



Change and development at RSG

At RSG's annual general meeting the outgoing chairman, Ian Miller, gave an account of the many changes in the year to October 2005.

Devon County Council had withdrawn from the contract with the National Asylum Support Service and had also turned down an opportunity to take part in the Government's Gateway project. Subsequently some of the asylum seekers in Exeter relocated to Bristol, but several still kept in touch with RSG. The work of the RSG office continued to expand, with an average of 10 visitors through the door every day.

Better news was that we got renewed funding for the post of Project Co-ordinator (two years!). Ian praised the work of Annette Hughes, the post holder.

Several trustees had been lost to RSG during the year: Clare Ridout, RSG's treasurer, Peter Barton, its secretary and Jules Shore. Their work had been greatly appreciated and their expertise was much missed. The AGM approved the appointment of ten new trustees (see page 2). A new chairman (Fran Jenkin) was appointed. Lawrence Sail

(who already chairs monthly management committee meetings) became secretary.

Fran Jenkin, Francisca van Holthoorn and Jenny Stephens reported that RSG's advocacy work continued during the year. Asylum seekers faced severe difficulties in pursuing their claim, and RSG members did their best to help. Problems included a compressed timescale for applications, language difficulties and the unwillingness of solicitors to take on cases (no Exeter solicitor was doing so). RSG is not permitted by law to offer legal advice but there were many other ways in which we could help.

RSG's English language provision had continued, led by Kate Hannan. Numbers had decreased during the middle of the year (partly as a result of the re-dispersal to Bristol) but were now increasing again. It had been decided to adopt more formal, book-based methods, and expand the amount of help offered.

The housing advice service run by Pat Barker, Pat Comery and David Mezzetti found that the ending of the NASS contract was followed by a

broadening of the issues they had to deal with (something which is now characterising most aspects of RSG's work). The problems of young, male asylum seekers tended to be different from those (say) of couples, some with no local connection and therefore no eligibility for Exeter housing, and who might have children. 'We can still say, after four years, that we have not known of a refugee sleeping rough ...'

Once again we ran a purposeful activities fund during the summer. It was organised initially by Cassie Hague from January this year. Cassie held a successful and well-attended volunteer evening and social event, but unfortunately had to leave the post (though she continued as a volunteer). Adam Welton was appointed to succeed her and the project is still moving forward most encouragingly, though, unfortunately, we have not been given funding for next year.

The whole RSG project was being evaluated by an independent consultant. (Details of any findings will be published in the Newsletter.)

(Ian Miller and Adam Welton: next page)

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Help needed and RSG party and articles on Ian Miller and Adam Welton (next page)

Volunteer profile: William Gallois and latest immigration and asylum statistics (page 3)

Labour's bonfire of liberties: human rights update (page 4)

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RSG management committee

Meetings are held on a Wednesday late in every month at 7pm in Wat Tyler House (see above). Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

Every meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers, who are particularly welcome. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting, please.

HOW TO HELP

We seriously do need help (see above). Contact the office (address above) as soon as possible if you can volunteer – or want to make a donation.

Thanks ...

Help needed

RSG's work is ever-changing but never seems to diminish. We have been fortunate to be able to recruit new trustees (no charity can function without them, and there has been a disturbing tendency recently for trustees to leave the country!). Elisabeth Baker, Jeremy Cushing, Hassan Daneshgar, Hassan (Cyrus) Ghisari, Francisca van Holthoon, David Mezzetti, Tim Niblock, Bahram Raad, Hussein Razi and Neil Whiter were all elected at the annual general meeting. At the same meeting Ian Miller resigned as Chairman and was replaced by Fran Jenkin. Lawrence Sail was appointed secretary.

We are still without a treasurer,

however, and anyone who knows anything about bookkeeping or accountancy and can help is urged to contact Annette. A charity *definitely* can't do without a treasurer.

We also need people with ideas about next year's Refugee Week, and anyone willing to help wade through piles of Gift Aid forms so we can claim the tax back – very useful work, this, lots of money to be made for RSG.

And of course more donations are always needed, especially if regular, by standing order and accompanied by a completed gift aid form!

Ian Miller

At the AGM Ian Miller (photo, right) resigned as chairman of RSG, though he remains a trustee. He is replaced by Fran Jenkin.

Fran Jenkin writes: Ian has been the chair of RSG since its foundation and we wish to thank him for all his work and commitment.

He has done much invisible work with sensitivity, insight and thoughtfulness. He has been a stalwart for both asylum seekers, refugees and the organisation, always combining a lightness of touch with seriousness.

Ian has had time for everyone and made friends with and supported numerous people.

His quiet presence and good humour will be much missed, although we hope he will continue to bring his qualities and skills to the work of the management committee.

Thank you, Ian, for being there, especially at times when no-one could or would step into the breach. [FJ]

Adam Welton

Adam has been a brilliant Co-ordinator of the Purposeful Activities Project. He has been good-humoured, helpful and imaginative as well as being practical and realistic.

