



Newsletter

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

Changes to the drop-in service

We had to make the difficult decision to reduce the drop-in service to enable staff to focus on funding applications. It is now open three days a week (see panel)

During January the service saw 52 individuals over 114 visits; 45 refugees and 7 asylum seekers. It was seven people's first visit to the service in the current financial year. The majority of the visits were for help with immigration applications, citizenship or passport applications and using computers. 14 visits were for help from the emergency fund, which has helped four people most weeks.

Fun on the allotment

It's now getting to the time of year when work once again starts on the allotment. If you are interested in helping us grow fruit and vegetables, please get in touch with the office.

The Women's Project

The women recently had their ESOL (English for speakers of other languages) exams and nearly all passed, enabling them to get their settlement visas in the UK. Massive congratulations to all of them and a big thanks to Clare Henry and the volunteer home tutors for all their work on the project.

Community fundraising

We are aiming to meet our £21,000 deficit for the next financial year with a big community effort. We are in the process of establishing a fundraising team, but we are also hoping all of our

supporters will get involved, even if on a very small scale - a cake sale, a coffee morning or a sponsored bungee jump - we don't really mind, just get involved! if everyone can make a small amount of money, together we can keep our services going until 2012. Please let us know if you would like to run an event or if you would like to be involved with the co-ordination of our fundraising efforts.

English classes

As well as the sterling work carried out by the Women's Group volunteers with their one-to-one home tuition, RSG is now offering English classes open to all refugees or asylum seekers on two evenings a week. Experienced and enthusiastic volunteers are currently running a programme on English for work, offering help in areas such as curriculum vitae (CV) writing, interview techniques and filling in application forms. Students are also able to have their individual queries or particular problems with English addressed.

New opening times

The drop-in service will now be available on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays from 10am to 12 and from 2pm to 4.

Volunteer vacancies

We are currently seeking female, ESOL-skilled, volunteers to join our home tutor programme and volunteers with skills in events and local fundraising. Please contact the office if you can help.

Refugee Week 2010 CDs now available!

Reminisce about last year's Refugee Week music event, or hear it at last if you missed it the first time round! We now have the CDs ready - Sounds of Freedom 2010 - the double CD is dedicated to Fran Jenkin and contains music and poetry from the event. It's a bargain at £8 and all proceeds will go directly to RSG. Please phone the office on 01392 682185 if you would like to buy a copy, or if you want some to sell among your own network.

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REFUGEE SUPPORT GROUP DEVON

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

93 Fore Street
Exeter
EX4 3HY

(Note: entrance is in Market Street. Access by stairs only: please telephone if you need help.)

Telephone:
01392 682185Email:
info@rsgdevon.org.uk

EDITORS

Annette Hughes and
Jeremy Cushing

RSG trustees

Next meeting will be on Wednesday 16th March in the new offices (see above), 5.30 p.m. For information contact the office.

Every ordinary meeting starts by considering any proposals or requests put forward by asylum seekers. Agenda items to the office if possible two weeks before the meeting.

NB views expressed in this newsletter are not necessarily those of the Refugee Support Group Devon

EDL swamp Exeter

We all turned up to the EDL demo on 12th February expecting massed lines of angry skinheads and hundreds of police

When we got there, the street was full of people with an ethnic mix even more kaleidoscopic than normal for Exeter. We listened to anti-racist oratory, munched food (a Cornish pasty in my case: very English), offered one another leaflets and waited for the EDL (English Defence League) to arrive. Rumours flew about that they had already been sighted but had been sent away again. (This turns out to have been true: apparently there was quite a big demo in St Thomas, as well.)

Eventually when nothing seemed to be happening some of us set off up the High Street to see what we could find. We noticed a clump of people, with a few police officers, further up. When we got there, there were eight people, three of them male and wearing EDL red-cross masks over their faces, one sharp-suited young man and four young women, surrounded by about five times as many anti-EDL locals, mostly photographing and filming the event. Anyone who started to argue with the demonstrators got eased away by police, who clearly had instructions to nip any aggro in the bud.

