



Widdecombe and Galloway unite to stop deportation

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An unprecedented coalition of MPs including Ann Widdecombe and George Galloway will today join residents from Weymouth in a last-ditch attempt to stop the deportation of a family of asylum seekers.

Verah Kachepa and her four children, Natasha, Alex, Antony and Upili, will be sent back to Malawi next Tuesday unless new evidence of the dangers they face convinces the immigration minister, Tony McNulty, to personally issue a reprieve.

The family hit the headlines during the general election when the South Dorset Tory candidate, Ed Matts, doctored a photograph of him supporting the family at a rally so it instead highlighted the Conservatives' more hardline stance on asylum.

The blunder revived the fortunes of Labour MP Jim Knight, who defied national trends to hold on to Labour's most marginal seat with the biggest swing to Labour in the country.

"A lot of that was down to his support for the Kachepas," said Ralph Johnson, one of the family's supporters. "Many people are saying they're now expecting Jim to deliver."

Mr Knight will give the minister a new report by a Malawian doctor highlighting the risks the family face if deported, while the Kachepas' supporters, including children and pensioners, have chartered a coach from Weymouth to Westminster to lobby the government.

"We've got some new evidence to present to the minister and I hope that will be sufficient for them to stay in the UK permanently," Mr Knight said. "Despite a background of negative media noise about asylum seekers, the Weymouth community has rallied round the Kachepas."

Mrs Kachepa brought her family to Britain in 2001 to join her husband, a pharmacist who obtained a work visa. He left and his family was warned never to return to Malawi when he began living there with a niece of former dictator Hastings Banda.

Mrs Kachepa fears for her life if forcibly returned. "I feel afraid all the time," she said. "The worst I could face if we are sent back is death. The ex-president's family will do anything to prevent me making a noise and they have control over all aspects of life. If I am in danger my kids will be in danger. The only good thing is we've got lots of support here in Weymouth. Everyone has been saying 'good luck'. That has given us hope."

According to Mr Johnson, Tory leadership hopeful David Davis has expressed interest in their campaign, which has also been backed by Ms Widdecombe, Mr Galloway, Humfrey Malins, Tory shadow home affairs minister, and Mark Oaten, Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesman.

Later this afternoon, Billy Bragg will perform at a concert at the Cinnamon Club in Westminster, alongside Mrs Kachepa's son Alex, a talented rapper.

Local people successfully campaigned to bring the Kachepas back to Weymouth after they were seized by immigration officials in a dawn raid and taken to Yarl's Wood detention centre, near Bedford, in March. The government delayed their deportation until Alex, 17, Anthony, 15, and Upili, 11, completed their school year, although the uncertainty has already cost Natasha, 20, a university place to study nursing.

"The contribution that Verah Kachepa and her family have made to Weymouth, particularly in the area of racial tolerance and integration, is an asset we do not want to lose," said Mr Johnson.

"We've got the evidence to prove they are in danger and they are contributing to our society. These are solid grounds for humanitarian and compassionate reasons to keep them here in south Dorset."

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