CALAIS AND BEYOND: RESPONDING HUMANELY TO THE ‘MIGRANT CRISIS’

INTRODUCTION: A SENSE OF PANIC

The narrative from the most excitable sections of the media around recent developments in Calais has been clear: We are under attack. The security of the realm is at stake as thousands of migrants storm lorries and Eurostar to achieve what Hitler failed to do, shout the tabloids. The Prime Minister has described migrants as a “swarm”, with all the connotations of plague associated with it. Now there is a panic over new net migration statistics.

Is it so simple? Is what is being said even true? Do we need an alternative perspective and approach?

1. UNDERSTANDING WHAT IS HAPPENING

It is undoubtedly part of a crisis. In fact, what we are witnessing is the largest refugee crisis since the Second World War, and the biggest challenge to humanitarian protection since the Vietnam boat people began arriving on foreign shores. It must be given serious attention.

Firstly, we should pay attention to the language that we use. Aside from the emotive rhetoric of some of the media and some politicians, we need precision in our definitions.

The use of the word ‘migrant’ in this context is misleading. A migrant is someone who has entered a country and stayed for more than one year. The people we are describing are in transit. They may or may not become migrants in any official sense. Some are refugees and people seeking asylum.

If they are “illegal” then we have to ask which law have they broken, and whose law? Certainly they have not broken any UK law, as they are in French territory.

We will be assured that the people involved are ‘economic migrants’. That is to say, people who are travelling to another country for work. For certain they are doing that. However, this masks the simple fact that the phenomenon of the people-scramble in Calais is a consequence of forced migration, not migration by choice.

We know that around a half of the people at Calais are from Syria and Eritrea. No one would endure such intense hardship, and risk the precarious crossings either on the Mediterranean boats or the
axels of cross-channel lorries, if they were not leaving intolerable situations. The 3,000 or so migrants in Calais are a tiny number of people compared to the almost two million Syrian refugees located in Turkey.

It is best practice in refugee work, and also a sensible strategy for refugees themselves, to stay as close as possible to their home countries. Conflicts do come to an end and people can return to pick up on their lives. People only move beyond that when return becomes out of the question.

For many it is because their properties have been sequestered by opponents, so there is no home to go back to or because their properties have been destroyed. When homes started to be bombed in Syria, that is when the exodus from the neighbouring countries began.

2. A GLOBAL CRISIS

The current global crisis is the product of a vast inter-regional collapse precipitated by the US/UK invasion of Iraq and then Afghanistan. The intervention in Libya is also a major factor and in the vacuums created we see the growth of non-state armed groups, including ISIS, Boko Haram and Al Shabaab.

So stretching from the Ukraine to Northern Nigeria are intersected regions with a patchwork of local conflicts unified as they feed into another world war by proxy.

We should not ignore the realities of climate change, either. Droughts and water wars underlie the conflict in Syria and the Sudan, and desertification makes it harder for young people to make a living in their rural home areas.

All of this amounts to a pressure cooker situation, and the migrant crises are the points at which it all becomes visible.

3. ‘LOCK-DOWN’: INEFFECTIVE AND INHUMANE

We know where there are problems: Lampedusa, the Greek Islands, the Bulgaria-Turkish border, the Hungary-Serbian border and Calais-Dover. There are specific reasons why these crossing points are more problematic than others. They are a combination of inefficient on non-existent processing procedures and particularly aggressive policing.

Bulgaria has erected a huge fence on its border. Hungary too has closed its border with Serbia and has also begun to erect a fence. There is a new exodus from Kosovo, the reasons for which are not yet fully understood. Greece has its own economic problems but has long operated a draconian system of detention in poor facilities (which Syriza has showed some willingness to change).

This lock-down is not only inhumane but self-defeating, as detention facilities become clogged up and warehouses. Lampedusa suffers from being closest to the Libyan coast. The failure of the Libyan state, for which Western powers need to take a share of responsibility, has opened up new routes. Libya’s location in relation to the regions of the Middle East, the Horn of Africa and Northern and West Africa, together with its proximity to European shores, open up a dangerous route.

While we may look at people being rescued in boats as either a dangerous threat or a human tragedy, those who see the same pictures in perilous and risky place see them as a sign of hope.
These are the people who made it. The route may be dangerous but the price, both financial and personal, is worth paying. Lampedusa, as a result, is overwhelmed and extremely inefficient.

4. CALAIS IN CONTEXT

So we return to Calais. In the grand scheme of things, it is a small problem. Effective processing of migrants with access to legal rights would mean that people did not have to risk all. It is all a matter of political will and common sense, both of which are in short supply at the moment.

The approach of the European Union (EU) is totally inadequate. As with the case of the Vietnamese boat people, there is a need for a coordinated international approach to the current crisis.

