

MIGRANTS, REFUGEES AND ASYLUM-SEEKERS: A BIT OF HISTORY

The current so-called national crisis over refugees and asylum-seekers isn't something new that has never happened before. Britain has a very long history of taking in refugees from war and political or religious persecution.

In the 20th century alone, there were a number of occasions when quite large groups of people came to make a new life for themselves, were eventually integrated into the population and became British themselves. This is not about outsiders and insiders: all our families were outsiders originally and we're all insiders now.

Early in the century, there was a big influx of Jews, for example, escaping from vicious anti-semitic pogroms in Poland and Russia. In the 1930s, more came from Germany and central Europe to escape from the Nazis.

In 1956, a large number of families came from Hungary, following the invasion of Soviet forces and in the 1970s, it was the turn of Ugandan and Kenyan Asians, many of whom settled in the East Midlands.

Since 1951, the international Refugee Convention has given an absolute right to seek asylum in any of the 147 countries – including Britain – that have signed up to it. Not all claims have to be accepted, but all have to be examined carefully and people allowed to stay and be supported while that process is under way.

Nowadays, a number of quite unrelated things have been deliberately confused by the government and much of the media to create what they claim is a crisis: immigration from the EU, immigration from outside the EU (Commonwealth countries in particular), foreign students – and people claiming asylum. Just to be clear: asylum-seekers are people who are exercising their legal right to have their claim for asylum considered, while refugees have had their claim accepted and now have permanent residence in Britain. So, as you can tell from that, there is no such thing as an “illegal asylum-seeker”, whatever certain papers and politicians say!

Racism and xenophobia are in fact used to explain the lack of government investment in jobs, housing, schools and public services. There is little or no acknowledgement of the value new arrivals bring to Britain or of the fact that migrants pay a lot more in taxes than they take in benefits. Or that most urban areas - villages, towns and cities - have few if any recent migrants of any sort.

Neither is there ever any mention of the millions of British migrants living abroad and using the services of other countries: would there be the same tabloid headlines about the country being “swamped” or “full up” if they all decided to return, I wonder?

In short, this supposed migrant crisis is really about the poor provision of essential services for all of us and the lack of support for migrants to integrate into British society, and this is the background against which the Nottingham and Notts Refugee Forum has to work.

THE WORK OF THE REFUGEE FORUM

The Forum was set up in 2000 by a group of local people who were concerned that asylum-seekers were being dispersed (to use the official expression) to Notts with little access to advice and assistance. No Government money was available to provide this service then and none is now, despite Nottingham being one of the main "dispersal areas" in the country. At any one time, there are up to 1,000 asylum-seekers in Notts, many of whom stay on and become part of the Nottingham mix once they get formal refugee status.

Since that time, we've grown into a medium-size charity, employing more than 20 people and working with over a hundred volunteers. We've moved twice from our original cramped building and are now in a former school in St. Ann's, about ten minutes' walk from where we started, close to the City centre.

The Forum undertakes a wide range of activities and services: we provide Welfare Rights advice, housing advice and health advice. We work with young people – both the children of refugee families and unaccompanied minors – and run groups for families and women. We also help destitute asylum-seekers as best we can, providing a special advice session just for them, where they can get a hot meal, a bag of groceries and a small cash grant at the same time. We work with other organisations, such as the Red Cross, Housing Associations, local Councils and the NHS. And we work with the Government's official housing providers, who are currently G4S – you may have heard of them.

Recently, we have had to respond to the removal of Legal Aid from many asylum-seekers by establishing a Legal Advice service for the first time.

As well as all this, we do what we can to publicise the real stories behind forced migration and disprove the lies about people only coming for the pittance they receive – in fact, less than half the level of Job Seekers' Allowance. In the last year, we've been on local radio, Notts TV, BBC East Midlands TV, in the Nottingham Post and elsewhere.

As I've already said, we receive no money from the Government for the work we do, even though we are recognised as the official Notts source of advice and support. We have been receiving a grant from Nottingham City Council for some years, but that's under permanent threat as a result of cuts in local government funding.

This means we have to rely on short-term grants from various funders, including the National Lottery and corporate donors such as Lloyds Bank. It makes life extremely precarious for our staff, who are all at risk of redundancy once the funding for their project runs out – and of course, it's a big problem for our clients as well.

We're currently doing our best to encourage supportive organisations to affiliate to the Forum and make what donations they can. Funders are often more interested in supporting a particular project than paying our rent, but we can't have one without the other!

So, who are we working with? This varies depending on what is going on in the world. Last year, our clients' main countries of origin were Eritrea, Iraq, Iran and Sudan. Next year, it will probably be different. There are more families than used to be the case – when we started, it was mainly single young men - and a worrying rise in unaccompanied children. We need staff, volunteers or paid interpreters who speak about 40 different languages in any year and of course, these languages also change regularly.

In the last year, we had over 8,000 separate visits from individuals or families, involving over 10,000 people in total and 56 different nationalities.

In finishing, I'd just like to talk a bit about the current situation in Britain, as it's presented to the public. There has been a lot of deliberately inaccurate publicity about 20,000 Syrians being accepted for settlement in the UK and in fact, only about a hundred have arrived in Notts so far, mainly placed in the City, but also in Mansfield and Broxtowe borough. Only a few hundred more are currently placed anywhere in Britain and the UK is one of the few European countries that has refused to accept even one of the desperate people from Calais and the Greek islands that we regularly see on the TV news and in the papers.

Overall, the proportion of refugees and asylum-seekers coming to Britain is tiny – less than 2% of the world total (and only about 8% of all migrants to the UK are asylum-seekers). Even small countries like Sweden are far more welcoming than our Government - looking at the number of asylum applicants per head of population, the UK comes a very poor seventeenth out of all European countries. And about two thirds of all refugees worldwide are taken in by developing countries bordering their country of origin.

In short, there is no "national migrant crisis". It is simply a political invention seized upon by the right-wing press as a way to try and discredit their political opponents. We could absorb many thousands of refugees quite easily, as we have in the past, if the Government was prepared to come up with the relatively small amounts of money needed for support and services, rather than spending a lot more to keep people out. There would be absolutely no need for the host population to suffer any disadvantage – in fact, we would benefit from their skills and enthusiasm.

Our country is put to shame by much poorer countries which do the best they can under the circumstances, rather than lecturing others about their failings as they pull up the drawbridge. If it wasn't for the people like you who give their help and support to organisations like the Refugee Forum and aren't prepared to just follow the herd, we would be unable to continue with our

work. So I thank you for your willingness to hear an alternative point of view and for your interest. If any of you are would like to know more about joining the Refugee Forum or becoming a volunteer, we would be very happy to hear from you.

Resources

* NNRF website: www.nottsrefugeeforum.org.uk

* Allan Njanji's U-Tube film: "Destitution – Our Story"

(Give out those below at each meeting)

* Copy of NNRF Annual Report (also available online at NNRF website)

* Application/Affiliation Form (also available online at NNRF website)

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