

Asylum and immigration: A Christian perspective on a polarised debate

by Nick Spencer

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CHAPTER 1

‘Whatever You Say, Say Nothing’

Introduction

Writing about asylum and immigration is rather like walking on ice. The subject is lethally slippery, the ground beneath your feet of uncertain strength and the writer never quite sure that a single, misplaced phrase will not send him crashing into the freezing waters of public opprobrium. Referring to people’s inability to talk honestly about the bloodshed in 1970s Northern Ireland, Seamus Heaney once wrote:

The times are out of joint...

...to be saved you must only save face

And whatever you say, you say nothing.¹

It is tempting to appropriate these lines for the closely linked topics of asylum and immigration. It is dangerous to suggest that asylum and immigration should be limited or that the historic British identity be preserved for fear of being labelled small minded or crypto-racist. It is equally dangerous to suggest that asylum and immigration should be actively encouraged or that a new British identity forged for fear of being labelled a soft touch or a bleeding-heart liberal. To be on the safe side and save face, whatever you say, you should say nothing.

Understanding this anxiety not only helps us circumvent the tone of polemic and hysteria which so often mars the debate, and so say something constructive, but also grasp many of the factors which make the issue so very important.

No discussion of immigration can begin without acknowledging the spectre of racism that casts its long shadow across the whole debate. The twentieth century's legacy of unprecedented and unimaginable genocide, motivated by ethnic rivalry or justified by social Darwinism, will remain with the human race for millennia. On a smaller but hardly less important scale, post-war immigration to Britain exposed a latent racism in many Britons, with Afro-Caribbean, Pakistani and Bangladeshi immigrants enduring the same prejudice which earlier Irish immigrants had suffered, only intensified by their different skin colour. From the riots in Nottingham and North Kensington in 1958 to the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993, post-war Britain has numerous milestones marking its painful history of race relations.²

More alarmingly, recent years have seen the far right gaining ground in continental Europe. Jorg Haider's Freedom Party won 27 per cent of the vote in the 1999

Austrian elections and Jean-Marie Le Pen's National Front polled six million votes to beat socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin into second place in the 2001 French general elections. In Denmark, the Danish People's Party is currently the country's third largest party. In Italy, the Northern League and National Alliance parties entered a coalition government with Silvio Berlusconi following the 2001 elections. In Switzerland, the Swiss People's Party ran newspaper advertisements blaming crime on 'black Africans' before capturing 27 per cent of the vote in the 2003 elections. In The Netherlands, the assassinated Pim Fortuyn's LPF recently came second only to the centre-right Christian Democrat Party. In comparison, the British National Party is an insignificant affair, although its success in recent local elections made it newsworthy. These far right parties are by no means unanimous in their policies but are united in their determined and often aggressive anti-immigration stance.

The insignificance of the British National Party has not prevented the phrase 'institutionally racist' from being thrown about with careless abandon. Defined and popularised by the MacPherson enquiry into the death of Stephen Lawrence as 'the collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture or ethnic origin', it has become the phrase of choice for confessions and accusations alike.

In the wake of the MacPherson enquiry, the head of the prison service asserted that his service was institutionally racist. At a press conference to launch its report *Raising the Attainment of Minority Ethnic Pupils*, inspectors from The Office for Standards in Education claimed that many of Britain's schools were 'institutionally racist'.³ In an interview in June 2002, the Director of Public Prosecutions, countering

suggestions that the Crown Prosecution Service was racist, claimed that ‘British society is institutionally racist... the whole of society has a problem.’⁴

The popularity of the phrase and the eagerness with which it has been used over recent years is both unnerving and unhelpful. In much the same way as the people of Salem, in their determination to destroy witchcraft, found themselves haunted by it at every juncture, so our eagerness to eradicate racism is in danger of having the same effect, inducing paranoia and a spate of accusations and confessions, and making any more balanced and nuanced analysis very difficult.

A matter of life and death

A second reason for our anxiety is that, perhaps more than any other contemporary issue, it really matters. Education, transport and social security are all important domestic issues but unlike asylum they are rarely matters of life and death.

Many of the people who end up on British soil claiming asylum do so because they would be dead had they remained where they were. The most common provenances of British asylum applicants between 2001 and 2003 – Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia – speak for themselves: all are areas of major political and military instability.⁵ According to a report published by the Institute for Public Policy Research in May 2003, repression, discrimination, ethnic conflict, human rights abuses, and civil war were the most common reasons for forced migration into the EU in the 1990s.⁶

Reaching British soil is, in itself, no guarantee of safety. On 19 June 2000, 58 Chinese immigrants were found in Dover in the back of the container lorry that was smuggling them into Britain. They had suffocated to death. A year later Firsat Dag, a

young man who had fled Turkey for taking part in a pro-Kurdish demonstration, was stabbed to death in the Sighthill area of Glasgow. Whilst all political issues deal with important subjects, few are quite so immersed in matters of life and death. It is hardly surprising that the debate is so highly charged.

