

Introduction

A Matter of National Pride

The United Kingdom has a long-standing tradition of giving shelter to those fleeing persecution. We are determined to uphold that tradition.

This comes from a briefing for Labour Party MPs before the Report and Third Reading Stages of the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Bill, but something very like it has been repeated like a mantra by ministers of both Conservative and Labour governments throughout the years 1987 to 1999, the period which this study surveys. It is indeed a matter of national pride that persecuted people have been able to find a refuge in this country. National pride comprises various elements: aspects of the national character, real or imagined (sympathy for the underdog, a sense of fairness, doggedness in adversity), battles won, great figures of the nation's history, achievements in the arts, economic success, the nation's standing in the world, the country's assets of scenery and natural products. A sense of pride in giving shelter to the persecuted – perhaps one aspect of sympathy for the underdog – reflects a moral achievement, and constant reference to it by government ministers shows how important it is felt to be. Generosity to one's own people is to be expected and is not particularly praiseworthy. Generosity to those outside one's own community is widely accepted as a virtue. Cardinal Basil Hume once said, 'It seems to me that the reception given to those applying for asylum is an illuminating indicator of the state of a society's health.'¹

1. Quoted in the Refugee Council, *Credit to the Nation: A Study of Refugees in the United Kingdom*, London, 1997, 8.

The British people have also, of course, defined themselves by what they are not as well as by what they are. Traditionally the British have seen themselves as free not oppressed, an island people not Continental Europeans, since the Reformation as Protestant not Catholic, not black or brown. But all these categories have been eroded. The Cold War is over so we cannot define ourselves over against the Eastern Bloc; we do now in some sense belong to Continental Europe though part of our national malaise stems from our uncertainty about what this should mean; Roman Catholics are now recognised as no less British than anyone else, and part of the British mainstream; black and brown people now form a permanent part of the population. Moreover we have lost an empire, and for many in the older generations this loss is of some significance. Hence there is something of a national identity crisis, and this fuels people's uneasiness about newcomers and further diversification of our society.

Have we, as a nation, a continuing right to the sense of moral worth we have assumed about welcoming those in need of safety and a refuge? Who is meant by 'we'? The government? Or the people as a whole? The government is less and less willing to give shelter to those seeking asylum, most of whom are branded as 'economic migrants'. There is much talk of 'bogus' or 'abusive' asylum claims, with Home Office ministers giving a lead in this. A recent publication cites the following headlines in large-circulation newspapers in late 1998:

'Why do we let in this army of scroungers?' (*Daily Mail*, 26 September)

'The Good Life on Asylum Alley' (*Daily Mail*, 6 October)

'When "asylum" means a free pass to paradise' (*Evening Standard*, 15 October)

'Refugee Crime Wave in London' (*Evening Standard*, 17 September)

'Asylum law buckling as false claims grow' (*Daily Telegraph*, 28 September)

'Brutal Crimes of the Asylum-seekers' (*Daily Mail*, 30 November)²

In the run-up to the local elections of May 2000 attacks on asylum seekers increased in the right-wing press to such an extent that the Asylum Rights Campaign complained to the Press Complaints Commission about the *Sun's* and the *Daily Mail's* hostile reporting. Although the complaint was rejected, the Commission members concluded their adjudication by warning that 'in covering such topics there is a danger that inaccurate or misleading reporting may

2. Quoted in Amnesty International, *Most Vulnerable of All: The Treatment of Unaccompanied Refugee Children in the UK*, London 1999, 19.

generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility,' and editors were reminded of their responsibilities to avoid discriminatory reporting. The Commission underlined their oft-repeated concern about racist reporting.³ The Refugee Council believed that racist attacks and attacks on asylum seekers increased as a result of this hostility.⁴

The legislation passed in the last decade has made it progressively more difficult for anyone seeking asylum to find refuge in the UK, and life progressively more uncomfortable and uncertain for those who, against all the odds, manage to reach this country. In 1996 legislation was passed which deprived the majority of asylum-seekers of social security benefits of any kind, and left them without food or shelter. Mercifully the 1948 National Assistance Act was invoked, and under it asylum-seekers had to be provided with food and shelter. English law did not allow people to be left starving on the streets. In 1999 a Labour government recognised that its predecessors had gone too far and that a significant section of the population was shocked by what had been done. So the new government accepted that the UK had an obligation to continue to provide at least minimal food, warmth and shelter for asylum-seekers. But, arguing that cash was an inducement to economic migrants, the new government was prepared to subject 'genuine' asylum-seekers, as well as those it claimed were making 'abusive' claims, to a humiliating system of food vouchers to satisfy the anti-immigrant feeling reflected in, and whipped up by, sections of the press. Vouchers are humiliating because their users are instantly identifiable as asylum-seekers and hence targets for those who label all such as 'scroungers'. Some asylum-seekers seen shopping with vouchers have been abused and even spat at, whilst some supermarket check-out staff have treated them with contempt. Are the British people being robbed of a cause for pride with regard to those who seek refuge here? Is what is happening really the fault of 'bogus' asylum-seekers who have abused our hospitality, or has our welcome worn thin?

