramatic.

Ascension Island Government describes beautiful sandy beaches amongst volcanic rock, warm clear water and opportunities for hiking, swimming, fishing, snorkelling and diving.

Long Beach, immediately beside Georgetown, stretches for almost a kilometre.

But this is also an environmentally important island. Long Beach is an important nesting ground for green turtles; Ascension supports globally significant seabird

populations and endemic species, and large areas of both the island and surrounding ocean are protected.

Any substantial development would therefore require extremely careful environmental planning.

Ascension could not simply be bulldozed into becoming an enormous immigration camp.

Nor should it be.

Don’t build a prison

This is where I think the original proposal needs fundamentally changing.

Suppose somebody crosses the Channel illegally and is intercepted.

Following appropriate immediate medical and safeguarding checks, that person is transferred to Ascension Island for processing.

They aren’t placed behind razor wire.

They aren’t locked in a cell.

They are provided with safe but basic accommodation and essential services.

And, crucially, they are free to move around the island, apart from legitimate restricted areas such as military installations, sensitive infrastructure and protected environmental areas.

Their asylum application is then determined.

If their application fails, Britain attempts to return them to their country of origin or another country in which they have a right to reside.

But suppose that country refuses to accept them.

Under the present system that creates an enormous problem. Britain cannot simply detain somebody indefinitely where there is no realistic prospect of removal.

So don’t.

They remain resident on Ascension.

They can walk around the island. They can use its recreational areas. They can work. They can live their lives.

Britain continues seeking their lawful removal, and they remain free to leave whenever another country is prepared to receive them.

What they do not automatically receive is entry into mainland Britain simply because their removal has proved difficult.

That distinction could completely change the legal argument.

The question would cease to be:

“How long can Britain detain this person?”

Instead it becomes:

“Does somebody who has no right to enter the United Kingdom acquire such a right merely because another country refuses to accept them?”

Those are very different questions.

Let people work

There is little sense in creating an offshore community containing potentially thousands of working-age adults and then prohibiting them from doing anything productive.

Subject to safeguarding and employment law, residents could be permitted to undertake voluntary paid employment.

Ascension would need substantial additional infrastructure if the scheme reached any significant scale.

Accommodation would need constructing and maintaining.

There would be roads, water and wastewater systems, electricity generation,

renewable energy, communications, catering, cleaning, waste management, landscaping and maintenance.

There would be opportunities for vocational training.

Some residents might already be electricians, plumbers, builders, engineers, cooks, mechanics, healthcare workers or technicians.

Others could learn useful trades.

Rather than paying contractors to perform every routine function while thousands of people remained idle, residents could contribute to maintaining and developing the community in which they were living.

There might eventually even be a case for substantially improving Ascension's maritime infrastructure.

Its existing Georgetown pier supports ship-to-shore cargo operations, but an offshore-processing system operating on a large scale would create very different logistical requirements.

A modern harbour or enhanced cargo facility would be a major civil-engineering undertaking requiring professional design, specialist contractors and environmental assessment. It isn't something that could simply be constructed by untrained asylum seekers.

But properly employed and trained residents could form part of the workforce delivering supporting infrastructure.

There is an important principle here.

Work should be an opportunity, not a punishment or a condition for receiving food and shelter.

That distinction matters.

The deterrent isn't hardship

This is perhaps the most important part of the proposal.

There would be no need deliberately to make conditions miserable.

Indeed, Ascension's warm climate, beaches and extraordinary landscape make that approach rather pointless.

The deterrent is something entirely different.

It is certainty.

At present, the attraction of the Channel route is ultimately access to Britain.

The proposition behind an Ascension system would be brutally simple to understand:

Paying a smuggler and successfully crossing the Channel does not result in settlement in mainland Britain.

Imagine that message becoming established beyond reasonable doubt.

A migrant in northern France considering paying several thousand pounds for a place aboard a dinghy would know what happens if the boat reaches British jurisdiction.

Not London.

Not Manchester.

Not Birmingham.

Not years in British asylum accommodation followed eventually by life in Britain.

Instead:

Ascension Island.

Your claim will be heard.

You will receive accommodation, food, healthcare and protection from mistreatment.

You will not be imprisoned.

You can move around the island and, subject to whatever legal regime Parliament

establishes, work.

If Britain determines that you have no right to protection, arrangements will be made for your departure.

But deliberately crossing the Channel will not itself become a route into mainland Britain.

Whether that would materially reduce crossings is ultimately an empirical question. Australia's experience suggests that destination certainty can form part of a deterrence system, but Australia's policy combined offshore processing with maritime turnbacks, returns, regional agreements and other measures. It would therefore be misleading simply to say, "Australia used an island and the boats stopped."

What about genuine refugees?

This is one of the biggest questions the proposal has to answer.

If somebody is found genuinely to require international protection, what happens to them?

Simply saying "they stay on Ascension forever" is not an adequate refugee policy.

A functioning scheme would therefore require a clearly defined outcome for successful applicants.

That might involve resettlement agreements with participating countries, lawful residence within an appropriate territory, or some other protection arrangement consistent with Britain's international obligations.

This is where comparisons with Australia become relevant, because offshore processing ultimately requires somewhere for recognised refugees to go.