A matter of identity

Beyond the violence and humanitarian crises that underpin and pursue many claims of asylum, there is the less shocking but no less motivating issue of personal and national identity. Again, unlike other major areas of policy, asylum and immigration force both immigrants and host nations to ask of themselves the one question which marks us out as human: who am I?

The answer to that question incorporates a vast range of factors. Ethnicity, religion, family, language, cultural praxis, education, social mores, and personal history will all contribute to an individual's answer, and a nation's response will include many of these whilst adding national history, political system, social structure, and implicit cultural values.

When an individual migrates across national boundaries, either by choice or necessity, many of these fundamental elements come into sharp focus and attain particular importance. When mass migration occurs the same thing happens not only to the migrant group but also to the nation in which it settles. A number of intractable questions are posed, the most basic of which is 'which identity, if either, prevails when two alternatives meet?'

In reality, the question is almost always rather more subtle and involves the gradual mutation of the various factors which comprise *both* identities. Yet, this does little to lessen its importance. Even when asylum and immigration is not a matter of life and death, it is often one of dignity and humanity. What is at stake, in our language, culture and values, is what makes us human.

Clarifying terms

Much of our difficulty in talking fruitfully about asylum and immigration is due to our confusion and abuse of relevant terms. Without a cogent, coherent and comprehensible vocabulary no genuine or effective debate is possible.

Technically, the variety of terms available should facilitate the debate. Yet, our tendency to nuance, load or completely misuse them often confuses the argument. ‘Political migrant’, ‘economic migrant’, ‘immigrant’, ‘illegal immigrant’, ‘asylum seeker’, ‘family settler’, ‘alien’, and ‘refugee’ are often used interchangeably and even confused with altogether different concepts such as ethnicity or religion. Such confusion makes constructive debate almost impossible. Even the (deliberate) use of the dual phrase ‘asylum and immigration’ in paragraphs above can be problematic. The two entities are linked but distinct, and pairing them together can often serve to blur important differences.

Popular confusion is not helped by internal differences. One Home Office report remarks, ‘sources of data which shed light on stocks and flows of migrants use widely differing concepts and definitions,’ before going on to examine the varying definitions of ‘migrants’, ‘foreign workers’ and ‘foreign-born workers’ in the International Passenger

Survey, the Labour Force Survey and the National Census.⁷ ‘It is crucial,’ it concludes, ‘to understand the concepts and definitions involved.’

It is, indeed, crucial but that does it make it easy. The Oxford English Dictionary definition of an immigrant is ‘one who settles as a permanent resident in a different country’⁸ but this is somewhat narrower than that used in government reports. One such report says:

migrants are defined as all those who were born outside the UK – a group which make up eight per cent of the total UK population, or almost ten per cent of the working age population (some 4.8 million people in total including 3.6 million people of working age.)⁹

This definition, as the huge numbers suggest, allows for a heterogeneous group. Some immigrants, as the report explains, have been living in the UK for decades.

Approximately 47 per cent have acquired British citizenship. Others, almost a third of the total immigrant population in fact, have arrived during the last decade. The term ‘immigrant’, therefore, can incorporate those who have lived in Britain for a week and those who have lived there for 50 years. It includes those who have come as refugees, as students, for reasons of family reunion, and as part of the highly-skilled migrant programme. (A more precise definition of immigrant is the one used in the International Passenger Survey, the government’s continuous, voluntary sample survey of all international passengers, but this precision is often lost in popular debate.¹⁰)

Research has shown that ‘migrant experiences are more polarised than those for the population as a whole with larger concentrations at the extremes (e.g. of wealth and poverty, high and low skills).’¹¹ It is not too much of an exaggeration to say that immigrants can differ at least as much from each other as they do from the general population.¹² This is recognised all too infrequently, with people using the terms ‘migrant’ or ‘immigrant’ as if they were exact and precise tools rather than the somewhat blunt instruments they are bound to be.