Sixty years ago, on 14 June 1938, the government of the day responded to the plight of Jews in Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia by offering to accept ten thousand Jewish children into the country. This became known as the *Kindertransport*, and it saved the lives of those ten thousand children, most of whom never saw their parents again: they died in the Holocaust, as their children would also have done had they not been rescued by the *Kindertransport*. Sixty years later on 14 June 1999 the Chief Rabbi, Professor

3. Adjudication delivered to complainants in May 2000, published 26 July 2000.

4. 'Nailing press myths about refugees', Briefing April 2000; *iNexile*, June 2000, 9.

Jonathan Sacks, unveiled a plaque in the House of Commons to commemorate that act of humanity. Speaking on Radio 4's *Today* programme in the 'Thought for the Day' slot, the Chief Rabbi insisted that the spirit of compassion still lived. He told of how the head of the Refugee Council, visiting the Midlands to meet refugees from Kosovo, had become alarmed when someone told him there was a demonstration outside. Fearing the worst, he had gone to the window. There was indeed a crowd and a banner. On the banner was written just one word, 'Welcome'. 'And when those refugees return home', said the Chief Rabbi, 'they'll carry with them the memory of that moment – the knowledge that there is another way of treating strangers, not with hostility but hospitality.'⁵

That same day Amnesty International published a report on the organisation's concerns about the treatment of unaccompanied refugee children in the UK. It made uncomfortable reading. In an article in the *Independent* which linked together the unveiling of the *Kindertransport* memorial, and Amnesty's report on the treatment of child refugees in the UK, Natasha Walter noted that the very next day Members of Parliament would be debating yet another illiberal Asylum and Immigration Bill. She concluded her article by asking:

When members of Parliament see the plaque commemorating the *Kindertransport* unveiled in the House of Commons today, will they feel a warm glow that Britain once did its duty by 10,000 children who needed their protection? Or will they look into their hearts and wonder how they can bear to pass a Bill that will do nothing to help the children who are fleeing persecution and genocide today?⁶

It seems that when the British public understand the need for refuge of some individual or group, then the spirit of hospitality is still alive and well. But too often the public has been misled about those who seek asylum, and then xenophobia has triumphed, fuelled by illiberal legislation which seems to lend substance to racist fears. A clearer and more principled lead is needed from government.

There is no denying that there is a refugee crisis in the world at the end of this second millennium. 'The problem of forced displacement is one of the most pressing challenged now confronting the United Nations', wrote UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his Preface to *The State of the World's Refugees 1997-98: A Humanitarian Agenda*.⁷ This survey gave the total number of refugees worldwide as

5. Transcript of the Chief Rabbi's message, courtesy of the Office of the Chief Rabbi.

6. *Independent*, 14 June 1999.

7. Published by Oxford University Press NY for UNHCR, 1998.

13.2 million, up from just 2.5 million in 1978.⁸ An even larger number of people, 21.5 million, were internally displaced, driven from their homes by war and civil unrest and persecution to take refuge in some other part of their own country.⁹ A happier side of the picture is that 3.3 million refugees have recently returned to their home countries. They also fall within the mandate of the UNHCR.¹⁰ These figures are a measure of the conflict and poverty which has overtaken large tracts of the world at the end of the millennium: some 35 million people whose lives are broken and disrupted.

The brunt of the refugee crisis is borne by the poorer countries of the South, not by the rich, industrialised countries of the North. In 1998 the EU, with its population of around 300 million of some of the world's richest people, received some 300,000 asylum applications. Switzerland, by far the richest European country, received a further 42,000.¹¹ By contrast Malawi, one of the world's poorest countries with a population of around 9 million, for years hosted a million Mozambican refugees. By no stretch of the imagination can Europe be described as overwhelmed by the numbers of people seeking asylum.

Home Secretary Jack Straw has pointed out that Britain does not receive an undue share of those who seek asylum in Europe. In 1998, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland all received a greater number of applications, and when the ratio of asylum-seekers to population size is taken into account, the UK drops further down the list to eleventh place in the European league table. On this count Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium and the Netherlands top the European list by far, though some of these countries are more densely populated than the UK. Nevertheless the numbers of people seeking asylum in Europe are some ten times higher than they were fifteen years ago, but so are refugee statistics worldwide. Sometimes we know about the crises which force people into flight. Bosnia and Kosovo have become household names. But people know far less about the oppression in Sudan and Congo Brazzaville, for instance, and find it difficult to understand why people from those countries should need to find a place of refuge.

Over the years asylum applications in the UK, in the EU and worldwide have fluctuated. Crises such as those in Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo have led to huge displacements of population. But

8. UNHCR, *State of the World's Refugees*, 1998, 54.

9. Janie Hampton (ed), *Internally Displaced People: A Global Survey* (for the Norwegian Refugee Council, and Global IDP Survey), London, 1998, xiv.

