
A humanist discussion of... immigration and asylum

Humanists seek to live good lives without religious or superstitious beliefs. They use reason, experience and respect for others when thinking about moral issues, not obedience to dogmatic rules. They believe that this life is the only one we have, and that we must make the best of it and rely on human beings and human institutions to promote and ensure happiness and fulfilment. Humanists believe in treating other people as they would like to be treated themselves, not in stereotyping or discriminating against entire groups of people. That means trying to understand other people and to imagine how they might be feeling, treating all human beings with equal consideration, and tolerating other beliefs and ways of life as long as they do not harm others. So humanists support human rights and oppose racism, torture, unfair imprisonment, discrimination because of beliefs, and vast inequalities in wealth and education, all of which stand in the way of overall human welfare and progress.

Humanists value freedom, including the freedom to move around the world, and can readily sympathise with those who seek freedom and want to live in a stable country where laws and their rights are respected. They can also understand the desire to move to somewhere where people do not starve to death, where children have the right to education, and where there are opportunities to improve one's standard of living.

With these principles it seems clear that humanists would defend the rights of immigrants, who are usually moving to another country to escape poverty and make better lives for themselves and their children, and of asylum seekers, that is immigrants who are refugees from wars and persecution in countries that do not respect their rights. Humanists also value evidence and reasoning when considering social and moral questions, so let us look at some of the evidence and issues raised by immigration of all kinds.

[Why should we take in asylum seekers?](#)

Asylum seekers are emergency cases. They are fleeing from danger – persecution or war – and so they cannot necessarily go through the usual immigration procedures. Sometimes, because of the chaos they are coming from, they have no papers and few possessions. They may be seeking only temporary asylum or refuge (words which means safe place or shelter) and may want to return to their own countries once it is safe to do so.

"In my culture, if it is raining and someone takes shelter on your verandah, you don't tell them to go away. When the rain stops they move on. This applies to me at the moment - the storm is raging and I am only taking shelter; when it stops I will find my way home." - Ugandan asylum-

seeker quoted in *The Observer*, April 2005

Most refugees entering Britain in 2002 came from countries like Iraq , Zimbabwe , Afghanistan and Somalia – places with harsh and oppressive regimes or severe ethnic conflicts – and genuinely need help.

Although Britain has quite a good record of helping asylum seekers, it has not always been very welcoming: we had a fairly restrictive policy towards Jewish refugees from Nazi Germany, and the current political climate favours restriction by numbers rather than need.

Is there anything wrong with “economic migration”?

The population of some countries, such as the USA , contains large numbers of refugees or economic migrants and their descendants. Many European countries have a long history of migration, outwards to colonies and for trade and business, and inwards. In the 20th century many migrants came to Britain from Britain’s former colonies to do jobs that other people did not want or to set up their own businesses. Some were invited to work here because we needed their skills and qualifications: for example, the National Health Service is still very dependent on doctors and nurses from overseas (and this can cause skills shortages in poorer countries). With the huge differences in wealth and opportunity between different countries, it is hardly surprising that ambitious people will move countries to improve their situation, and it is equally unsurprising that some wealthier countries will try to restrict immigration. Many countries now have strict quotas for immigration and require visas and work permits, to ensure that immigrants find jobs and accommodation and do not become burdens on the state.

The evidence is that migrants of all sorts have useful skills and qualifications and that most work hard to make a success of their new lives. According to a Home Office study carried out in 2002, immigrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, are far from being a burden on UK taxpayers. On the contrary, in 1999-2000, they made a net fiscal contribution of approximately £2.5 billion, worth 1p on income tax. Many have already shown considerably energy and enterprise just by getting here. Some people, for example the first minister of Scotland in February 2003, have suggested that we should encourage immigration to make up for the falling and aging population in Europe. There is very little evidence connecting immigrants or asylum seekers with crime or terrorism or “scrounging” or disease, all of which they have been accused of in the tabloid press.

What about “bogus” asylum seekers?

When it can be so hard to immigrate legally, it is not surprising that a minority of immigrants try to get round the restrictions either by entering

the country illegally under cover or by pretending to be asylum seekers, when they are in fact “economic migrants”, thus jumping the queue and breaking the law. And many immigrants will have more than one reason for migrating – they may well be both refugees and economic migrants. While many people think it is reasonable to plan for a manageable level of immigration and the best ways to deal with immigrants and refugees, much of the current debate is racist and unreasonable.

How should we treat immigrants and asylum-seekers?

Britain is popular with immigrants because many speak some English and because they may have friends or communities already here, as we have a tradition of immigration. But organisations that work closely with immigrants and refugees say that Britain is not their most popular destination and that we do not treat them particularly generously. We do not yet seem to have found a rational and humane way to help them to settle in or to give the assistance and advice they need with food, shelter, schools, finding employment, learning the language and culture.