Asylum seekers are, by nature, a more homogeneous group, but even this term is misused, often being confused with the term refugee. The official definition of a refugee derives from the 1951 United Nations Convention relating to the Status of Refugees, extended in its application by the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees, to which the UK is a signatory. This defines a refugee as a person who:

owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence... is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it...¹³

Even this definition is narrow, however, as it excludes people fleeing for reasons of war and famine, as opposed to persecution, as well as those who are persecuted but remain refugees in their own country. As one report remarks, ‘the majority of forced migrants

move for reasons not recognised by the international refugee regime... many are displaced within their own country of origin.¹⁴ The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that there are around 6 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) who do not count as refugees.¹⁵ The total global refugee population includes 'convention' and 'non-convention' refugees, as well as Internally Displaced Persons.

An asylum seeker, on the other hand, is 'someone who has fled their country of origin in order to make an asylum claim in another country.'¹⁶ He or she is someone 'whose claims for refugee status have not yet been decided.'¹⁷ These subtleties are sometimes lost in the debate. Not only are 'asylum seekers' clearly different from 'immigrants' (although they are, by definition, immigrants), but they are also different from 'refugees' by dint of having made a specific claim. Technically speaking (although the reality is rather different) an individual can only be an asylum seeker for a limited period of time, until their case has been decided one way or another. People can spend entire lifetimes as refugees.

Unfortunately, recognising the drawbacks in terminology and using the lexicon as precisely as possible is no guarantee of a rational debate. Words and phrases are invariably susceptible to manipulation, irrespective of how carefully they are used, and this is particularly the case when dealing with new policy initiatives. How one feels about the idea of detaining asylum seekers until their claims are decided will be subtly influenced by whether they are held in 'detention centres', 'accommodation centres' or 'welcome centres'. In much the same way as some seasoned journalists eschew the term 'terrorist', recognising it as a word which prejudges a situation, so anyone who voices an

opinion on asylum and immigration is caught in a Catch 22 of saying too much by saying anything. Whatever you say, your audience will second-guess your opinions.

There is, in reality, little that can be done about this except for maintaining a vigilant approach to terms used. At the very least, such an attitude will steer you away from the many ‘trigger’ terms that cross the debate like trip wires. ‘Flooded’, ‘soft touch’, ‘bogus’, ‘scrounger’, ‘refugee magnet’, and ‘racist’ are just a handful of those phrases invaluable to those who wish to write polemic but ruinous to those who wish to say anything constructive.

Slippery statistics

If it were simply a case of clarifying and avoiding certain terms, discussing asylum and immigration would be a reasonably straightforward issue. However, there is a bigger obstacle to constructive debate, which comprises a fifth and final reason for our anxiety about the issue. The facts themselves are nothing like as self-evident as we sometimes think.

This is partly reflected in the fact that virtually every organisation which ventures into this arena boasts some kind of ‘get the real facts here’ section.¹⁸ Quite understandably, relevant bodies are concerned to counter popular misunderstanding and misinformation, of which there is a great deal.

When MORI asked people in June 2002 what percentage of the world’s refugees they thought the UK hosted, the average answer was 23 per cent, several times higher than the correct answer.¹⁹ The following year, another survey asked what percentage of the British population people thought were immigrants to the country, giving immigrant a

broad definition, '(i.e. not born in the UK)'. Fewer than 1 in 10 respondents knew the right answer and the average response was 21 per cent, over three times higher than the true figure.²⁰

The same survey showed that, although 50 per cent of people thought that asylum seekers came to Britain 'because they have been persecuted in their countries', 45 per cent said it was 'because they want to live off social security payments,' and 64 per cent thought it was 'because they think Britain is a "soft touch"'. In reality, as far as it is possible to tell, there is 'very little evidence' that asylum seekers have 'a detailed knowledge of UK immigration or asylum procedures; entitlements to benefits in the UK; or the availability of work in the UK.' Moreover, there is 'even less evidence that [they have]... a comparative knowledge of how these phenomena varied between different European countries.'²¹ Similar confusion exists over the amount asylum seekers receive in benefit. One survey reported that the public believes asylum seekers receive £113 a week in benefits, whereas the true figure is around £37.²²

Such misinformation is more serious than it may first appear, as it is upon such questionable 'facts' that erroneous and sometime malign assumptions are built. One recent survey reported that young people's views of asylum seekers and refugees were largely negative, with only one in five 15- to 24-year olds agreeing that 'asylum seekers and refugees make a positive contribution to life in this country', and nearly three in five disagreeing (20 per cent 'neither agreed nor disagreed').²³ When inaccurate statistics are used to construct arguments that carelessly denounce or demonise whole groups of people, let alone people who are already vulnerable, rectifying them becomes extremely important.

