

ANIMAL FARM



Osman doesn't think much about how he is connected to cockle pickers or to the issues of EU enlargement that will take place on 1 st May. He is too busy trying to keep warm and survive.

Osman is an asylum seeker in Nottingham, one of the many thousands around the country who have had their benefit entitlements removed under Section 55 of the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act, 2002.

He lives from hand to mouth, and on the kindness of friends and refugee support groups in Nottingham . But as icy winds sweep around Parliament, it is the image of him sleeping in a council wheelie bin that is locked most firmly in my mind.

For me, this seemed about as bad as it could get. For Osman, at least he had a lid over his head. Many of those penalised by Section 55 in Nottingham have slept out in the open, in abandoned cars, in allotment sheds and on other people's floors.

The stories of what some of the refugees have been through are harrowing and humbling. Most of us, thankfully, will experience nothing like it. But it is an experience almost entirely ignored or derided in the tabloid press. Instead, Osman and others are depicted as the greatest threat to civilisation as we know it. To some extent, the final judgment about whether someone's asylum claim is legitimate misses the central issue we should face: is this the way a civilised society should treat those who are destitute within it?

Britain has constructed a set of rules about the treatment of asylum seekers that creates an ideal caricature for the Far Right to hate and blame, and a convenient smokescreen for government. Despite the fact that most of them are living in wretched conditions refugees are supposed 'to take all the decent houses.' We forget that local authorities are being forced to get rid of council houses rather than to build them and refugees usually occupy the poorest of the housing stock.

Then they are 'a drain on the NHS'. Yet we ignore that in the last year alone 45,000 foreign workers were recruited to work in the NHS, propping up the services that all of us depend on.

MP's regularly receive letters complaining that asylum seekers 'steal our benefits' and 'deprive us of a decent pension' but we rarely reply with an explanation that PFI schemes (paying 16.5% interest rates to contractors who take over public assets) take far bigger public handouts than refugees could ever dream of. Millions of people have found their works pensions have been stolen from them and frittered away by speculators; but not a single refugee was responsible for this.

Public anger is manipulated and directed towards those who flee to this country rather than at those who take our savings and do a runner. Politically, we are encouraged to offer asylum to capital in search

of tax havens but not to people in need of safe havens.

Finally, it is the asylum seekers who are supposed to be responsible for taking everyone's jobs. It took the tragedy of the cockle pickers, swept out to sea on Morecambe Bay, to remind us that the jobs offered to asylum seekers are rarely legal and invariably the ones no one else will do.

If Section 55 has been used to remove your benefit entitlements, and if you have no entitlement to seek legal employment, how do you survive? It is the classic way to create an underclass of permanent outsiders; eminently exploitable and almost universally derided. The cockle pickers weren't there because they had a passion for night bathing. They were there because they were penniless and because someone could make money out of them.

It was an accident waiting to happen. It could have done so in farming, fruit picking or food processing. In any area of seasonal trade or production there is a need for seasonal or temporary labour. Nature may determine much of this seasonality but it does not require the labour to be marginal and illegal. Only the free-market does that.

Parliament will be forced now to look at the licensing of 'Gangmasters' – those who recruit the labour to meet seasonal employment demands. The real test will come in the question of whether penalties will extend to the supermarkets, farmers or producers; the people who make the real money out of paying below the minimum wage to those who exist below the threshold of legal employment.

Gangmasters no doubt take their own slice of the cake but it is the demand for 'international competitiveness' that casts round for cheaper and cheaper labour. This is what brings me back to Osman and the EU Accession states.

I have just come back from Poland and Hungary, and have listened to other submissions from Slovenia and Slovakia. The purpose was to get some understanding of the impact that joining the EU on May 1st will have on their economies and communities. The excitement about a more diverse and enriched Europe was soured only by the demands of 'marketisation' that have been placed upon them. Nowhere symbolised this more than Poland.

Almost 20% of the Polish workforce is involved in agriculture. Much of this is in the form of subsistence farming or in small-holdings and family farming. As a result Poland is effectively self-sufficient in food production. Without disrupting this structure much, the country could easily increase its output and supply to others. But this was not enough.

The EU decided that all of the Accession states have to move towards 'modern' industrial scale agriculture...agribusiness. In Poland it means turning some 2 million people off the land. Where will they go? It is our demand for a free market in agriculture that will drive them to seek work elsewhere. No wonder the Poles wanted to know whether they would be able to get work permits for employment in Britain.

Almost all the pressure on Accession states is for production methods in which the East will supply the needs of the West, largely to the financial benefit of external corporations. The example of pig-meat production in Poland now frightens even the politicians who sanctioned the changes.

Possibly the biggest global producer of pig-meat is a US corporation called Smithfield. It saw that Poland had a long history of pig-meat products but that most of the pigs were reared on small family farms and integrated into other farm processes. Smithfield decided that its US model of huge, industrial scale pig factories was just what Poland needed. Unfortunately, they forgot to mention the pollution.

A pig is largely an eating, breathing manure machine. Food goes in one end and waste – masses of it – comes out the other. On small farms this can be incorporated into the recycling process for manure, but an industrial pig factory is a different deal. The Smithfield 'factories' range from 15,000 to 50,000 pigs. Each pig produces 10 times the amount of waste of a human being.

One of Smithfield's factories in the United States can produce more waste than the whole of New York. In Poland, a factory could produce more waste than Warsaw. And the waste has been poured out onto the land, creating great lagoons of pig faeces which, in turn, create their own health problems.

In the US, there is now a massive issue about how this contaminates the water supply. Half of the population of Milwaukee (400,000 people) went down sick as a result of the waste contaminating their local water supply.

Campaigners from the USA, including Robert Kennedy Jnr, have been touring Poland, warning what a dangerous deal they were getting into. But the deal had been done, and it was a pretty lucrative one for the company. Smithfield got the production permits and the profits, the Poles got the pig shit. It serves as both a useful lesson and a metaphor.

In all of the Accession countries, US multinationals, in particular, have been moving in in anticipation of easy access to EU markets. On some issues there is an overt recognition that Accession countries could be used as a Trojan horse for producing goods so far rejected by European consumers. GM crops and the production of beef, pork, chicken and milk using growth hormones are top of their current shopping list. But the displacement of labour, the siphoning out of wealth and the legacies of contamination do not concern them. These are all 'externalities' that do not figure in globalisation's accounting system. It is the chasm that divides the corporate bottom line from the human bottom line.

Our histories tend to be written, in part, around the achievements of great explorers. The reality, however, is that most of us grow up and grow old in the country we were born in. Tidal movements of people are driven by fear, by famine, by war and by disaster. They are not driven by 'benefits tourism.' Today, they are more driven by the obsession with global free movement of capital and an indifference to the human and environmental costs left in its wake.

Osman fled from persecution. He could just as easily have fled from destitution. His journey followed the same direction that wealth has been flowing; except that wealth has not been flowing from country to country, but from citizen to corporation.

When we lift the lid on what globalisation is actually doing to society, it isn't Osman's future that should be consigned to the wheelie bin.