That problem cannot be solved merely by building accommodation.

And what if somebody can never be

returned?

This is perhaps the most interesting question of all.

Suppose someone’s claim fails.

Britain says they can safely return home.

Their home government refuses to issue documents.

No third country accepts them.

The person cannot lawfully be detained indefinitely simply because removal is difficult.

But if they aren’t detained — if they have accommodation, freedom of movement around Ascension, access to essential services and the opportunity to work — the situation becomes legally much more complicated.

Could they remain on Ascension for five years?

Ten?

Twenty?

Could they establish family life there?

What legal status would they eventually acquire?

Could restrictions on leaving the island except for an agreed destination eventually amount in substance to a deprivation of liberty?

Those questions require serious legal examination.

The European Convention on Human Rights applies to Ascension. Moving somebody thousands of miles into the Atlantic does not cause Britain’s human-rights obligations simply to disappear.

Any credible proposal must acknowledge that rather than pretending otherwise.

Scale is the real practical challenge

This also cannot be a scheme designed around a few hundred people.

Recent Channel crossings have been measured in the tens of thousands annually.

Even if offshore processing itself reduced crossings substantially, Britain would have to build the system before knowing how quickly that deterrent effect would occur.

Accommodation capacity would therefore need to be measured in thousands.

That means water.

Power.

Sewage treatment.

Food.

Healthcare.

Schools and safeguarding if families and children were included.

Policing.

Fire and rescue.

Transport.

Communications.

Waste disposal.

Courts and legal access.

Administrative facilities.

And an enormous logistics chain connecting a tiny Atlantic island with the outside world.

Ascension’s existing population of roughly 800 demonstrates the scale of the

transformation being contemplated.

A settlement of 10,000 offshore residents would outnumber the existing island community more than ten to one.

That alone should prevent anyone pretending this could be implemented “tomorrow”.

Water may be one of the biggest engineering questions

Ascension is an arid volcanic island.

That matters.

A population increase measured in thousands would require substantial additional potable-water capacity. Depending upon location and existing capacity, that could mean expanded desalination, storage and distribution infrastructure.

Every litre arriving at a tap ultimately produces a corresponding wastewater problem.

Electricity demand would rise sharply as well.

Ascension has abundant sunlight and persistent trade winds, potentially making renewable generation attractive, but reliable baseload and backup generation would still be essential for critical infrastructure.

The engineering study therefore needs to precede the politics.

Before promising accommodation for 10,000 people, establish exactly how many megawatts of electricity, litres of potable water, tonnes of food and cubic metres of wastewater treatment would be required every day.

The environmental constraint cannot be ignored

Ascension is environmentally extraordinary.

It has endemic species found nowhere else, important seabird colonies and one of the South Atlantic's major green-turtle nesting populations.

Its entire Exclusive Economic Zone forms a vast Marine Protected Area.

Around 28% of its land is already within protected areas, according to the Ascension Island Government.

That makes location selection critical.

A new settlement couldn't simply expand wherever construction was easiest.

Development would have to be concentrated on environmentally suitable land and supported by proper environmental impact assessments, biosecurity and controls over waste and pollution.

Ironically, residents could potentially contribute positively here too.

Conservation, invasive-species control, habitat restoration and environmental monitoring already form part of life on Ascension.

What happens to the cruise ships?

Once the Ascension concept is examined properly, I am increasingly unconvinced that cruise ships are the important part of the original idea.

They might provide temporary surge accommodation or transportation.

But permanently anchoring old cruise ships in or around the English Channel introduces maritime, weather, servicing and logistical complications without solving the underlying legal problem.

The essential system is much simpler:

INTERCEPT → SCREEN → TRANSFER → PROCESS → PROTECT OR RETURN

The crucial element is not where somebody sleeps for the first few nights.

It is establishing that an irregular Channel crossing does not create a route to settlement in mainland Britain.

Could it actually work?

I don’t yet know.

And that is precisely why I think it deserves examination rather than either instant enthusiasm or instant ridicule.

There are formidable obstacles.

The ECHR still applies.

The Refugee Convention matters.

Recognised refugees require an outcome.

Children and vulnerable people require special consideration.

Ascension’s existing community would be dramatically affected.

Infrastructure costs could be enormous.

Environmental constraints are substantial.

Transporting thousands of people almost 4,000 miles raises another set of costs and logistical questions.

And an offshore population unable to return home could remain there for years.

Those aren’t details to be waved away.

They are the questions on which the proposal succeeds or fails.

But the idea becomes considerably more interesting once one misconception is removed.

Offshore processing does not have to mean offshore imprisonment.

Ascension could theoretically operate as an open offshore community in which people were safely accommodated, free to move around the island, able to undertake properly regulated work and able to leave whenever another country lawfully accepted them.

The deterrent would not be cruelty.

It would not be starvation.

It would not be incarceration.

It would be the removal of the prize that makes the Channel crossing attractive in the first place:

the expectation that successfully reaching British jurisdiction ultimately means reaching mainland Britain.

Whether that principle can be made legally, economically and operationally viable is the question Britain should examine.

Because beneath an over-simplified social-media video may be a policy concept considerably more sophisticated than the video itself realised.