Some of us tried to engage by asking EDL what exactly it was they were trying to get across?

The sharp-suited one said, it was an anti-burqa demo. Why? we asked. We don't approve of Muslim women being made to cover themselves and walk ten paces

behind their husbands, they said. Several people said, but that isn't what happens. The spokesman obviously thought we were deluding ourselves. Why don't you campaign against domestic violence, which affects all groups? we asked. That's an issue everywhere, he said, a bit confusingly. Somebody asked why if they were against burqas they were wearing masks? We can wear them if we like, seemed to be the (rather aggressive) message.

Not getting very far with the spokesman we turned to one of the other demonstrators, who had pulled down his red-cross mask to better explain how urgent his message was. English culture was gradually being subverted, he said, hadn't we noticed? Soon we would all be under sharia law. EDL absolutely wasn't racist, they believed everyone had a right to their own religion, but extremist Muslims were a danger they were determined to alert us to.

We said, there isn't any problem in Exeter. Ah, but there will be, he said. Didn't we remember the Giraffe bombing? How would we feel if our daughters had been blown up? (Why is it always daughters, I wonder?)

We tried to persuade him that Muslims who believe in terrorism are only a tiny minority. He wasn't impressed: obviously they were trying to make us see that this wouldn't last. We disagreed with

him, we said. 'I've got a right to my opinion! I may be working class but you don't have to educate me!'

We hastily denied any intention of doing so, but still insisted that we disagreed. At that, the three masked men started the EDL chant, which sounds like 'Ugh, ugh, Eee Dee Ell', which was both unattractive and unconvincing.

On the whole they seemed more pathetic than dangerous, except for the man in the sharp suit, who might reward watching. (Looking at the news photos of the event, it wasn't actually a sharp suit. But it felt like it.) I felt a strong impulse to tell them to go home, have a nice cup of English tea and stop worrying so much.

Perhaps next time, bring some tea? Charm beats bad manners every time.

The Express and Echo

Since the demo a lot of people have expressed criticisms about the coverage in the Express and Echo. I found it very confusing: it was entitled 'Local police praised for aid at English Defence League's demo', but this referred to the EDL demo in Luton, to which, apparently, Devon and Cornwall Police sent a contingent. They (the police) were also present at the Exeter demo, of course, and as far as I could see they did a good job: no kettling, no angry confrontations, no helmets and above all no horses. You might say they were a little too active in frustrating conversations with EDL activists, but still, they have arguably got the message we should probably all take on, namely that dialogue is best. [JC]

Trustee report

Trustees met on 12th January and 9th February

Consultations

The trustees have been trying to find out the views of service users and volunteers about the current developments in regard to funding and RSG's future. A meeting with service users was held on 12th January. The main message was that if RSG folded there was no replacement in Exeter, with the implication that some service, even reduced, ought to be maintained if at all possible.

A further meeting, with volunteers,

was held on 26th January and produced numerous suggestions, so many that it was thought necessary to arrange regular meetings. A problem was that by the nature of their engagement volunteers did not meet one another, and consequently it was difficult for them to interact as a body. Accordingly a further meeting was agreed for 24th February.

Need for new trustees

It is agreed that RSG needs more trustees as there are still some roles which no-one has been able to take on. Suggested rules for

recruitment and induction of co-opted or elected trustees were put to the meeting on 9th February.

Staffing

Annette and Emma have now been agreed to work for shorter hours from 1st April. More work is being done on how they can manage their roles with this reduction.

English for speakers of other languages [ESOL]

The group continued to serve numerous clients and was much valued, as was the work put into organising it by Clare Henry. Its future was not completely secure however, because of lack of

funding into the future. Fundraising is ongoing.