It is laudable that the EU has at least accepted that rescue is essential. There remains a heartless view that if people are allowed to drown, then it will discourage others. There is no evidence that that is true, but the very act of expressing such an opinion beggars humane belief.

However, rescue is taking place by both navies and voluntary endeavour including MSF, who have three boats engaged in search and rescue operations. This is all hugely expensive for nation states, voluntary organisations, and the individuals who pay large sums to make the crossing. If money was diverted to processing arrivals at the port of entry then the crossing could be made on regular ferries or by air travel, saving money and lives.

The long game of the EU is to destroy the “smugglers’ business model”. Their intention is to confiscate and destroy boats by military force. They can only do this with a UN resolution which would allow legal use of weapons of war against criminal activity. We know from Latin America’s military war against drugs that this can strengthen rather than diminish organised crime.

In the meantime the EU countries have been reluctant to enter into any kind of sharing agreement between member states as to a fair distribution of asylum claimants. The most efficient way of doing this would be to ask individuals with a well-founded claim, which should be straightforward for those coming from the most dangerous situations, to choose the country in Europe they would wish as their final destination.

5. MISLEADING ‘PUSH’ AND ‘PULL’ LANGUAGE

Those in Calais desperate to come to the UK have made a rational choice on the basis of their language skills, or through an intention to join family members, or because of an emotional connection with the country. If they are allowed to come to the place of their choosing where there will already be some social capital on which to draw, then settlement and integration will become easier.

Academics have long since have used the language and analysis of “push” and “pull” factors. There are reasons why people leave their country and there are factors which determines their final destination. For the wealthy global business leader, it is the pull factor which brings them to London. For the Syrian refugee in Calais, it is the push.

There is, however, a tendency to misuse this concept. Politicians and policy makers seem to live in an unreal world. They believe that by eliminating pull factors they can stop desperate people from making the perilous journey. This clearly fails the common sense test. Any amount of heavy policing,
detention, carrier liability and visa restrictions will not work if the forces creating the flight are so severe.

There are things that can be done. We could lift visa restrictions temporarily from the most severely affected countries such as Syria and Eritrea. Immediately, those travelling could take legitimate routes into Europe. Processing at ports of entry could be speeded up. Counter-intuitively, it would allow for greater vigilance over security, which is naturally a concern. Countries would actually know who had entered their borders. By allowing people to connect with family already here, through a EU wide distribution agreement, settlement would be easier.

However, this is only a temporary solution.

6. THE NEED FOR ACTION

The international community has to revisit the central geopolitical issues of conflict, human rights abuses, climate change. Just before the Iraq war, Tony Blair remarked, in an almost throw away comment, that “of course there will be some collateral damage.”

The current migrant crisis is the ‘collateral damage’ of everything that has happened since. In some respects, it is one more nail in the coffin of an economic and military strategy fuelled by neoliberal ideology – what some have termed ‘the new economic colonialism’.

Deaths in the Mediterranean and informal refugee settlements in Calais are just the visible signs of a deeper collapse. More than common sense, a new politics is needed to address these fundamental causes and problems.

7. A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE

Faith communities and civic organisations can play a significant role in making the human issues of forced migration and displacement central, challenging misleading language, highlighting unjust or victimising policies, and opening up space for alternative perspectives and conversations.

In particular, those of us who are Christians need to remind ourselves that we are the product of people movements – some forced, some voluntary, some hopeful, some fearful. It is out of this resource of experience, and our founding texts that point to justice and compassion as going to the heart of what God requires, that we should seek to respond.

FURTHER RESOURCES

Vaughan Jones, ‘Migration and the 2015 election: reframing the terms of the debate’ (Ekklesia 19 March 2015). http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21475

Simon Barrow, ‘International Migrants Day: we need to change our thinking’ (Ekklesia 2014): http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/21172

Savitri Hensman, ‘Contrasting church attitudes on human rights for all’ (Ekklesia, 2010) http://ekklesia.co.uk/node/8492
Vaughan Jones, ‘Migration: Why a broader view is needed’ (Ekklesia, 2010).
http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/12034

Vaughan Jones, ‘Are immigration controls moral?’ (Ekklesia, 2005):
http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/research/280405immigration

Mawuna Remarque Koutonin, ‘Why are white people expats when the rest of us are immigrants?’ (Guardian, 13 March 2015). http://tinyurl.com/qz4jx8b

‘We need a positive approach to migration’ - Ekklesia statement:
http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/17659

* All Ekklesia’s news, reporting, comment and analysis on migration issues:
http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/migration

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ABOUT EKKLESIA

Founded in 2002, Ekklesia is a public policy think-tank that explores the changing nature of the relationship between politics and beliefs in a plural world. Committed to social justice, peacemaking, environmental sustainability and new economy, it seeks to combine transformative Christian thinking about public life with ideas and insights from a range of allies beyond the Christian tradition.

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