



Newsletter

www.rsgdevon.org.uk

Fran: our loss

As most readers will already know, RSG's chair, Fran Jenkin, died on 24th July. We are still trying to come to terms with our loss, as is much of Exeter's charitable community.

Lawrence Sail writes: Fran was a founder member of the Refugee Support Group (Devon) - RSG - which has been in existence for ten years now: and for the last five years she was its chair. It is, as most of you will know, the sole organisation focused on addressing the needs of asylum seekers and refugees here in Exeter. It was set up as a consequence of the government's dispersal of asylum seekers to different parts of the country: those who came to Exeter were mostly from Afghanistan and Iran. Since those early days the Group has developed to meet the evolving needs of its service users, and it now works with people from various countries of origin, as well as the families of refugees and those granted citizenship and 'indefinite leave to remain'.

Fran was one of a very rare breed - the efficient visionary. All that she did combined scrupulous attention to detail with the strongly held belief that it is essential to act in the interests of justice, and on behalf of those in danger of being denied it.

Her energy was as formidable as her wit was quick. A typical Fran day would involve an elaborate juggling - of meetings, whether with groups or one-to-one; of answering or silencing her mobile phone; of casework; of advocacy; of giving an opinion on Exeter City's performance or prospects; of talking, persuading, supporting, consoling. And

the range of what she did was extraordinary. In terms of RSG, this meant that if there was a coffee morning, she would be there; if someone was needed to go to the police station in the middle of the night on behalf of a client, she was there; if there was to be a meeting with an MP, a councillor, or a lawyer, she was there; at the events of the annual Refugee Week, she was there; if there was a football tournament involving asylum seekers and refugees she was there; if members of the Women's Group were displaying their wonderful Gold Dozi embroidery, she was there. In fact the setting up and development of RSG's Women's Group was one of her finest achievements - starting with just a few participants, it now has well over sixty members, and its success gave Fran a proper pride and delight.

Fran was held in huge respect and affection, as we all know - and perhaps most of all by those to whom she gave not only practical advice and support, but a real sense that, whatever they had been through, they mattered as individuals. One of our service users, writing in re-



sponse to the news of her death, suggested that she combined the characteristics of a lawyer, a mother and an angel. This catches exactly the way in which she brought together campaigning and comfort, toughness and tenderness. And she herself embodied the very qualities that asylum seekers and refugees have themselves to develop - courage, persistence and hope.

The challenge of her principled activism will continue, yet her death is a grievous loss. Today, even as we celebrate all that she did and was, we lament her passing. [LS]

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What we owe the rest of the world (page 4)

AGM

6 for 6.30 on October 6th in RSG office. All welcome

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The AGM is on 6th October, 6pm in RSG office (see above). Next regular meeting will be on Wednesday 13th October, same venue, 5.30 p.m. Further meetings are planned for 10th November and 8th December. Everyone welcome. For information contact the office.

Every ordinary 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.

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

Fran's other career

Before she retired Fran worked for many years in the English department at Exeter College

Fran Jenkin – the Fran was short for ‘Franscilla’, something almost nobody knew, and which we’d laugh at sometimes - was an astonishing person. She died on Saturday, having survived for the last few months the way she had lived, by force of will. I’d known her since about 1975, when she came to Exeter to do an M.Ed, and wound up teaching at Exeter College, initially part-time, and soon full-time, taking on every petty establishment across which she came, always with good humour, and with a sense of what was politically right. It is easy to make fun of political correctness: the phrase has become almost a term of abuse. But Fran embodied it. She devoted almost every hour of her life to helping people – refugees, asylum-seekers, the overlooked and uncared-for – gain respect, gain recognition. All this was done with a generosity and ferocity of will which was not at odds, as it might have been, with her sunny disposition. She didn’t care what people thought of her at all. She had no need to. They knew she was as honest as the day, and they knew that, when it came to moral honesty, she was an inspiration.

She wasn’t a plaster saint. She liked to take risks – in-

cluding marrying, in Cuba, one Christmas Day, a man much younger than her, and whom she spent the next few years battling to get to Exeter. That the marriage didn’t make it was beside the point. She wanted to try to find out if it could be made. She had that toughness.

Her teaching was as un-touchable as it was unusual. Students in her groups were allowed to paint the rooms whatever colour they wanted. She had them writing and painting, with music playing, in Literature lessons.

It looked like a hippy experiment. It wasn’t: it was a terrific piece of teaching because she held it together. If she was going to experiment, it was no holds barred. Her students – not for nothing was she the student liaison officer, campaigning tirelessly for their rights – worked with her, not against her. And so they succeeded. I watched her teach several times, and any initial worries that it was a high-wire act were soon dispelled. She never ran a session unless she knew why she was running it. She was a great teacher-trainer herself.

