

Office for Refugee Policy

ANY ROOM AT THE INN?

Reflections on Asylum Seekers

by Bishop Patrick O'Donoghue

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Charged political atmosphere

The current debate on asylum is too often based on misrepresentation, prejudice and hostility. I am afraid that with the coming General Election we might see a further escalation of hostility and prejudice against asylum seekers and refugees.

This kind of hostility is not new; it has been going on for a while, so much so that it has begun to infect the body politic. A recent survey conducted by Reader's Digest is quite revealing, in that it exposes a certain ignorance about asylum seekers and demonstrates that people are beginning to believe a lot of the hype about them.(1)

I am not suggesting that we shouldn't debate this important issue of asylum. In fact, I support the right to free speech and debate, which I believe is fundamental to any democratic society. However, the right to free speech must not be abused to cause prejudice and hostility towards asylum seekers, especially during the election campaign when there is intense competition for the popular vote. Politicians and the media need to be aware that xenophobic speeches and reports about refugees and asylum seekers can pander to the racist views of a small section of the electorate, with enormous consequences for community relations. It may cause anxiety and insecurity - perhaps even trigger violence - towards asylum seekers and other minority communities.

That is why I wholly support the initiative of the Commission for Racial Equality, committing the major political parties to take action against candidates or campaigners who do or say anything likely to stir up racial prejudice. Equally, I support the initiative of the Association of Chief Police Officers in producing the Guidelines for the Policing Needs of Asylum Seekers.(2) These initiatives are important to maintain a peaceful political atmosphere for the General Election and beyond.

Facts, not suppositions

The number of people seeking asylum in the UK has increased from 71,000 in 1999 to 76,000 in 2000 - an increase of about 7%. It seems to me that Britain is not unique in this regard. In fact, looking at the number of asylum seekers as a percentage of the population, Britain is tenth among European countries. And, whereas in the whole of the 1990s, Britain received about 370,000 applications, Germany received 1.8 million.

In the international context, the UK and indeed the whole of Europe host a small proportion of the world's refugees. The Home Secretary, Jack Straw, conceded this point at the Home Affairs Select Committee in November last year: 'The greatest burden of supporting refugees falls on the developing countries'. While the Home Secretary did not give figures, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) says that 90% of refugees remain in developing countries - countries with fragile political and economic systems and which can least afford to support refugees.

It is wrong to suggest that the claims of the majority of asylum seekers in the UK are unfounded. Last year, for example, more than 58% of decisions resulted in the granting of refugee status (this figure includes appeals and backlog). Most asylum seekers are refused, not because their claims are unfounded, but for technical reasons such as the failure to meet deadlines or improper submission of the complex Statement of Evidence Forms (SEFs).(3) Furthermore, the Government itself admits that almost 1 in 20 refusals are overturned, although these are not recorded in official statistics.(4)

It is often claimed that refugees are a burden on the economy and on the taxpayer. Research in Canada, Australia and Germany shows that, once settled, refugees actually increase Government revenue and create a net tax benefit. In Britain, Home Office research confirms that refugees bring a wealth of skills and experience to the country,

and their contribution to the British economy, society and culture is immense. The study also acknowledges that in many areas refugee skills are ignored, if not under-utilised. For example, thousands of refugee doctors and nurses have skills that are being ignored, while the NHS is desperate for staff. Shouldn't the Government be supporting such skilled refugees to contribute to British society?(5)

Crisis in the asylum system

I would like to make three points about the current crisis.

Firstly, as a Christian, my concern for refugees is based on an ancient biblical and historical mandate. This begins with the story of Creation when God created human beings 'in his own image' for a life of dignity and righteousness. God constantly reminded the people of Israel that they experienced the hardship of being aliens and slaves in Egypt, requiring them to treat aliens in their midst with compassion (Exodus 22:21; Leviticus 19:33; Deuteronomy 10:17-19). Throughout the Bible, people are called to offer hospitality to strangers and exiles. The prophets stood up, calling for justice for the poor and marginalised, and for strangers, orphans and widows. The refugee, a person who is by definition poor and marginalised, in great human need, and in danger of violence and persecution, therefore needs divine and societal protection. This principle is central to both Jewish and Christian moral understanding.

For Christians what is most fundamental is God's revelation in Jesus Christ. The Gospel suggests that his life and ministry were shaped by some of the experiences we associate with refugees. Mary and Joseph were on the margins of society at the very time of his birth and were forced to take refuge in Egypt. His poignant saying, 'Foxes have holes, birds in the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head' (Matthew 8:20), will have a strong resonance for those uprooted from their homes. But perhaps the clearest teaching offered by Jesus is undoubtedly his explicit identification of the stranger as the sacrament of his presence for all time: 'I was a stranger and you welcomed me' (Matthew 25:31-35).

