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The Politics of Bigotry

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On the weekend of 14-15th August, after months of provocations by the local media, small groups of local residents in Dover clashed with asylum-seekers at a funfair. The Dover Express had been telling locals for so long that their town was over-run with immigrants that someone was bound to bite eventually. Home Office minister Lord Bassan immediately asserted that the town was indeed 'overcrowded' and that New Labour's draconian powers of dispersal (under the proposed Asylum and Immigration Bill) were—entirely coincidentally—the only solution! Never mind that Dover has a population of over 30,000 and that the refugee population's access to local resources is minimal. Immigrants, as ever, provide a convenient scapegoat. Dover's economy has been wrecked by the closure of the Kent coal mines, redundancies on the ferries and the loss of construction jobs on the completion of the Channel Tunnel. Blaming asylum-seekers for the flight of capital from the area is an easy means of deflecting local anger away from those directly to blame.

Not content with the victimisation of those forced to flee NATO's destruction of the Balkans, Home Secretary Jack Straw cast around for a new target, and used an interview with BBC

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Radio West Midlands to attack travellers. "Many of these so-called travellers seem to think that it's perfectly okay for them to cause mayhem in an area, to go burgling, thieving, breaking into vehicles, causing all kinds of trouble, including defecating in the doorways of firms and so on and getting away with it." Straw's comments were combined with moves to introduce visa restrictions for Czech nationals, and were clearly intended to generate racist hysteria aimed at Roma asylum-seekers. Czech gypsies endure 70% unemployment in their homeland, as a direct result of workplace racism. Over twenty Roma have been murdered by far right groups in Czechoslovakia since 1990. According to Straw, though, they're 'bogus asylum-seekers'. Gypsies have been used by the Czech government as scapegoats for crime, housing shortages and cuts in benefits. Trying to find sanctuary, they're destined to serve the same ends here.

In 1993 the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) described refugees as "the symptom of the ills of an age." An average of nearly ten thousand people each day are forced to become refugees. In a world population of 5.5 billion, roughly one in every 130 people on earth has been forced into flight. For all the talk within Europe of an 'asylum crisis', some 24 million people are displaced within the borders of their own countries and, as the UNHCR makes clear, the vast majority of refugees sought and found sanctuary in neighbouring third world countries, and returned home when conditions permitted.

In 1993 a UNHCR report states simply: "What sets refugees apart from other people in need of humanitarian aid is their need for international protection. Most people can look to their own governments and state institutions to protect their rights and physical security, even if imperfectly. Refugees cannot. In many cases they are fleeing in terror from abuses perpetrated by the state." All this is absented from any discussion in the media about the 'asylum crisis.' New Labour has chosen to provide tax breaks for big business rather than allocate increased resources to public spend-

ing. When classroom numbers increase, hospital waiting lists are fiddled and benefits cut, some kind of smokescreen is inevitably needed to deflect popular anger from the real culprits. New Labour has chosen to do what every other Labour government has done—it has played the race card. The end result is that people who are fleeing for their lives may well end up paying with their lives because the only 'conviction politics' Blair's 'Christian' government has left is the politics of bigotry.

The UNHCR has described the "impulse to provide refuge to strangers in need" as "one of the most basic expressions of human solidarity." In practice, what the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares as "the right to seek and enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution" (Article 14 [1]) is in practice subject to the ideological twists of governments committed not to 'human solidarity' but to avarice and the preservation of privilege. In 1918 fifteen thousand White Russian refugees were allowed into Britain while Jews and Armenians were deliberately excluded. During the Cold War the West condemned Eastern European states for their denial of freedom of movement to their populations. The Hungarian government was pressured to open its borders with Austria in 1989, creating a route for East Germans into the West. The steady haemorrhage to the West was then used to undermine the stability of the East European states. During 1989 alone some 1.2 million people left the Warsaw Pact area. Once the destabilisation of the state capitalist regimes was underway, the attitude of the Western states to the right of freedom of movement of Eastern European citizens was redefined—Italy deployed troops to deter Albanian asylum-seekers, while Austria used its army to keep out Roma gypsies.

In their magnificent history of global refugee movements, *Refugees in an Age of Genocide* (Frank Cass, 1999), Tony Kushner and Katherine Knox note that "it is all the more remarkable, and one cause for qualified optimism, that popular attachment to the concept of asylum has in the last years of the century

remained strong in spite of the atmosphere created by successive governments and the popular press.” In 1991 *The Sun* carried out a survey of its readers, and found out (doubtless to its horror) that half of the sample stated that they did not want the government to “turn its back on our tradition of giving haven to refugees.” In a more detailed survey carried out in 1997 by the Institute of Public Policy Research, three-quarters agreed that “most refugees in Britain are in need of our help and support.”

Those of us committed to a world based on what Bakunin called the “real union of free peoples” need to be in the forefront of the defence of the right to asylum, and the physical defence of those seeking refuge. The UNHCR, though, notes that “global migration proceeds across a spectrum of motivation, ranging from those who flee from persecution to those who flee from serious danger, those who are trying to escape from misery and those who wish to leave behind a lack of opportunity.” The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT) exist ostensibly to help developing countries, but in reality do no more than facilitate the freedom of capital to exploit labour and natural resources across the globe. Free movement of labour, though, is denounced as ‘bogus’ (the spectre of the exploited beginning to exploit the exploiter?) and those seeking a new life are criminalised for not knowing their place. As a German refugee group, Die Karawane, note: “This contradiction is most apparent at the USMexico border or at the eastern frontiers of the EU, where the military clampdown on illegal migration ensures that reserve pools of cheap labour are preserved on the edges of affluent US and Europe” (CARF no. 51, Aug/Sept 1999).

In 1652 the Digger activist Gerard Winstanley raised the call for the battle to “take the earth to be a common treasury.” That battle still remains to be won. If we are to rebuild a movement fit for the task, we have to defend the right of freedom of movement of labour—for all people to seek opportunity where they can. Racism is, in part, an ideological prop of the ruling class which is used to

set those with least to gain in this society against each other. It is, further, the cultural trace of the determination of capital that we should all know our place in this world—and that place shall be defined by borders drawn up by those who see us as no more than cheap labour, a resource to be exhausted like every other resource. As A. Sivanandan observed in 1990, “today the colour line is the poverty line is the power line ... that is why you cannot fight racism without also fighting imperialism. You cannot fight for the cause of black people without fighting for the cause of working people. You cannot, in the final analysis, fight oppression without at the same time fighting exploitation” (*Communities of Resistance*, Verso, 1990).

In *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Allen & Unwin, 1958), Hannah Arendt is drawn to comment that “contemporary history has created a new kind of human being—the kind that are put in concentration camps by their foes and internment camps by their friends.” For us, then, our attempts to make a different history have to begin with the need to save the refugees of today from the internment camps which the likes of Jack Straw would have as their fate again.