

Great Britain: This horror story visited on South Wales by Suella Braverman could be coming to a street near you

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A far-right backlash against the home secretary's asylum policy has brought a deluge of hate to a peaceful Welsh town

Take what follows as a little local horror story, if that makes you feel better. But I see it as a parable, a lesson in how toxic things can get when some of the basest ingredients in politics are blended just so and left to fester. Our setting today is a town a few miles outside Swansea, yet with only a few changes it could come to the end of your road.

"I was always proud to say I was from Llanelli. Now? It's worse than embarrassed. I'm ashamed." That's not a disgruntled neighbour speaking, but the leader of Llanelli's council. And what's upsetting David Darkin isn't some new eyesore, but the forces gathering on his streets. In the privacy of his office, he likens what's outside to the 20th century's darkest decade.

Just a few months ago, no one here would summon up the ghost of 1930s fascism. But that was before this spring, when the town's top hotel was taken over by the [Home Office](#) to house about 250 asylum seekers - and all hell broke loose.

The Stradey Park Hotel is described by local people as "the jewel in Llanelli's crown", the place where everyone wanted to hold their weddings. Even today, as workmen pull out the building's innards in preparation for its new role, it leaves a splendid shell: a cream-coloured Edwardian mansion tucked into a hillside, with views over the Gower coastline.

Now it is in the hands of Suella Braverman. However hard the home secretary huffs and puffs about cutting hotel bills for asylum seekers, she is now one of the biggest hoteliers in Britain. To house a [huge backlog manufactured by the Tories](#), Braverman has [just shy of 400 hotels](#), creating a chain [more than twice the size of the Hilton group in the UK](#).

What costs taxpayers billions is making some people extremely rich. Stradey Park was [sold in 2020 to Sterling Woodrow](#), an investment firm based about 250 miles away in Billericay, Essex, which also [trades in hotels for refugees](#), first in [Cumbria](#) and now here. It struck a deal with Clearsprings Ready Homes, one of just three firms that handles all the Home Office's asylum seeker accommodation. The founder of Clearsprings is [Graham King](#). In 2022, the company [reported profits of £28](#), six times more than the year before.

Stradey Park should have received its new residents at the start of July, but local resistance put a stop to that. The opposition began with court cases and letters to Whitehall from the town's great and good, but over the past 12 weeks it has metastasised. A permanent protest camp has sprung up right at the hotel gates, and what it has become leaves the town's elected representatives baffled

and fearful.

What began as complaints about the loss of a four-star hotel and 100 jobs is now a swamp of conspiracies about invaders and foreign rapists. A leaflet recently given out around the town asks: "Is it racist to protect your home from unknown unvetted illegals?" Last week, some of the people at the camp stormed the hotel. One leader of the original protest, Robert Lloyd, is now hounded outside his home for not being hardline enough. He says that friends whose weddings he attended now threaten him, and the night before we met last week, the police were doing hourly patrols outside his house.

Every jobbing demagogue is now making a beeline for south [Wales](#). Katy Hopkins and Richard Tice have done selfie stops, while GB News and TalkTV have piled in. And this weekend, sad-sack fascist Anne Marie Waters addressed a capacity crowd, following on from the fascist organisation Patriotic Alternative, which has papered the town with its hate literature. At Hope Not Hate, Rosie Carter has spent years monitoring extremist organisations, but what she sees in Llanelli troubles her: "It's far-right radicalisation in real time."

A couple of hundred miles away in Westminster, "culture wars" is just another electoral sport, to be indulged for a couple of points in the polls or a mention in the papers. But in south Wales or [Dunstable](#) or [Knowsley](#), you see what's really at stake, where the mainstream and extremist right effectively collaborate in poisoning the very soil of a place so that supposedly subterranean prejudice voiced after last orders has become chest-out, finger-jabbing racism.

The [Labour](#) party in Llanelli, as elsewhere, has not reacted honourably. The most outspoken opponent of this bigotry has been the local Senedd Cymru member, Lee Waters. Among the abuse he has received as a result are direct threats to him and his family. Despite that, one county councillor turned up at the camp, posing in a camouflage jacket alongside a placard reading Welsh Lives Matter. No action has yet been taken against him, for all Labour's protests of being an anti-racist party. Other Labour party representatives have been rather circumspect, perhaps out of a sense that their electoral base mustn't have any prejudices challenged. By their silence, they are effectively allowing some of the basest rhetoric to be normalised.

One local antiracist activist, Steve Kelshaw, says: "Churches won't say anything; the Labour party won't say anything. All our usual sources of moral authority have gone." That authority rested on an economic order, which has also dissolved. Llanelli steel production was once called a Klondike, so well did it pay, while down the road is what remains of Port Talbot, once called Treasure Island because no one could believe how good the wages were. All of that has gone now, with a town centre that in places is more boards than shops.

Almost everyone in Llanelli told me the camp was a no-go area, that a visit would mean intimidation or worse. But I didn't think that would be fair, either to those protesting or to anyone reading this. So I went.

The hotel and its opponent camp sit on a narrow road out of town. There are protesters everywhere in front, watched over by police officers. When the residents move in, some from war zones of their own, it will become a fortress on a hill. From a balcony hangs a banner reading: "No illegal immigrants." Fluttering elsewhere is military regalia: an RAF flag, a banner with a poppy and the legend "Lest we forget". This sight was honked by a passing car at least every minute. Men and women came out of the tent to stare at me.

In the spring of 2016, when [I came to south Wales before the Brexit vote](#), plenty of people told me how migrants were taking houses, hospital appointments, benefits. Mingled in with all that this time

was something else: conspiracies. A man pulled out his phone and showed me a video of a white boy on his knees crying and kissing the feet of what he claimed were “Afghanistanis”. Where was this video from and when? He didn’t know. When white boys did the bullying wasn’t that also wrong? He didn’t appear to care.

In another conversation, a man fretted about not enough Welsh children being born. It was an echo of the chant from the far right in Charlottesville, Virginia, about white people being replaced. Out of the corner of my eye, a placard read: “We were never asked”. You might think it meant the conversion of the hotel, but the same phrase is plastered across the publications of the far right, to warn that immigration will dilute whiteness.

This back-and-forth went on for what felt like an hour, in the pouring rain of a Welsh summer. People would voice grievances, like housing and jobs, that could surely be solved with politics and money. And then they would lurch off into wild talk about how Albanians and Somalis have a propensity to gang-rape. It was a mix of the prosaic and the conspiratorial, as if your neighbour stopped talking about their lawn to whisper that lizards were moving in next door.

So much has been taken from this region over the decades – the anthracite coal, the tin and steel – but at least then local people got paid something for their troubles. This time, too, everyone wants to get their cut from Llanelli: the hotel owners, the outsourcing firm, the Home Office. Then there are the touring nationalists, popping over the border to pretend they care about Wales, while in Silicon Valley the social media firms whip up any tensions with their algorithms.

Back in Westminster, Braverman ponders how all this will play for her next leadership bid. Some day soon, all these people will move on to their next fairground. And the poor sods in this sometimes-beautiful town will have to decontaminate their very soil.

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