Possible collaboration with other organisations

Noticing lack of progress following the meeting on 8th December, the trustees set up a working party to pursue negotiations with potential partners. These are ongoing and results will be reported in the next issue. We are open to any possibilities, from a merger with another organisation to lesser provisions like sharing office space. The crunch will obviously come when we can no longer afford to employ paid staff.

News roundup

More on Jimmy Mubenga

Once again the asylum system suffers from whistle-blowers (remember Louise Perrett's claims about the UKBA office in Cardiff). Four staff of the security firm G4S, which at the time had the £100m contract to conduct 'removals', reported to Parliament that they had been warning the firm about dangerous restraint techniques for six years before Mr Mubenga's death. They specifically pointed to what G4S staff called 'carpet karaoke', i.e. forcing the detainee's head down between his knees, as creating a danger of asphyxia. G4S denied that staff had ever raised concerns. The whistle-blowers further claimed that G4S training was poor quality. As in the Cardiff case, there was an allegation that a culture of denial existed in which staff were encouraged not to show compassion for detainees, and ostracised if they raised concerns. G4S said the welfare of detainees was its top priority.

New deal on control orders

On 26th January the Government announced proposed new rules for dealing with people regarded as potential terrorists whom it's impossible to prosecute because the evidence is secret. Labour imposed 'control orders', which involved house arrest and many other restrictions. These were ruled unlawful in 2009 and the new government has proposed revisions, having nearly split over arguments between Lib Dems and 'securocrats'. As a compromise, control orders have been renamed 'terrorism prevention and investigation measures' (TPims). One piece of good news was the end of internal exile (forcing suspects to live away from their home areas). But house arrest remains and suspects can still be sanctioned without prosecution in the courts.

Temporary immigration cap ruled unlawful

Last month the High Court ruled that Theresa May (the Home Secretary) had broken the law by imposing an interim immigration cap without going through Parliament.

Ban on spouses 'impossible to justify'

A two-year-old law intended to deal with forced marriages was thrown out by Lord Justice Sedley last month. The law banned non-Europeans who were under 21 joining their spouses in the UK. The judge said it could not be justified because of its disruptive impact on lives.

High earners escape immigration cap

The Government has announced that people earning over £150,000 will not be caught by the proposed cap on immigration

from outside the EU. We will also allow in scientists and people with skills which cannot be filled by EU citizens. However curry chefs were not included ... and anyone with a criminal conviction would not be considered, either.

More cuts to refugee charity

Following the demise of Refugee and Migrant Justice, the Refugee Council faces nearly two-thirds cut in its government funding, following one-fifth last year. This will seriously impact its services.

Student immigration

The government seemed likely to insist on limiting the number of foreign students coming to UK universities. The immigration minister claimed that we needed to cut widespread abuse of the student visa system. He said that there was no intention of cutting legitimate degree course students, but the vice-chancellor of the University of East Anglia said that in practice the curbs would amount to a 'hostile act' against universities and would lose them about £1bn in fee income. (Note also the bad effects on British influence in the world: currently looking a bit shaky.)

Lesbian threatened with deportation to Uganda

Brenda Namigabbe was told by the Home Office she would be deported to Uganda because she could not prove she was lesbian. Uganda has seen in recent months a rising tide of persecution against homosexuals. A leading Uganda MP, David Bahati, who is trying to enact the death penalty for them, warned Ms Namigabbe that she must 'repent or reform' if she goes back there. She fled Uganda because she was threatened and her partner's house was

destroyed. She was already on her flight when her lawyers secured a judicial review. Archbishop Rowan Williams has appealed to the Government to protect gay asylum seekers. Meanwhile a prominent gay activist, David Kato, was beaten to death in Uganda on 26th January.

New report on destitution

Oxfam has produced a report about asylum seekers entitled 'Coping with Destitution'. The findings are basically (a) there are a lot of destitute asylum seekers, some having been surviving for more than two years; (b) the Government is deluding itself by believing that sheer desperation will drive them to leave; (c) because they fear deportation they are cut off from advice which might help them (e.g. they may not know they are entitled to free primary health care). They are also wide open to exploitation, e.g. by being used as unpaid labour, or providing sexual services, in return for necessities.