He established a client-led user group so being able to organise activities that have met needs and extended asylum seekers' and refugees' experience of Devon and the local community. Above all he has brought fun into peoples' lives, which is not to be underestimated given the burdens of the participants. It is such a shame that the funding was not extended. We wish Adam all the very best in his future and extend huge thanks.

RSG PARTY

We will be holding a party to mark the end of both the Activities Project and Ramadan. This will be an evening event with food and music, friends and frivolity. All are most welcome regardless of participation in the Activities Project and/or Ramadan. We are hoping to create a family atmosphere so please invite the younger members of your friends and family. Looking forward to seeing you at St. James Hall at Exeter City FC on the evening of Sunday 6th of November.

Times to be confirmed – please contact RSG for further details.



PROJECT WORKER REFUGEE INTEGRATION

Salary £21,000; could be job share

RSG is looking for the right applicant to hold a one-year full-time appointment (see last issue). See next page.

**Last date for applications
Friday 11 November**



Volunteer profile: William Gallois

Halley Cohen writes: William first heard of RSG through his wife, Rebecca Niblock, after she became a volunteer. He was motivated to volunteer himself in May 2004 after becoming increasingly aware that the public debate around asylum issues was 'distasteful' and fear-inducing instead of welcoming. He was troubled to learn about the arbitrariness riddling the asylum process. Like many volunteers, he hoped to help redress this imbalance by working directly with asylum seekers and refugees.

William teaches history at Roehampton University in London, spending a morning each week in the RSG offices. With regard to his work at RSG, William says, 'I try to help each person who comes into the office. This might involve filling in forms for housing benefit, job seekers allowance or medical forms as well as job and university applications. We don't see as many people who need help with basic subsistence anymore. There is more of a focus on settling refugees into the community and linking them into services and activities.'

William stresses how much he has gotten out of volunteering. 'I meet amazing people. I have never met so many people who possess such dignity, good humour and intelligence. I now have a richer sense of what living in Exeter is like on more levels. It is far too easy to move within narrow circles and volunteering gives me a more complex understanding of the people I pass on the street. My goal as a volunteer is to be part of a group of people who can show asylum seekers and refugees that they are welcome in Britain, and not just tolerated.'

[HC]

Project worker

The new post of project worker for refugee integration is now being advertised. The successful applicant will work with the existing RSG team but specialise in helping refugees with jobs and training through the RSG enquiry service. The aim of the project is to improve job pros-

pects for refugees, working with other service providers, recruiting and training volunteers to help and devising training programmes for refugees, volunteers and service providers. *Apply by email to the office or send an A4 SAE (46p stamp) for application pack. Telephone queries to 01392 213208.*

More in, fewer out

Tunbridge Wells was not pleased.

Happily some of the heat seems to have gone out of the immigration debate. Partly this is no doubt due to the failure of the Tories' disgraceful election campaign; partly to the Prime Minister's having moved on from whipping up public anxiety about asylum seekers to making us all frightened of teenagers.

However recent announcements show that on present trends the UK population is in fact likely to rise more than previously forecast. The causes are partly a slightly higher birth rate but mainly net immigration. Large numbers of people decided to leave Britain last year – 360,000 – but even larger numbers came to stay. The net increase as a result was around 220,000. This included nearly 50,000 from the ten countries which recently joined the EU. The Office for National Statistics revised its predictions of future population growth as a result, guessing long-term net immigration at 145,000 a year to make the population go on increasing till 2074 instead of their previous predicted peak in 2050. This of course means some decrease in the strain caused by an ongoing fall in the numbers of people working as compared with those who are retired. (This is a great relief to the present writer.) It also helps to keep wages (and labour costs generally) down in the UK and provides us with a steady supply of people who almost by definition are possessed of above average initiative and general get up and go. (They usually tend to be young, too.) It mostly reflects the success of the British economy in producing more jobs (some say; but our unemployment figures are nowhere near as good as the government says, and if our productivity levels were better we wouldn't need so many workers). Needless to say Disgusted of

Disgusted may have been a bit happier with the latest asylum figures. These are down once again, from 7015 in the first quarter of 2005 to 6220 in the second. This is a fall of 76% since October 2002 and follows an almost uninterrupted fall, quarter by quarter, since then. About 3000 failed asylum seekers were removed from Britain in the second quarter of 2005 (an increase of 3%). The Home Office minister, Tony McNulty, said in true Blairite fashion that 'our five-year immigration strategy sets out ways in which we will continue to deal with attempts to abuse our asylum system'. The Blairite habit of inciting and then exploiting public anxieties could hardly be better exemplified. In fact, the government, through incessant legislation, has managed to make it virtually impossible to seek asylum in Britain (at least without breaking umpteen laws and probably selling your soul to a people trafficker). At the same time it has presided over a sick Home Office culture in which those who do succeed are routinely disbelieved. Not just failed asylum seekers but, now, immigrant workers from eastern Europe who for any reason fall on hard times are driven into destitution which would be remarkable in Dickens's time.