It is natural therefore that the Church of Christ, drawing on the entire biblical heritage, accepts the special calling to protect, care for and support refugees and all uprooted people. We share with all people a fundamental belief in our common humanity and solidarity. If we neglect refugees, if we do not console the uprooted, we have indeed failed in our calling to follow Christ.

Let me also touch a little on the Catholic Church's rich body of social teaching on refugees and migrants. From the beginning, the Catholic Church has always taken a global view of refugees and makes connections between economics, migration and social justice. Pope John Paul II powerfully explored this theme in the context of the Jubilee year 2000, when he said:

'If we recall that Jesus came to "preach the good news to the poor", how can we fail to lay greater emphasis on the Church's preferential option for the poor and the outcast? Indeed, it has to be said that a commitment to justice and peace in a world like ours, marked by so many conflicts and intolerable social and economic inequalities, is a necessary condition for the preparation and celebration of the Jubilee.'(6)

Secondly, I am aware that there are many areas of the asylum system that are not working. For example, the determination system continues to be plagued by inefficient and unfair decision-making procedures; the backlog in the asylum system continues to be high; too many asylum seekers are being detained arbitrarily; asylum seekers continue to

suffer poor housing, welfare and health care; and there is a lack of training and employment opportunities for those granted refugee status.(7)

The most immediate impression is of a system which is uncoordinated, and one in which all participants - decision-makers, judges and legal representatives - work under great pressure of time and resources. Our asylum system needs reform; we should take responsibility for it and not blame asylum seekers for our failures.

Thirdly, while not questioning the right of the UK Government to control its borders, I have concerns about the inflexibility and inadequacy of our asylum system, which all too often rejects asylum seekers with valid claims. It is with sadness that I say that it is the victims of such decisions, not those who make the errors of judgement, who may pay the price of persecution, torture or even death.

The need for reform

It seems to me that the absolute priority for a credible asylum system should be the speed with which asylum applications are processed. This is in the interests of all who use the asylum system, especially the asylum seeker. It is also in the interests of the general public, because the quicker the decisions are made the less time asylum seekers will spend on Government subsidies. Speedy processing will also act as a deterrent to a small group of people who will otherwise apply knowing that it will take a long time for the applications to be turned down, hence the opportunity to abscond. While I am wary of the more exaggerated claims about the number of asylum seekers disappearing into the system, it is clear that there must be some mechanism for monitoring the application process and improving the efficiency of removals.

The efficient processing of applications can only be achieved by the provision of adequate resources, primarily enough caseworkers to make good-quality initial decisions supported by better information and training. The present Government has invested more than the previous administration in this respect, but a lot more still needs to be done.

I would also like to see a greatly improved system of support and accommodation for asylum seekers. In principle, I am not opposed to the new dispersal system, not only because it removes social budget pressures on local governments in the south east but also because it encourages the view that asylum is a national issue that requires national responsibility-sharing.

In practice, however, the dispersal programme has proved to be unsatisfactory. Asylum seekers are being dispersed to areas that lack support systems or have had little experience of working with asylum seekers. Far from Home, a study by Shelter published in January this year, found asylum seekers living in appalling and often dangerous properties owned by unscrupulous landlords.(8) Racism towards asylum seekers is also on the rise in some regions, and asylum seekers are reported to be living in fear, feeling insecure and increasingly marginalised. The chaos that has been brought about by the dispersal system must be ended.

Finally, I would strongly urge the end of the demeaning, costly and inefficient system of asylum vouchers. Asylum seekers are provided with vouchers that give them an income of 70% of the normal income support - that is almost 30% below the poverty line.(9) There is widespread concern that the voucher system stigmatises asylum seekers, is costly to implement and nullifies the Government's strategies to tackle poverty and social exclusion. Token Gestures, a recent joint report, provides a detailed but bleak picture of the physical, material and spiritual damage the voucher system is having on asylum seekers.(10) The voucher system simply must go!

European Union

On the international level, it is important that Britain works jointly with its EU partners to create a more humane and efficient Europe-wide asylum system. Title IV of the Amsterdam Treaty and the 1999 Tampere European Council have already provided the framework for a common European system. We need the political will to drive this process forward, not in the direction of the lowest common denominator, but towards the best practice of the EU member states. The recent statement by the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, proposing quotas for refugees that Europe would accept from specific trouble spots, while insisting that the rest should find protection in the region they come from, is very disappointing indeed.(11) I am absolutely opposed to the creation of a fortress that would place barriers on the path of people seeking protection from persecution in the EU.