More Yarl's Wood pain

Earlier this month the High Court ruled that the detention in Yarl's Wood of Reetha Suppiah (see Newsletter, April last year) and Sakinat Bello and their children was unlawful because UKBA had not followed their own rules. The families' lawyers said 'there was not a shred of evidence' that UKBA had considered the welfare of the children.

More recently the Observer revealed that Denise McNeil, who was involved in a hunger strike at Yarl's Wood, had now spent a year in Holloway Prison without being charged. She has been separated from her 8-year-old son, Tre-Anri. She had complained of being beaten by staff at Yarl's Wood.

Michael Morpurgo on Yarl's Wood

In the Dibley Lecture on 15th February the children's writer and Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo spoke about the rights of children world wide. He began by talking about Yarl's Wood. In doing so he quoted from two sources:

A robin redbreast in a cage
Has all heaven in a rage

(William Blake).

He then quoted the story of the character Meltem from the play 'Motherland' by Natasha Walter:

'My name is Meltem. It was 7 o'clock in the morning in August. At our home in Doncaster. We've lived there for six years. They banged and banged on the door. As soon as my mum opened the door they rushed in. There were twelve of them, twelve big men. They took us to the police station. They told us to wait, they said there is a car coming to take you to the removal centre.

'The car came and it was awful. It had a

cage. For a minute I thought to myself, am I an animal? The journey took a long time and this is where we ended up, here in Yarl's Wood. I tell you it has no difference from a jail.

'It has been more than two months I'm here so far. For education in here, I get maths for 9 year olds, and jigsaw puzzles. No. They don't give you an education here. I don't think you can get educated when you know you're in a prison. I saw an officer slapping a little two year old baby because he was playing with lights. And I saw a mother crying for her baby because they wouldn't take her to health-care. The officers were being really nasty, like they are just lowering people down and saying words to make them sadder. At school I was good at science, maths, and history. I wanted to become a doctor. My teachers, they were really kind. I miss them all so much, just being at school and doing normal things, with my friends.'

Cameron rediscovers the dog whistle

Cameron's recent speech to a NATO security conference in Munich comes from a long line of initiatives by desperate politicians deploying what Australians call the 'dog whistle' technique. This encourages voters to think the speaker sympathises with their worst impulses, whilst on the surface appearing to be a reasonable contribution to debate.

If you read the speech you realise immediately that it's not aimed at an audience of security people: it doesn't say anything other than platitudes about British or European defence and security policy. It's aimed at voters in the UK.

What he wants to talk about, Cameron says, is terrorism. And he puts forward an explanation of why we in Britain are subjected to terrorist attacks, as follows.

Terrorism isn't generated by things which happen outside the UK (i.e. our foreign policy). It's generated at home.

How is it generated? We have pursued a misguided policy (he calls it 'state multiculturalism'). This tolerates unacceptable aspects of other cultures (by which it is obvious he means Islam: the only actual example he gives is forced marriages).

Because we do not firmly insist on our essentially British values ('Freedom of worship. Democracy. The rule of law. Equal rights regardless of race, sex or sexuality') Muslim youths feel 'rootless'. This makes them easy prey for people who want to groom them in a 'process of radicalisation'. 'Young, dynamic leaders promote separatism by encouraging Muslims to define themselves solely in terms of their religion.'

The answer? - to refuse state contact with any organisation which does not clearly agree to these British values. (This is probably a reference to the previous government's 'Prevent' strategy and liaisons between it and some Muslim organisations which, for example, do not firmly reject antisemitism or homophobia. Many other people have expressed doubts about the 'Prevent' programme.) The implication is that retreating from such confusing ideological accommodations will help young Muslims to see themselves as British, since we will have provided a 'vision of society' to which they will 'want to belong'.