The misinformation works in both directions, however. The common assumption that ‘Britain is a nation of immigrants’ is, at best, meaningless and, at worst, simply wrong. Britain is a nation of immigrants only inasmuch as every nation is. In actual fact, except for the arrival of 100,000 Huguenots from France in the seventeenth century, and a similar number of Jews in the nineteenth century and again in early the twentieth century, Britain experienced no numerically significant migration in the 850 years before 1950.²⁴

In a different area, cases of HIV, TB and Hepatitis B have increased considerably in Britain over the last decade or so, and much of this increase is due to immigration. There is also good anecdotal evidence that ‘the NHS is being drained of millions of pounds a year by overseas visitors receiving “free” medical treatment to which they are not entitled.’²⁵ Simply because ‘NHS tourism’ is a term bandied about by scaremongering sections of the media, it does not mean it isn’t true.

However, in the same way as cleaning our language is not as simple as we would like it to be, clarifying our statistics is a difficult business. Whilst some facts quoted above can be easily corrected, others are vulnerable to subjective definitions, inexact estimates and straightforward ignorance.

One’s attitude to the number of refugees a nation should host will vary according to whether one is thinking about the total refugee population, the refugee population per 1,000 inhabitants, the refugee population per square mile, or the refugee population per US\$1m GDP. Each is a valid metric, each gives a different picture of which nation bears the heaviest ‘burden’ of refugees and each will have implications on which nation should accommodate more refugees.²⁶

Similarly, one's attitude to the economic benefits of immigration to a host nation will depend on whether one considers the effect of immigration on GDP or its effect on GDP per capita. Again, each metric is valid and each can give a different answer. It also, incidentally, depends on viewing 'immigrants' as a natural, homogenous group that, as we have seen, is a questionable assumption.

Over and above these varying measurements, there is the basic fact that the 'facts' are not always known. Many arguments are based on forecasts which, given the variety of extenuating circumstances, cannot be truly reliable. If resident population estimates can be inaccurate (witness the confusion over the actual population size following the 2001 National Census), immigration forecasts will almost inevitably be so. One of the most contentious elements in the whole debate, the number of illegal immigrants present in a nation, is, almost by definition, completely unknown.

Because the scale and nature of both asylum in and immigration to the UK is a relatively modern phenomenon, and because the issues which arise from them never 'settle' but change and modify over generations, the necessary data are often simply not available. Home Office studies are littered with the urgent calls for more work to be done.²⁷ Ultimately, no matter how good one's intentions are to form a rational, balanced, nuanced opinion, if the information isn't there, it can't be done. In the words of the Institute for Public Policy Research, 'the availability and quality of data in this area makes it extremely difficult to provide the empirical information and analysis needed for evidence based policy.'²⁸

Trying to say something

Recognising the sensitivity of the debates that surround asylum and immigration and our difficulty in talking about the issues involved, without descending into paranoid anxiety or ill-tempered polemic, is not simply an academic exercise. Instead, by locating and helping us understand the various mines which litter the landscape, it enables us to avoid them and, hopefully, therefore, to make a constructive contribution to the debate.

It reminds us that rather than simply discussing ‘policy’, we are dealing with people’s lives, security, relationships and identity, and that at all times we need to maintain a tone of sensitivity, respect and humanity. It reminds us that we need to use words as carefully as we can, to eschew inflammatory language and trigger phrases, and to be as precise with terminology as possible, but also to recognise that mistakes are easily made and that embarking on witch hunts against those whom we deem to have spoken inappropriately is counterproductive. It reminds us that we need to be as honest and exact with statistics as possible, and to maintain the humility which recognises that, with the best will in the world, we may be wrong. Any genuinely Christian response to asylum and immigration in Britain today should begin with these caveats.

