Take one traumatised child, classify as 'adult', arrest, lock up, and bundle onto plane, bound for danger - Labour's Britain in 2010

Clare Sambrook [1] 8 March 2010
A shameful case of the imprisonment and deportation of a minor by the UK Borders Agency.

‘He looks my age,’ says my nine-year-old son. ‘He looks sort of like me.’

There’s a picture on my screen: a small, slight boy who, for legal reasons, we’ll call M. He’s being cuddled by his 17 year old big brother Z. Both boys are smiling. They have been reunited after a long, hard separation.

Back home in war-torn Afghanistan their parents and a sister were killed. Big brother Z was first to come to Britain, traumatised, in November 2008. He has refugee status, studies for his GCSEs at school in Leicester.

This past October little brother M made his way here. Despite M’s size, his vulnerability, his boyish looks, officials said, you’re not 14, you’re an adult.

Instead of being taken into care, M was bounced around between three different adult hostels and a house-share with older men — and refused asylum.

Welsh Refugee Council staff were baffled and concerned. To them he looked every inch a traumatised boy.

Across the Afghani community and Red Cross networks, word rippled out: a boy called M badly needs to find his big brother Z.

The boys were reunited in February — and just in time, for if the big brother was, by official assent, just 17, then surely it must follow that the younger, smaller, slighter brother must be... younger.

M’s solicitor told his UKBA case-worker the good news and made an appointment. ‘I felt relieved,’ says Sabina Hussain, Welsh Refugee Council’s child advocacy officer, ‘I was looking forward to some stability for the brothers, and reuniting them for good.’

Last Monday, a bright, sunny St David’s Day morning, Sabina went with M to help him lodge his fresh asylum claim at the Border Agency’s Cardiff office.

M was arrested, and locked up in Cardiff Bay Police Cells, in extreme distress, dwarfed in man-sized padded clothing to protect him from self-harm. His seat was booked on a flight bound for Afghanistan, Tuesday 9 March.

In the dark early hours of Tuesday 2nd March, M was taken with an adult detainee by caged van on
the 109 mile journey from Cardiff to Oxfordshire and Campsfield House, an adult detention facility run by the government’s commercial partner Serco. He shared a dormitory with seven men.

Welsh Refugee Council instructed solicitors, spearheaded an emergency campaign. Concerned citizens lobbied MPs and the Home Office. On Thursday morning, just days before the flight, Sabina said: ‘M is crying, “please help me, I’m scared, this place is no good, no sleep, no eat, I want my brother”. We are gravely concerned for his welfare.’

Solicitors appealed to the High Court to block M’s deportation. Sabina joined him in Campsfield House to await the Court’s decision.

Meanwhile, up in Glasgow, university professor Alison Phipps was asking friends to testify that she and her husband Robert Swinfen love their foster daughter Rima, that she loves them and that Rima really is 17, and not, as the authorities insist, over 20.

Fleeing religious persecution in Eritrea, shipwrecked off Italy, Rima Andmariam had sheltered in a derelict Milan squat, gone hungry, lost a finger, made her way to Britain and Cardiff — aged 15, according to her papers which Cardiff UKBA and social services refused to accept, insisting she was an adult.

Rima fled, moved from house to house, lived rough until twelve months ago when Alison and Robert took her in as their natural daughter. In May last year Rima was seized and locked up in Dungavel, a former prison.

When Rima’s solicitor lodged an application for judicial review, the Border Agency swept her out of its range, taking her 356 miles south by caged van to Yarl’s Wood, Serco’s notorious Bedfordshire detention centre. Another application for review, deportation averted. After seven days in Yarl’s Wood Rima was home again.

And then, last month, the day after Valentine’s Day, the government told Rima she would be forcibly deported to Italy within weeks. The family campaigns vigorously for clemency, fearing that each new dawn will bring the Border Agency’s arrest squad to their door.

Last Thursday afternoon the Hon Mr Justice Cranston stayed M’s deportation, ordered UKBA to free him and instructed Cardiff Council to provide accommodation suitable for a 14 year old boy, pending a full judicial review hearing. That night an exhausted M was released from Campsfield, driven back to Cardiff and placed with foster carers.

M’s fate and Rima’s hang in the balance — here, in Britain, a country where asking for sanctuary is a right, not a crime, and where, according to the government, every child matters.

Sideboxes

‘Read On’ Sidebox:
Rima’s website is letrimastay.org.uk [2]

End Child Detention Now’s website is ecdn.org [3]

The national petition to end child detention can be signed at http://petitions.number10.gov.uk/NoChildDetention/ [4]


Country or region: UK

$(document).ready(function () { $('div#contentgrid').removeClass('grid-8'); $('div#contentgrid').addClass('grid-6'); });  About the author

Clare Sambrook [6], novelist & investigative journalist. Co-edits Shine a Light [7]. Co-founder End
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Subjects

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Shine A Light [10]

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