Cameron is very careful to say that not all terrorists are Muslim. He also says that to be a devout Muslim is not the same as being an 'extremist'. The distinction between being devout and people who 'define themselves solely in terms of their religion' is not explored.

What is he really saying?

It's not at all clear, as many commentators have pointed out. The speech is full of obvious absurdities and omissions, which Cameron must surely have known.

Firstly he says that the 'biggest threat to our security comes from terrorist attacks'. This is of course nonsense: terrorists have demonstrated their ability to kill significant numbers of their fellow citizens (though nothing like as many as have alcohol or road traffic accidents, say, or cost-cutting at Stafford Hospital), but most of their plots have been remarkably inept and even if they did succeed in more atrocities it would have no measurable effect on our national security: Britain is not so fragile. What *would* affect it would be over-reaction by our own leaders, as has happened with Blair's and Brown's attacks on civil liberty or the Bush 'war on terror' and our participation in the Iraq and Afghan wars.

He also argues that neither the unequal position of many Muslims in UK society, nor our foreign policy - 'riding roughshod over Muslim countries', propping up tyrants, supporting Israel - can be the main reason why these misguided young Muslims take to terrorism. The reasons he gives as to why this is so are nonsensical, and contrary to the views of most students of terrorism (no, honestly: they aren't even worth the effort of rebuttal). But to admit that either of these factors contributes to terrorism would be to implicate his own government, and the whole thrust of the speech is to put the blame elsewhere.

By listing classic British freedoms, of course, he implies that Muslims are against them. Hence we need to adopt a stance of 'muscular liberalism'.

The most glaring omission from the speech is the big demonstration by the English Defence League in Luton, on the same day. Why? One possible explanation is that to mention a serious threat to British values from non-Muslims would dilute the message (that Muslims are the threat). Even less creditable is the possibility that picking up EDL voters was a motive. But EDL activists have already expressed their delight: 'if he wants to start sticking up for us, that's great'.

'Terrorists generally do not commit terrorism because they are extraordinarily vengeful or uncaring, poor or uneducated, humiliated or lacking in self-esteem, schooled as children in radical religion or brain-washed, criminally minded or suicidal, or sex-starved for virgins in heaven. Terrorists, for the most part, are not nihilists but extreme moralists - altruists fastened to a hope gone haywire.'

Scott Atran: Talking to the Enemy

'There must be a reason why the queen's first minister chose to deliver a speech on the perils of Islam on the day a significant number of her subjects descended on a town - with a large Muslim population and malice in their hearts. It was just that at that moment, as the first beer bottles started to land, and the riot squad began to don their helmets, I couldn't for the life of me think of one.'

Dan Hodges in Labour Uncut

'[T]here is so much muddled thinking about this issue. ...'

'Frankly, we need a lot less of the passive tolerance of recent years and much more active, muscular liberalism.'

David Cameron: Munich speech

The most likely explanation for this speech, regrettably, is that it is a political diversion. With standards of living plummeting, unemployment rising, public services being decimated and bankers taking home huge bonuses, it's not difficult to understand why Cameron might want to divert attention from his own government's policies. Like Blair and Brown before him, he resorts when under pressure to speeches which the Australians would say are like dog whistles because you can't hear the real message but the dog does.

Cameron was, of course, the architect of Michael Howard's anti-immigrant campaign for the 2005 election. He is now trying to frighten us about terrorism. He hopes to profit from a classic tendency for society to support the establishment if people think there is a serious threat to their security.

He also denies that the main cause of the terrorist threat to the UK is his own government's policies, both domestic and foreign, which appear seriously unjust to a large section of British society.

And finally, it's old-fashioned divide and rule: he hopes we will turn our indignation on Muslims and support his government's valiant efforts to contain them. There can be little doubt that the speech risks inflaming racist feelings and Islamophobia. Either Cameron does not know that (which seems implausible) or he is truly desperate.

[JC]