



Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN

Britain's Hostile Environment

How successive British governments have hardened their hearts and closed doors to asylum-seekers

'That which is morally wrong cannot be politically right.' Yearly Meeting 1822 – Quaker Faith and Practice 23.26

In 2012, the then Home Secretary Theresa May gave an interview to the Daily Telegraph in which she promised to create a 'really hostile environment' for irregular migrants in the UK. The choice of a phrase more often associated with war zones, organised crime and terrorism is telling.

The Coalition went on to create a 'Hostile Environment Working Group', which was later re-named the 'Inter-Ministerial Group on Migrants' Access to Benefits and Public Services'. Those appointed to the group included the Ministers for Care Services, Employment, Housing, Schools, Health, and Transport. This was the beginning of an all-out onslaught on immigrants and a huge intrusion into people's private lives. The hostile environment has settled into our public life.



Illustration by George Sfougaras

Much has changed since Theresa May issued her 2012 statement. We have seen unprecedented numbers fleeing war and conflict in the Middle East and elsewhere, thousands have been drowned in the Mediterranean in their attempts to reach the continent of Europe, countries are building walls to keep out the desperate people who are seeking sanctuary, and Theresa May has become Prime Minister.

Within the Home Office there is an Immigration and Sanctions Directorate whose purpose is to 'make conditions difficult' for migrants to the UK who are regarded as illegal. Among other activities, it has been responsible for mistakenly sending out immigration enforcement letters to people who are legally entitled to remain in the UK.

Those who work with asylum seekers have noticed the official promotion of an increasingly open disparaging attitude. Whereas in the past asylum-seekers were given 'temporary admission', they are now classed as receiving 'immigration bail'. Asylum-seekers' below-poverty-level financial support has been cut further; with no right to work, they are now also barred from holding a driving licence or having a bank account.

Immigration checks have in essence been privatised. Employers, landlords, colleges, universities, banks, building societies, doctors and local government all have to conduct immigration status checks, incentivised by statutory duties, civil fines and criminal offences. One result of this has been that migrants, including pregnant women and trafficked domestic workers, have been too frightened to access medical care. There have also been incidents where women have gone to the police to report being raped only to be arrested for immigration offences. So it is likely serious crimes are going unreported.

Money matters. In the current hostile climate there is only a very limited supply of legal aid at the start of an asylum claim, and asylum-seekers are frequently unable to proceed with appeals. High fees are charged for applications for Leave to Remain. These costs are even greater for those in the limbo-land of 'Discretionary Leave to Remain', who are hit with enormous fees when they try to renew at the end of the 30-month period (and then at 60 months, and then again at 90 months).

Rules can be changed without any discussion. While she was Home Secretary, Theresa May made 45,000 changes to the immigration rules. Many people are not aware that detailed regulations can be changed without any public discussion. Often, these changes are only discovered by legal practitioners who come up against them. On 6th April 2015, for example, the fee for renewal of Discretionary Leave to Remain was raised overnight from zero to £649 and had risen to £993 by 2017, plus a compulsory £500 'Immigration Health Charge'. The 2017-18 charge for Indefinite Leave to Remain is £2,297. On top of this, if you lose in a Judicial Review of a Home Office decision, any unpaid costs awarded against you can negatively affect the outcome of any future asylum application. Certain families granted Discretionary Leave to Remain may receive a biometric residence card which denies them access to benefits ('no recourse to public funds') and effectively forces them to depend on their hard-pressed Local Authority for survival.

The government is breaking its own laws. The Home Office's deportation of an asylum seeker to Afghanistan in September 2017 in breach of a court order showed that the government is prepared to ride roughshod over the laws of the land.

The political climate for people seeking sanctuary has grown considerably chillier over the last fifteen years. As Prime Minister, Theresa May has expressed a desire to withdraw from the European Convention on Human Rights and replace it with a Bill of Rights. What this would mean for the rights of those who are not British citizens is unclear. If this were to happen it would inevitably result in a further hardening of hostile attitudes towards 'outsiders'. However, the public response towards refugees has frequently been generous and compassionate, with an estimated 10,000 Britons offering practical support to the migrants in northern France.

Why are Quakers concerned?

'Which of you, if your son asks for bread, will give him a stone?' (Matthew 7, 9). Many of our politicians and our fellow-citizens appear to have no understanding of the commandment to do justice and love mercy. They have hardened their hearts against all who come to our shores looking for help. But nothing is inevitable; as we are reminded by George Fox, we must be of good faith and valiant for the Truth in this thick night of darkness.

What can we do?

Find out which organisations are working locally with people seeking sanctuary, e.g. City of Sanctuary.

The Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network (QARN) is a network of Quakers across the UK who share a concern about the injustices that are practised in our name, and a determination to bring about change for those who have been forced to seek sanctuary. We hold meetings, organise conferences and support one another in our work. Our members are active as individuals and as members of other groups (Quaker and non-Quaker) across a wide spectrum of asylum-related activities, giving us a broad and solid base of knowledge and expertise. In May 2016 QARN commissioned **Journeyman Theatre** to write a play based on the true story of a woman fleeing domestic abuse and servitude in Chechnya and encountering the UK's hostile environment when she seeks sanctuary here. Called 'The Bundle', it can be performed at your Meeting or other local venue by arrangement with Journeyman Theatre.

QUAKER ASYLUM AND REFUGEE NETWORK (QARN) c/o Leicester Quaker Meeting House, 16 Queens Rd, Leicester LE2 1WP website: qarn.org.uk contact: info@qarn.org.uk

Ask your Meeting to become a **Meeting of Sanctuary**. Sanctuary Everywhere encourages Quakers to act in solidarity with refugees and migrants. Meetings are supported from Friends House with briefings, training, retreats, conference calls and an online discussion forum. The Sanctuary Everywhere Manifesto expresses the commitment of Britain Yearly Meeting to this work.

Ice and Fire Theatre can be booked for a performance of 'Asylum Monologues', based on the testimonies of those on the receiving end of the UK's hostile environment.

Quaker Asylum and Refugee Network
qarn.org.uk May 2018