It is inhumane to refuse all support to anyone arriving in this country, whatever their motives or means of arrival. It does not seem right to pen them up in prison-like surroundings or to bar their children from schools. It is also inhumane and impractical to disperse immigrants and refugees: proposals for dispersal often ignore the need for new immigrants to live near work, support systems such as language teaching, schools which know how to deal with refugees and children with little English, and people who share their language and culture. Asylum-seekers in particular may have need of specialist support that may not be available outside the bigger cities: for example, medical and psychological help if they have been tortured or suffered injury or traumas in war situations; foster care in their own community if they are unaccompanied children; help with tracing missing family members.

The USA requires new immigrants to learn the language and something about American culture and society before accepting them as citizens. It does not seem unreasonable for us to do the same: immigrants will have a far better chance if they learn English, and if they understand and participate in the society they live in. Most humanists would think it reasonable for immigrants to be required to subscribe to values such as democracy and human rights, values which contribute to making this country free, prosperous and attractive to immigrants. But it would not be reasonable to demand that they change their religious beliefs or family traditions, as long as they do no harm.

And it is right and reasonable to do what we can to spread peace, prosperity, democracy and human rights, so that people can live fulfilled lives in their own countries, as most would probably prefer.

Questions to think about and discuss:

- Think of 100 people. If they represented the typical population of the world :
 - 9 would have died before the age of 5;
 - 18 would never have attended school (11 of them would be girls);
 - 1 would have a college education;
 - 4 would be responsible for a quarter of the pollution that causes global warming;
 - 66 would be suffering the effects of drought and lack of water;
 - 6 would own nearly 60% of the wealth.
 - What do they all have in common? Which group do you fit into? If you can get 100 people together, you could try dividing them up into these groups (some of them overlapping, of course).
 - What would make you or your family leave your own country and go to live in another? Would you leave permanently or temporarily?
Where would you choose to go? Why? Would you be welcome in that country?
 - What would be the disadvantages of emigrating? What would you miss most?
 - Imagine that you have to leave your home and your country tomorrow, with only a suitcase. What would you take with you? If your home had been burnt down and you had no passport or ID documents, how would you prove who you are or where you came from?
 - How are you deciding your answers to these questions? What principles and arguments influence your answers?
 - How is the humanist view on this issue similar to that of other worldviews you have come across? How is it different?
 - Find out what documents you need in this country to: get a job; rent a room or flat; open a bank account; register at a doctor's surgery; get into a school or college. How would a refugee with no papers get these documents?
 - Find out what the minimum wage is in this country. Find out how much unemployment benefit is. Find out what asylum seekers are expected to live on.
 - Find out about your ancestors. Did any of them leave where they were born to live in another country? Why do you think they did or didn't?
 - Some schools will have refugee or immigrant pupils, or you may know immigrants or refugees in your area. Can you interview one
-

and find out how it felt to come to start a new life here, and what difficulties they had?

- Find out about migrants who made important contributions to the countries they emigrated to, or become famous. (Examples to start you off: Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein.)

Further reading and resources

Issues: The Refugee Crisis (Independence, 2001)

Eva Hoffman *Lost in Translation* (Vintage, 2000) – autobiography of an East European moving to the USA in her teens.

W H Auden's poem *Refugee Blues*

Refugees: We left because we had to (Refugee Council)

Fiction, children's (KS2-3)

An Na *A Step from Heaven* (Allen & Unwin)

Jamila Gavin *Out of India* (Hodder Children's Books)

Morris Gleitzman *Boy Overboard* (Viking)

Deborah Ellis *Parvana's Journey* (OUP)

Beverley Naidoo *The Other Side of Truth* (Penguin)

Film/Video/DVD

For schools

Why Refugees? (Team Video, www.team-video.co.uk)

(KS4-adult)

Dirty Pretty Things (Stephen Frears 2001), about the "invisible" immigrants that work in our big cities.

Last Resort (Pawel Pawilowski 2000), about an Eastern European and her son living in an immigration camp on the English coast.

In This World (Michael Winterbottom 2003), about the journey west of two Afghan refugees in search of a better life

Specialist organizations

The Medical Foundation cares for victims of torture

www.torturecare.org.uk

The Refugee Council supports and advises refugees and teachers dealing with refugee pupils www.refugeecouncil.org.uk

Amnesty International campaigns for human rights www.amnesty.org.uk

[Get Global! provides resources on global citizenship for teachers](http://www.getglobal.org.uk)

Getglobal@actionaid.org.uk

United Nations High Commission for Refugees for news and information about refugees worldwide www.unhcr.ch

Student Action for Refugees (STAR) www.star-network.org.uk Tel 020 7840 4425