This analysis is written with these points in mind and it is hoped that it will, accordingly, add something to a debate that seems to be one of the defining issues of our time.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Whatever you say, say nothing', *North* (London: Faber & Faber, 1975)
- ² cf. Yasmin Alibhai-Brown, *True Colours: Public Attitudes to Multiculturalism and the Role of Government* (London: Institute for Public Policy Research, 1999), pp.47–90
- ³ The phrase is, in fact, absent from the report itself but was used at the press conference, at least according to *The Guardian*. cf. 'Britain's schools dubbed racist', *The Guardian*, 11 March 1999 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,3604,315727,00.html>). For the OFSTED report itself see <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/docs/771.pdf>.
- ⁴ 'Most Britons are racist, says prosecutions chief', *The Guardian*, 24 June 2002 (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/story/0,3604,742611,00.html>)
- ⁵ Home Office Research Development Statistics, Immigration: <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/immigration1.html>
- ⁶ Stephen Castles, Heaven Crawley and Sean Loughna, *States of Conflict: Causes and patterns of forced migration to the EU and policy responses* (London: IPPR, 2003)
- ⁷ Janet Dobson et al, *International migration and the United Kingdom: Recent patterns and trends* (Home Office RDS Occasional Paper No. 75) <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/occ75execsum.pdf>
- ⁸ Leslie Brown (ed.), *The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933 (revised 1993)), p.1315
- ⁹ *Migrants in the UK: their characteristics and labour market outcomes and impacts* (Home Office RDS Occasional Paper No. 82, 2002) p.4 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/occ82migrantuk.pdf>)
- ¹⁰ The IPS interviews around 1 in 500 passengers, sampled on all major routes in and out of the UK. It questions them about their country of residence (for overseas residents) or country of visit (for UK residents), the reason for their visit, and details of their expenditure and fares. It defines as immigrants all those entering with work permits, or intending to work, for 12 months or more, students on long courses, spouses, fiancés, children and other dependants, although not asylum applicants. It addresses additional questions to this disparate group. For more details cf. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/ssd/surveys/international_passenger_survey.asp
- ¹¹ Stephen Glover et al, *Migration: an economic and social analysis* (Home Office RDS Occasional Paper No. 67, 2001), p.10 (<http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs/occ67-migration.pdf>)
- ¹² Christian Dustman et al, *Labour market performance of immigrants in the UK Labour market* (Home Office Online Report 05/03), p.70 <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/rdsolr0503.pdf>
- ¹³ Article 1A(2) of 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (http://www.unhcr.ch/html/menu3/b/o_c_ref.htm)
- ¹⁴ IPPR, *States*, p.5
- ¹⁵ <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home/opendoc.htm?tbl=STATISTICS&id=3d075d374&page=statistics>
- ¹⁶ Vaughan Robinson and Jeremy Segrott, *Understanding the decision-making of asylum seekers* (Home Office Research Study 243, 2002), p.vi. <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/rds/pdfs2/hors243.pdf> cf. also for further clarification and definitions (e.g. 'anticipatory asylum seeker', 'spontaneous asylum seeker', 'convention refugee')
- ¹⁷ IPPR, *States*, p.7
- ¹⁸ For example, Commission for Racial Equality, <http://www.cre.gov.uk/gdpract/refuge.html#luxury>; Migration Watch, http://www.migrationwatch.org/pdfs/Bulletin_no2.pdf; Refugee Council, <http://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths/myth001.htm>; BBC, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/2173792.stm>; Oxfam, <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/policy/papers/asylumscot01/asylum.htm>; The Independent, 23 May 2003, <http://news.independent.co.uk/uk/politics/story.jsp?story=408727>
- ¹⁹ <http://www.mori.com/polls/2002/refugee.shtml>. The correct answer to this question is itself very difficult to calculate. The global refugee population is a 'stock' figure, i.e. it gives the current stock of refugees. Conversely, national refugee populations are often not measured and national asylum ones are 'flow' figures, i.e. they measure the year-on-year flow of asylum applications rather than the stock of refugees. Whatever the correct figure is, it is certainly less than 23 per cent. See UNHCR statistics <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/home?page=statistics> for further details (NB their caveat in 2002 UNHCR Population Statistics, Table 2: 'In the absence of reliable Government figures, UNHCR has estimated the refugee population based on refugee arrivals and asylum-seeker recognition over the past 10 years for the following countries: Austria, Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Spain and UK.')
- ²⁰ <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/migration.shtml>
- ²¹ Robinson, *Decision-making*, p.viii
- ²² <http://www.mori.com/digest/2000/pd001027.shtml>. For further details on benefits available to asylum seekers, cf. http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_compendia/UK2003/UK2003.pdf p.91

²³ <http://www.mori.com/polls/2003/asylumseekers.shtml>

²⁴ And it is questionable whether the Norman Conquest or before it the Viking and Saxon invasions were numerically significant. See, for example, ‘Teeth unravel Anglo-Saxon legacy’, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/sci/tech/3514756.stm>

²⁵ *The Health Service Journal*, 12 November 1998, p.32; quoted in Harriet Sergeant, *No System to Abuse* (London: Centre for Policy Studies, 2003)

²⁶ cf. IPPR, *States*, p.6; cf. also <http://www.unhcr.ch/cgi-bin/tevis/vtx/home?page=statistics>

²⁷ For example, ‘There is a real need for more research in this area – indeed, it is striking how little research on migration there has been in the UK’, in Glover et al, *Migration*, p.2

²⁸ IPPR, *States*, p.2