Root causes

Ultimately, we must address the root causes that trigger the flight of millions of people throughout the world. In this discussion we come face to face with weary cynicism, if not the crude dismissal of asylum seekers as 'bogus' or 'economic migrants'. It is simplistic and wrong to suggest that asylum seekers who do not fulfil the terms of the 1951 Refugee Convention are 'economic migrants' or 'bogus'. The fact is that today, as in the past, large numbers of people are fleeing from human rights abuses, generalised violence, civil wars and armed conflicts. This cycle of violence is perpetuated by arms exports, particularly from the developed countries, to countries in turmoil. In other situations people flee from under-development, environmental disasters and misguided economic projects. For this reason the global economy must be held up for special scrutiny, for it continues to impose crushing debt burdens and distortions to the economies of the poor countries making it difficult for them to secure a decent existence for their peoples. It is no coincidence that the world's poorest countries are also home to the most horrendous conflicts and displacement of peoples. It is understandable, therefore, that victims of such policies should try to seek a better and more peaceful life elsewhere.

Let me remind those who wish to ignore their responsibilities to asylum seekers that if no action is taken now 'in ten years time, 1 in 3 human beings will exist on the margins of survival'.(12) One cannot pretend either that international consensus does not exist on this issue. Resolution 41/124 adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 1986, calls explicitly for a 'root causes' solution to the refugee problem viz. support for conflict prevention and resolution, coupled with fairer global structures on debt, trade and investments and development assistance. As Ruud Lubbers, the new UN High Commissioner for Refugees, argued, 'If the EU would only spend a small percentage of its development funds for preventive and durable solutions for the large numbers of refugees in protracted situations in many corners of the world, it would make an enormous difference.'

This year is the 50th anniversary of the UN Refugee Convention - born out of the enormous displacement of European people during the Second World War. It should remain a cornerstone of international law, and I would like our Government and all the member states of the European Union, as signatories to the 1951 Refugee Convention and other international human rights instruments, to uphold the fundamental principle of asylum for those fleeing persecution. It is not a matter of choice, but of duty.

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Footnotes

1) The MORI poll for Reader's Digest, November 2000, 'Are We a Tolerant Nation?', found that two thirds of respondents believed that immigrants (no distinction made of asylum seekers) account for 20% of the population; the real figure is 4%. 63% believed that too much was being done for them. Many believed that asylum seekers are given preferential treatment for housing; the real situation is that asylum seekers are dispersed around the country in temporary accommodation. Many believed that asylum seekers receive £113 a week in income support; the real figure is £36.54 a week for a single adult over the age of 25.

2) Commission for Racial Equality, General Election Compact, 14 March 2001, develops an earlier agreement signed by the five political parties in the run up to the 1997 General Election, 'not to pitch one group against another for short term political or personal gain'. Association of Chief Police Officers, Guide on the Policing Needs of Asylum Seekers and Refugees, 28 February 2001: 'There have been countless attacks on dispersed asylum seekers around the country. Asylum seekers are as entitled to live free from crime, harassment and intimidation as any member of society.'

3) Refugee Council: the 10-day deadline often makes it impossible for legal representatives to obtain evidence, medical reports, translations of documents and completion in English of the 24-page SEFs.

4) Home Office spokesperson on Channel 4 News, 25 January 2000.

5) Home Office Study #141: in 2000, people born outside Britain (including refugees and asylum seekers) paid around £2.6bn into the Treasury - 10% more than they took out.

6) Pope John Paul II, Tertio Millennio Adveniente, n. 51. See also Pope John XXIII, Pacem in Terris, 1963; Pope John Paul II, Sollicitudo Rei Socialis, 1987; and Centesimus Annus, 1991; et al.

7) The Government has had some success with the backlog clearance but as the Immigration Advisory Service (IAS) argues, 'The backlog of asylum applications of more than 60,000 is unacceptable and should be reduced to zero as a main priority by an accelerated procedure. ... The Government should implement the automatic bail hearing provisions of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act without delay.' Manifesto Summary Election 2001.

8) Shelter, Far from Home, 31 January 2001, inspected 154 dwellings housing 309 people, including 48 children: dampness, overcrowding, poor sanitation, unhygienic cooking facilities and inadequate means of fire escape were all commonplace.

9) An adult asylum seeker receives just £36.54 vouchers a week, £10 of which is exchangeable for cash.)

10) Token Gestures, December 2000, a report on the voucher system by the Transport and General Workers' Union, Oxfam, and the Refugee Council, and supported by the Asylum Rights Campaign, sets out the case against the voucher system, encompassing its cost, impact on race relations and its legality in regard to child welfare.

11) In February 2001, the Home Secretary Jack Straw issued a 'discussion' paper on reforming the 1951 Refugee Convention, as part of his contribution to the UNHCR-inspired 'global consultation' to commemorate the 50th anniversary of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.

12) UN Development Programme, Human Development Report, 1998.