

Refugees: Myths & Realities

Surge of Refugees a 'time bomb' for London Authorities –
The Guardian
25/9/98

Among the 16 victims was a baby, beneath her mother's corpse, and a boy, his throat cut – The Guardian 30/9/98 reporting from Kosovo

It is the most frightening feeling as you cross the tarmac and you think 'If only I can make it through customs, I'll be safe.' The last thing you want to do is draw attention to yourself. –
Poverty & Prejudice, CRE

Over the past few weeks an increasing number of scare stories have appeared in and on the media blaming asylum seekers for the current housing crisis, planted by a number of Labour controlled West London Councils.

Using emotive and at times racist language, the purpose is to pave the way for asylum seekers to be placed in different areas of the country in a form of detention – a new Labour proposal.

The housing crisis is caused by a number of obvious factors - the failure to build council housing, empty office blocks, the rich with their second homes – but there is a special crisis for refugees. Local councils seek to pin the blame for this on the last Government. This is done by correctly criticising the decision to withdraw Social Security benefits from many asylum seekers.

It is conveniently forgotten that Labour have now been the party of government for 15 months, which is more than ample time to restore the entitlement to benefits. This provision would at a stroke alleviate the crisis. Instead new Labour proposes further restrictions on liberty.

The majority of asylum seekers arrive in the UK in the most desperate of circumstances. Denied the right to claim asylum at British embassies abroad, they are forced to travel illegally. The immigration authorities then use the possession of forged documents to cast doubt on their genuineness and honesty. At the port they are denied legal advice and subjected to lengthy interviews. The 'lucky' ones are then given temporary admission; the rest put in prison.

Once in the country asylum seekers receive 20% less dole money than everyone else, and are denied the right to work for at least 6 months. They are left to their own devices to find housing and education. Those who do not know of the need to seek asylum at the port are refused all benefits and housing assistance, and are reliant on handouts from social workers. The same is true of asylum seekers exercising legitimate rights of appeal.

At the same time as the scare stories appear, we are treated to nightly images on TV of the plight of the people of Kosovo. People are murdered, homes burnt out and belongings destroyed. Most people are now so scared that, unless they can get out, they are forced to scavenge in the countryside in order to survive.

Most of us enjoy the ability to travel abroad for holidays or to see family and friends. We may even wish to emigrate to be near our families, to get a better lifestyle or just because we like the weather! Depending on where we try to go we face various bureaucratic restrictions. If we are black then the level of suspicion we face is increased. People wishing to come here from poorer countries face an impossible battle to get in.

Yet the world belongs to all of us and we should be able to travel freely. Therefore we should not simply be seeking a better deal for refugees, but we should oppose the existence of all immigration controls.

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