10. UNHCR, *State of the World's Refugees*, 1998, 288–9.

11. Tables attached to Jack Straw's letter to the *Daily Telegraph*, 21 January 1999, but not published.

crises do not always lead to people becoming permanently displaced. Refugees usually want to go home, even when home is far poorer and less privileged than their place of refuge. People have returned from the UK to, for instance, Zimbabwe, South Africa, Namibia, Uganda, Chile and Argentina in the last two decades, and some are among those mentioned above for whom the UNHCR has a continuing responsibility to see that they are satisfactorily resettled. But not all who found asylum in the UK have returned home. For some, their home country remained unsafe. Sometimes a whole generation has grown up in the UK and become integrated into British life. The children of refugee parents who have grown up in the UK may have known no other home, and been educated and then married and found employment in the UK. The parents themselves are likely to have been naturalised as British citizens. Some refugees who try to return home discover that so much has changed that it is their home no longer, and they cannot readapt. Some of those who stay in the UK are high achievers in spite of what they have been through. The Hungarian, Arthur Koestler, made his name as a writer in Britain in spite of spending six weeks in prison because he entered the country illegally.

The Refugee Council's publication, *Credit to the Nation*, is a celebration of the contribution made by refugees to national life. Scientists, artists, philosophers, entrepreneurs and businessmen and women, religious leaders, poets, doctors, and entertainers are among those named in this impressive survey.¹² Dr Max Perutz OM, FRS, is just one of seventeen Nobel Laureates who came to the UK as refugees; Michael Marks of Marks and Spencer is the best known refugee entrepreneur; Manubhai Madhvani, one of Uganda's leading industrialists expelled by Idi Amin in 1972 is now a leading industrialist in this country; Minh To from Vietnam is a successful entrepreneur and manufacturer; musicians have included the members of the Chilingiryan String Quartet who came from Armenia as well as Siegmund Nissel and Peter Schidlof, co-founders of the Amadeus String Quartet; Wole Soyinka, the Nigerian novelist who won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1986, lived in Britain for a while; and many more have become part of mainstream British society, playing a useful and productive role in their adopted country.

This is in spite of the fact that the UK does almost nothing to help people settle once they have been recognised as Convention refugees or been given exceptional leave to remain for humanitarian

12. Refugee Council, *Credit to the Nation: A Study of Refugees in the United Kingdom*, London, 1997.

reasons. There are no resettlement grants, little in the way of English language classes to assist newcomers, no special programmes through which people with professional qualifications can update them so as to be able to practise in the UK. People mostly have to struggle through on their own, or with the help of voluntary agencies who do their best, but find it difficult to make up for properly planned and funded programmes. Some refugees have suffered too much and found the strain of waiting for years to know whether or not they will be recognised as refugees too great to be able to adapt properly. If they are Black or Asian, then they may also have experienced discrimination in seeking employment.¹³

So it is a strange and patchy picture. On the one hand people seeking to find refuge in the UK may encounter blatant and often racist hostility fostered by sections of the media, as well as the cold, legal nit-picking of the Home Office as it examines their claims. On the other hand there is a large section of the population where genuine goodwill is found, though successive governments have done little to harness it except when it became politically necessary to admit some special group: Vietnamese or Bosnians, for instance. Because of restrictive legislation and the walls being built around 'Fortress Europe', Britain's tradition of granting sanctuary to refugees is under serious threat, and its people are apparently being encouraged to define themselves over against those they wish to exclude, instead of as possessing a spirit of generosity which welcomes and protects those in need of refuge. A mixed message is coming across from government when on the one hand it seeks to promote better race relations in the wake of the report into the murder of the Black teenager, Stephen Lawrence, and on the other hand it passes legislation which is likely to damage race relations.¹⁴ Racist crimes rose alarmingly in early 2000 at a time when hostility towards asylum seekers was being whipped up as local elections approached. Britain is now irreversibly a multicultural nation, and the only healthy kind of self-definition must take that into account. Rwanda, Bosnia and Kosovo are horrifying and extreme examples of what can happen when a people try to define themselves over against a section of their own population.¹⁵

13. Jenny Carey-Wood et al., *The Settlement of Refugees in Britain* (for the Home Office Research and Planning Unit), London, 1995.

14. Commission for Racial Equality, *Connections*, Winter 1998/9, 8–9; Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *True Colours: Public Attitudes to Multiculturalism and the Role of Government* (for IPPR), London, 1999.

15. For a discussion of multiethnic nations see Adrian Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism*, Cambridge, 1997, especially Chapter 7, 167–84.

The reason for starting this account with the year 1987 will quickly emerge. In 1987 there was a somewhat muddily ad hoc system for dealing with asylum claims which had emerged over the years. The numbers applying for asylum were around 4,500 per year in the mid 1980s. The procedures were slow and somewhat amateur, and sometimes went badly wrong, but they were relatively generous in that two thirds to three quarters of those who applied for asylum were either recognised as refugees or given exceptional leave to remain for humanitarian reasons outside the immigration rules. European governments had begun to harden their attitudes towards refugees other than those from Communist countries in 1985. 1987 was the year when things started to change in the UK, and a harsher wind began to blow in this country and throughout the rest of Europe.