One piece of good news: in the Special Immigration Appeals Commission Mr Justice Ouseley ordered the Home Office to release four of the ten men imprisoned without trial after the July bombings. The Home Office claimed they 'represent a real risk to the security of the country'. The judge commented that July 7th did not provide evidence of a greater security risk posed by these applicants than before, implying that their renewed imprisonment was oppressive. Three of the four had been on suicide watch.

[JC]

Labour's bonfire of liberties

I'm not going to apologise for banging on about civil rights again, because I think it's one of the most serious threats to the lives of minorities in our society. Minorities most certainly include refugees and asylum seekers – though the threat extends to other groups, and to some extent to all of us.

First, the good news

Charles Clarke has backed down (a little) on 'glorifying terrorism'. As an ex-history teacher I'm quite sorry about this in a way, since it was going to be such fun watching the Home Office make a cake of itself defining which historical events were terrorism and which weren't. You couldn't make it up! However it's still a serious issue which hasn't really gone away. Clarke has also accepted that detention in police custody will be supervised by high court judges. Similarly it was reassuring that the new Lord Chief Justice wasted no time in telling the government not to try to push the judges around. A lot of expert opinion (including Lord Carlile, QC) is lining up behind the idea that the proposed three-month detention period is not only oppressive but likely to be unlawful. The programme to send back Iraqi asylum seekers seems to be on the verge of collapse. And the Asylum and Immigration Tribunal condemned the Home Office's attitude towards sending failed asylum seekers back to Zimbabwe, expressing alarm at the Home Office's lack of interest in what happened to those sent back and sharply criticising a Foreign Office mission to Zimbabwe which appeared to be uninterested in any facts which might cast doubt on government policy.

The bad news

is, however, that government pressure to erode various protections of individual rights continues, as it has done for virtually the whole period of New Labour government. Because of the nature of the current terrorist threat there is actually no way we can be totally secure. To some extent public alarm is justified and politicians have of course to acknowledge that. However, it is unlikely in the

extreme that any physical damage terrorists may do in the UK will amount, over time, to a real threat to our national life. I would argue that in spite of the horror we feel about bomb attacks and their consequences to individuals and their families, in the end more damage will be done by the loss of confidence in the basic fairness of our laws which current proposals are likely to cause in various minority communities. Meanwhile lack of trust in government (and in this government in particular, especially in view of its attempts to claim that Iraq did not contribute to July 7th) inhibits reasonable discussion of possible compromises. The Lord Chancellor has yet again claimed that the proposed laws would be used 'reasonably', but numerous cases of which the treatment of Walter Wolfgang is only the most newsworthy show that he is – crudely – talking nonsense. And presumably knows it. The police now almost routinely use existing anti-terror legislation (there are 200 laws on the statute book already) in cases which have nothing to do with terrorism and the courts appear unable or unwilling to do anything to check this. It is inevitable that this will also turn out to be true of any new law. The same will undoubtedly happen with ID cards if they are introduced: and the weight of consequent injustice will fall most heavily on the poorest members of society.

Torture

The US Senate has now ruled (by 90 votes to 9) that 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment' should be banned in all US facilities, wherever in the world they may be situated. To prevent this becoming law President Bush would have to ban a \$440-billion military appropriation to which the ruling is attached, which in view of the ongoing catastrophe in Iraq would be interesting (to say the least). This new prohibition is good news but will not affect the methods which the CIA already routinely uses to circumvent anti-torture laws, namely 'renditions', sending detainees to countries where they can be tortured (and quite possibly 'disappeared') without any legal comeback for the US authorities.

This involves a whole CIA airline which shuttles prisoners around the world to places like Egypt and Jordan, and in which our government is deeply complicit (a lot of the flights use UK airports). Meanwhile the British government is still refusing to answer letters on the subject of its attitude to torture.

There are currently two legal processes in train which are relevant to this. One is the case of Mohammed Ramzy at the European Court of Human Rights. Mr Ramzy is in danger of deportation to Algeria from the Netherlands, but in a previous ruling in the case of Karanjit Singh Chahal (1996) the court ruled against deportation on the grounds that the appellant might be tortured. The governments of several EU states (including us) are trying to use the Ramzy case to overturn this precedent. The other case is currently before the House of Lords and concerns last year's judgement by the Court of Appeal that evidence obtained by the use of torture can be accepted by British courts provided that no agent of the British government was involved in inflicting the torture. (In the ricin trial evidence said to have been obtained from Mohammed Meguerba was provided by the Algerian authorities, who are well known for using torture, especially in political cases.) This Appeal Court judgement seems to many people to make our adherence to the UN Convention against Torture largely meaningless. Regardless of any moral considerations, it also means that our courts will end up using evidence produced in the most dodgy possible ways. Hazel Blears, for example, defended the use of evidence provided from Uzbekistan, where not only is torture routine but the government is accused of setting people up in large-scale agent provocateur operations. If the House of Lords supports the judgement it will mark probably the most significant deterioration in UK human rights law since the 19th century (early 19th, at that).

[JC]

WHAT TO DO

Write 'not in my name' letters to as many relevant politicians as you can.