

ASYLUM SEEKERS



'This country is too small to be taking asylum seekers. We have drugs and muggings and violence on our estates, and all they give us is more asylum seekers. Thousands and thousands are coming in through the back door and no one can track them down. How many are terrorists? Have you politicians forgotten September 11th, or do you just not care'.

The letter this was taken from was accompanied by a collection of cuttings from right wing daily newspapers. It is the type of letter MP's have begun to get from their constituents, triggered partly by the way asylum issues are reported and partly by the way the government has responded. Rather than denouncing the public for getting it wrong, we have to begin with the political responsibilities for challenging the inflammatory propaganda of the press.

Members of the public who put together a collection of legitimate but unconnected fears and blame them on refugees cannot simply be dismissed as racists. In Burnley, housing conditions are so bad the real question is not why people are rioting, but why more people aren't. Hopelessness and social division come out of decades of under- (or non-) investment in social housing. Labour's response has not been to launch a new era of council house building and improvement. Instead we have played the more divisive game of stock transfers - off-loading the most powerless of tenants onto new landlords in the hope that someone else will pick up the bill for repairs and improvements.

The fear of crime is a legitimate one but it has nothing whatsoever to do with refugees. The charge of 'working illegally' and being a burden on the state would disappear if refugees had work permit status while their applications were being processed. Not only would this massively reduce the 'disappearance' factor, it would allow us to recognise that most refugees have worked every day of their adult lives (and for much of their childhoods). They have only survived by working. Politicians have done refugees (and the public) a massive disservice by failing to make this point over and over again.

We continue to fail the public when we decline to explain that Britain will have to increase the numbers of working age adults we allow into the country if we want to continue paying ourselves pensions. The state pension has always been paid out of tax and National Insurance. Those in work paid for those who had reached the age of retirement. But with more of us living longer (and retiring earlier) the balance changes. If the state pension is not to be cut dramatically we either have to increase the number of adults in the workforce, increase levels of taxation or raise the age of retirement. At its crudest level, those who would throw out all refugees need to know they will also be throwing out their own pension rights or right to retire.

If, politically, we have failed to get the economic issues across, we have been just as poor on the social and humanitarian level. Those of us who voted against the current Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill did so because it fuels the misunderstanding of asylum issues rather than reduces it.

Segregating refugees in Reception Centres is a free gift to racists. Ten years ago in the Lichtenhagen estate in Rostok, Germany, I was involved in the aftermath of three days rioting in which neo-nazi gangs torched the blocks of flats refugees were living in. They bolted doors to prevent families escaping from the flames and clubbed those who did so. Neo-nazis in Britain will use the symbolism of Reception Centres to fan up the same hatreds.

Thirty years ago, in response to the mass expulsion of Asians from Uganda, I was involved in a very different approach. The press propaganda was no less hostile but the government response was significantly different. Local authorities were given a huge increase in housing finance and a legal duty to lead the programme of integrating refugee families into the life of local communities. The extra resources meant that people were not set against each other in the pursuit of scarce resources.

The same was true for education. Refugee children were not 'swamped' by a language and culture they did not understand. Nor were schools asked to take on responsibilities they were not equipped to deal with. An equivalent huge injection of funding went into education. Many schools and LEA's employed Section 11 teachers to address the language needs of refugee children. Some areas created specialist language schools to give every refugee child a free year of tuition before entering mainstream education. Of course racist organisations hated this, and tried to run up racist divides wherever they could, but communities and local authorities could fend this off with visible gains in the quality of housing and education in their areas.

When social conditions improve, communities feel secure and grow together. The Achilles Heel in New Labour's approach is that it has not put new money into council housing, the education of refugee children and the creation of permanent job opportunities. We could do so and add to the security of local people. We could do so and add to the sense of hope and improvement. We could do so and meet the needs of refugee children without any disadvantage to our own. It is the failure to give the political lead that leaves the ground open to those who would prefer to play the race or refugee card.