

## **Charities help people find common ground – a powerful balm for polarising and divisive rhetoric**

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Asylum is such a contentious area of policymaking that political leaders face an obvious choice – approach it with cool-heads and nuance, or utilise its potential divisiveness. This decision sets the tone for public debate, which is why charities need to take the long view of issues that are with us for the long-term. We might adapt our approaches as political winds change but we must remain focused on our ultimate goal – controversies come and go but our mission endures.

Today, asylum has become a wedge issue, a topic through which our representatives can split us into camps to shore up their support among groups of supporters. The 2019 elections showed us that campaigning on a wedge issue – Brexit – can pay huge dividends at the ballot box. Instead of Remainer and Brexiteer we now have Refugees Welcome or Deport Them All To Rwanda.

To polarise voters, some MPs use, and the media repeat, extreme and dehumanising language. Some of the language mirrors that used by racist and far-right groups. The tropes have come thick, fast, and grim. Former Home Secretary Suella Braverman described people seeking asylum as an “invasion on the south coast” who are creating “a hurricane of mass migration”. Former Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick dismissed people granted refugee status as “overwhelmingly low-skilled men with poor literacy who will remain dependent on the state for decades to come”.

In May last year he described those crossing the Channel to claim asylum as tending to “have completely different values and lifestyles”. And the Prime Minister himself weighed in at a right-wing conference in Italy, telling the audience that migrants are a “weapon” to “destabilise and overwhelm our country” which will “destroy our faith in government”.

The target of this extreme language is almost always the people who are least able to fight back: refugees, victims of trafficking, the poor. And, in their quest to divide us, our leaders also target the people who support them. Lawyers and charity workers are in the crosshairs, leading to political and media attacks. One refugee charity was described by a radio host as “human traffickers” who “facilitated fraud and terrorism”.

The real-life consequence of exploiting this divisiveness is intimidation and physical violence of people seeking asylum and those who advocate for them. Hotels have been targeted by rioting, far-right mobs. A law firm was attacked by a knifeman. Charity workers have been abused and intimidated.

Extreme racist and dehumanising language creates a problem and a fear in people’s minds that has no basis in reality. But this fear makes it easier for leaders to silo refugees in society and drum up support for vicious and cruel policies, such as the deportation deal with Rwanda, or the use of a barge or MOD barracks to house torture victims. It also makes it easier to blame people seeking asylum and immigrants for the ballooning cost of living, the ever-lengthening NHS waiting lists, and the lack of affordable housing.

This approach is not used by one political party. New Labour introduced the law that the current Government is using as the basis for the Rwanda deportation policy; Labour removed the right to work for people seeking asylum in 2003; and Labour advisers and ministers discussed breaking European human rights laws to deter people seeking asylum.

This picture feels bleak. And that is undoubtedly how it is experienced by people caught in the crossfire, people who are looking only to escape the collapse of their concept of home and build new lives with hope and safety for the future. But there is another, crucial, side to this story.

That is a story of resistance. Resistance to the attempts to divide. A story about communities being brought together in spaces where people can build deeper mutual understanding, which helps to increase cohesion, reduce tension, and encourage mutual support. In such spaces solidarity increases. We are able to recognise that the big problems that face our society are shared across our different communities, and that solutions are best made at a systemic level.

According to Migration Exchange's report "People, power and priorities: Insights into the UK refugee and migration sector" (July 2023), there are 708 registered charities in the UK which specifically focus on refugee and migration issues. They, we, are the lifeblood of the pushback against the divisive, dehumanising agenda. They walk alongside those trapped in this dehumanising labyrinth, building connections and understanding across these false divides.

For example, the Bristol Refugee and Asylum Seeker Partnership is a group of 15 organisations working in solidarity with refugees and asylum seekers. The partnership aims to raise the voices of people in the city. This includes increasing the understanding and visibility of refugee work outside the sector and strengthening links with those working in other areas, such as housing and homelessness, disability, LGBT+, and business.

Of course, cohesion can only come when we remove barriers to power for people with lived experience. Charities are beginning to understand how their existence and development has been shaped by White supremacy. We must dismantle this power structure and remove hurdles so people with lived experience are centred and, with allies, are the ones who "dismantle the master's house" and make sure that our sector is open, cohesive, and antiracist.

It is vital that refugee organisations do not further isolate and segregate people seeking asylum by siloing them and their problems. Refugees in the UK face systemic racism, poverty, a lack of accommodation, terrible housing standards, marginalisation, immigration uncertainty, a mental health epidemic, and other poor outcomes.

Our society and our communities are so interwoven that bad policy that affects all of us will affect people seeking asylum – and bad policy that affects asylum seekers will affect us all. They are systemic issues that ultimately require systemic solutions – so, it's systemic solutions we must support.

Let's look at two examples. Firstly, accommodation. Poor housing policy has created a crisis in the UK, with too few homes and too many bad homes. Refugee organisations working on the frontline know that too many people seeking asylum live in frankly dire accommodation. Those that live in our communities often find themselves in a property that is so badly in disrepair it's dangerous. Meanwhile, tens of thousands are unable to live in homes so are put into hotels, barges, or MOD camps that are cramped and segregated.

These are all aspects of exactly the same problem that so many people in our society face – a lack of good quality, affordable homes. Refugee charities cannot call for better housing for people seeking asylum without acknowledging the wider problem facing the UK. To improve housing for people seeking asylum, the sector must work with housing organisations to create policy that works for everyone.

By uniting the problems that everyone faces we can better unify people and start to build a better country for everyone.

Our second example is of how bad policy targeting people seeking asylum negatively affects us all – the ban on work. The 300-member-strong Lift the Ban Coalition campaigns to give people seeking asylum the right to work and, by default, it's campaigning to give UK companies the right to hire people seeking asylum. The right to work benefits people in the asylum system and helps often short-staffed business. And it also benefits us all because, as the economy grows, more people are paying tax and national insurance. It's why you will find business groups, recruiters, economists, and trade unions among the coalition members, and politicians from all parties among its supporters.

Forced displacement does not happen in a vacuum. Its causes are varied, deep-rooted, and often the legacy of colonialism and contemporary Western foreign, economic, and environmental policy. Refugee organisations can unite with different movements to tackle these causes of displacement, our colonial legacies, the sale of weapons, the supporting of authoritarian governments, the wars waged, the carbon emissions, the extractive economic relationships. That's not to deny people the right to move, that must be reinforced, but to support people's right to stay.

Our mission to unify is within our communities but also in how we as organisations look at ways to solve the problems people face. Despite the divisions that are created and exploited by our politicians, the communities that exist within our society are deeply interconnected, as are the problems that beset them. Our quest for solutions can build on and develop further our togetherness.

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