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'REFUGEES WELCOME' AND BEYOND

Anna Lindley on 15 September 2015

Refugee March London 12 September 2015, Alex Donohue on Flickr CCbyA

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Public horror and confusion at the plight of people trying to enter Europe has grown over the last few months crystallised into widespread outrage at the photograph of little Aylan Kurdi. Across the UK, people are organising, petitioning, protesting - on Saturday, in London, tens of thousands of people took to the streets.

How much this late summer outrage contributes to policy departures or shifts in public consciousness of real significance remains to be seen. Focusing on the situation of displaced Syrians in particular, in less than a week, popular mobilisation and media pressure have succeeded in forcing the Prime Minister to commit to expand the UK's refugee relocation programme from an embarrassing fig-leaf to allow for the resettlement of [20,000 people over the next five years](#). But there are serious issues with the commitments made so far.

Fair share?

It is highly debatable whether this quota constitutes stepping up to our 'fair share' of the resettlement responsibility, given the inordinate strains on countries in the region (particularly Lebanon, where a quarter of the population are refugees). People have been leaving Syria since 2011 and this is not a situation that is going to be resolved soon, given the state of affairs within Syria and the stances of key international players.

Many displaced Syrians in the region lack effective protection. Providing humanitarian assistance and removing some of the most vulnerable people to safety is [patently not enough to contain this crisis](#). Meanwhile, with the build-up of immigration checks and controls, and paucity of legal routes for

migration, we still effectively force people seeking refuge in the UK into the hands of smugglers.

A more comprehensive and co-ordinated approach to protecting displaced Syrians is sorely needed, and can only be realised through international cooperation, at EU and international level, not unilateral decision-making.

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Filling the quota

The UK government's record on identifying vulnerable people directly from camp populations is not exactly confidence-inspiring. As widely reported, 216 people were resettled since January 2014 under the [Vulnerable Persons Relocation Scheme for Syrians](#). Cameron has talked about expanding the criteria used. But the government may need sustained encouragement to fill its new quota.

Proper partnership

Emphasis is being placed on local authorities and devolved administrations coming forward to resettle Syrian refugees, in exchange for finance to support them during their first year in the UK (diverted from the international aid budget). Charitable initiatives are already collecting funds to make up anticipated shortfalls. To ensure that the resettlement programme does not turn into another immigration policy embarrassment, central government cannot just dump responsibility on already strained local government infrastructure and community goodwill. Proper partnership among all the actors – state, local government, NGOs, and refugees themselves - is needed to make these kinds of programmes a success.

Wider attitudes

The plight of Syrian refugee families on the borders of Europe has touched people's hearts, but what of those less televisual, with different stories, less easily categorised, but still deserving of compassion and respect?

People on the move to and through Europe have many starting points, and are often driven by experiences of oppression and inequality in which Europe is implicated in various ways. How they are treated reflects on us. What scope exists to build on this rush of sympathy to promote a wider shift in public consciousness on immigration?

Of course, a small army of UK citizens and residents are already hard at work trying to combat the 'hostile environment' our government promotes (providing legal assistance, visiting detention centres, teaching English, building 'cities of sanctuary', campaigning to end discriminatory rules on family reunion, running food banks, campaigning for the living wage...). These are people of different faiths and political stances; mobilising around ideas about humanity, justice, solidarity, care, community and rights. It is a dimension of the 'big society' long-overlooked by government, media and researchers.

More broadly, though, there is some room for manoeuvre. Opinion polls suggest that the majority of people think that nationally, immigration should be reduced; but at the same time, [few people actually see immigration as a problem](#) in their own local area, in their personal experience.

Shifting the debate

A key task is to combat head-on common migration myths. For example, recent reviews of available research, digesting complex evidence, refute simplistic assumptions about immigration [depressing wages, taking away jobs and benefits](#).

Other important tasks are to expose unjust elements in the current immigration system, and to highlight the ways that migrants contribute to society.

But more than this, we need to continue to re-frame the debate: migration is too often presented, both by pro- and anti-migrant lobbies, as an issue apart. In fact, many researchers find that following migration constantly points us towards key challenges facing our society: the flourishing of low-paid, precarious work; austerity policies that disproportionately penalise ordinary people for mistakes of the political and economic elite; questions about the purpose and future of our school and university system; how to hold together the NHS; indefinite detention and limitations on access to justice; housing pressures; questions about the role and autonomy of local government; and debates about [who 'we' are and how we want to live together](#). How struggles for alternatives develop and connect is critical for everyone already living in the UK as well as for people seeking to join us.

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