

Summary of Keynote Address by Maurice Wren, Chief Executive of the Refugee Council

AGM of the London Churches Refugee Fund, 7th July 2015

Mr Wren opened his keynote address by highlighting that we are living at a time of crisis: a crisis in refugee numbers arising from forced migration, and a crisis too of political extremism, xenophobia and fear.

Both feed into a state of mind where the political class is seemingly unable to tackle the causes of migration or is even guilty of fuelling them. And we are failing to address these humanitarian challenges with the same alacrity as we show in taking military action overseas.

“The challenges are entirely manageable”, Mr Wren went on. We know from experience over the centuries that migration renews society; we know it “works”; and yet we struggle to realise this vision of renewal and have ended up instead trying to strengthen our protective walls. We have fallen into a political rhetoric of attack: attacking the boats and the people smugglers, but also, when all else fails, attacking (in our language and attitudes) migrants themselves – “the last redoubt of the shameless”.

Mr Wren went on to highlight the plight of the refugees at Calais – a tiny fraction of the total numbers going elsewhere. All these people are on a “one-way journey”, there is no “home” for them, no “going back” possible. The Home Office estimates that some 40 a day are making it across the channel, so in the perception of the refugees “the odds are quite good” and it is a perfectly rational decision for them still to come. “People are drawn to safety, to stability, to hope”. No fence, no amount of security, is going to stop them. We need to work with the grain, not against it.

At the moment, the UK’s approach is to push down on those factors perceived as a “pull” for refugees, driven by a fear of appearing “soft”. This totally ignores the reasons why people are fleeing and risking their lives : Mr Wren said that at least half of those crossing the Mediterranean on boats have a strong “prima facie” case for asylum. Despite which, the “calculated political messaging” of the authorities tells us that these people are scroungers, benefit-seekers or, at worst, terrorists.

Our commitment to taking refugees from Syria is smaller than that shown by Ireland or Latvia. Instead, another Immigration Bill (is it the 12th since 2000?) is to be brought forward to criminalise migrants, enlisting the institutions of society as agents of policing. Privately, officials recognise that tectonic shifts are happening; but the government is “trapped by the very political rhetoric that it has done so much to foster”.

Governments keep promising “solutions” that don’t work, leading people to cynicism and disconnection from the political process and creating a breeding ground for extremism.

Cuts are coming again, imposed on a system that is already at breaking-point. The government is seeking ways of moving against people who are refused asylum but who cannot safely be removed from the country: the emphasis of policy is not on protection and sanctuary, but on removal and criminalisation. The system offers appalling accommodation and no help to those stuck in it. All this leads not just to destitution but to exploitation and harm of vulnerable individuals.

So, what is to be done?

1. We need to celebrate and savour our wins. Campaigners have revealed the truth of the conditions at Yarlswood, and opposed the expansion of Campsfield. The Detention Enquiry that reported just before the General Election was vital work and the MPs behind it will take it forward. Detention Action has had “spectacular success” in opposing Fasttrack but this didn’t happen overnight, taking at least 11 years! And other groups have also achieved much, from which we need to take lessons.
2. We need solidarity between us and refugees, and between agencies working in this sector. We should resist the attempt to segregate/differentiate “deserving” from “undeserving” migrants. We need to raise the public’s compassion for all who come here. Destitution is a structural problem in the UK, not confined to migrants, so we should show solidarity with others who campaign against it.
3. We need to build a “movement for change”. Mr Wren said that he perceived “a growing sense that we want to change things”. We must target local councillors and businesses to unite against destitution. There are now over 40 active City of Sanctuary groups. See too the work of Citizen Action with its “I am a Migrant” posters.
4. We need to take the message out to other groups in civic society. Schools, healthcare centres and many more need to be speaking out for migrants. We should not hesitate to break bread with those we otherwise perceive as political opponents, where we can make common cause on these issues. Work with those who will work with us.

Mr Wren concluded with a call for us to cooperate, combine and collaborate. We need to coordinate our actions and work with a unity of purpose and clarity of objectives, at both national and local levels. Agencies should know and pursue what their strengths are, and avoid “competing” with each other.

“Solidarity, not exclusivity”.

Notes taken by Martin Ashford, LCRF Trustee