[Courtesy Bill Greenwell]

Detention of children in asylum seeker families

During the election many of us campaigned for the detention of children in immigration centres to cease. Both the parties of the Coalition promised that they would ensure that this happened. Nick Clegg condemned it as ‘state-sponsored cruelty’ and a ‘moral outrage’, accusing the Labour government of covering up the number held. David Cameron said ‘we will end the incarceration of children for immigration purposes once and for all’.

However, on 8th September the immigration minister, Damian Green (pictured) seemed to back off from this policy. Answering a question in Parliament about the future of Yarl’s Wood, he said, ‘At the moment we are looking at alternatives to detention for children ... it is our intention to minimise the detention of children in the future as a whole and, therefore, that aspect of Yarl’s Wood would disappear, but clearly not its use for adult women’.

The Coalition has stated that its intention to end the detention of children for immigration purposes still stands, and it is piloting a number of alternatives (one of which is speedier deportation).



Trustee report

Trustees met on 14th July and 1st September.

Fran

The meeting on 1st September was obviously very taken up with the death of Fran. The whole of RSG would feel the loss of her leadership, and especially the women’s group. Annette and Clare Henry were co-

operating and the trustees were very grateful to them for their efforts.

Funding

Funding difficulties continued and trustees considered possible outcomes. We had enough funding for the current financial year but there were not enough committed funds to last through the next. If we could not secure enough funding to continue on

our present basis we would have to decide whether to take an early decision to slim down our operation or continue as at present until our funding ran out (currently somewhere in the summer of 2011). We would need to consult on this and the trustees discussed ways of canvassing the opinion of service users in particular. In the mean time fundraising continued, and trustees were told of possible help from University volunteers

in raising our profile locally and possible improvements in our local fundraising.

Future role of RSG

If we were able to continue we might have to revise or extend our role. Already the nature of our client population was changing; and in addition we were receiving requests for help from non-refugee migrants, a situation thought likely to continue. This would require that we acquire new skills.

News roundup for July and August

Supreme Court rules in favour of gay asylum seekers

The British Supreme Court has ruled unanimously in favour of two gay men who faced persecution in their home countries of Iran and Cameroon. Before today's judgment, the men had been refused asylum and told they should behave discreetly and hide their sexuality.

The Cameroon asylum seeker said he had been attacked by a mob after he'd been seen kissing his partner. The Iranian, now aged 31, was attacked and expelled from school when it was discovered that he was gay. He could face public flogging or execution in Iran. In Cameroon, a gay man could face six months to five years in jail.

The cases of these unnamed men will be reheard, and the court will now pass on detailed guidance to the lower courts about how such cases should be treated in the future.

The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had accused the UK of turning international convention 'on its head'. The UK's Home Secretary, Theresa May, said after the judgment: 'We have already promised to stop the removal of asylum seekers who have had to leave particular countries because their sexual orientation or gender identification puts them at proven risk of imprisonment, torture or execution'.

May's department, the Home Office, had contested the case under the previous Labour government, and said it had taken the men's sexuality into account.

The ruling has been welcomed by gay rights lobby group Stonewall, which published a report in May this year. No going back: Lesbian and gay people and the asylum system (2010), finding almost systemic homophobia in the British system.

New report into detained children

Earlier this month the charity Medical Jus-



tice reported on research involving 141 cases of children held in immigration detention centres. More than half (74) were said to have suffered psychological harm (with

symptoms including bedwetting, loss of bowel control, heightened anxiety and refusal to eat). There were three suicide attempts and 92 physical health problems which could be related to detention. 48 of the children had witnessed violence, mostly during attempts to remove them from the UK, 13 being physically harmed; 38 were separated from their parents, sometimes as a result of parents having expressed concern about the way the children were treated.

Locals likely to be preferred over migrants for social housing

Charities have expressed concern over the government's decision to give councils more freedom in allocating social housing. They fear that this will result in migrant families losing out.

Criticism of immigration dawn raids

Immigration Inspector John Vine (below)



reported that dawn raids on asylum families facing deportation have become 'the norm', with no evidence that the authorities actually consider whether they are necessary. He said that his investigation of 42 deportation cases found that the majority of arrests of families by UKBA were carried out between 6.30am and 6.40am.

He was sharply critical of this practice and rejected explanations from immigration staff that this is the 'optimum time' to find a family together before children go to school and to minimise any community reaction.

'Although we found awareness that the time of the arrest could be tailored to each family's circumstances, there was no evidence that this was happening in practice,' the report said. It also revealed that many families are given less than 45 minutes to pack all their belongings, including clothes, medication and children's toys. Alternative methods were used in Glasgow but had not been adopted in England and Wales.

Demand that France repay debt to Haiti

President Sarkozy has been urged to repay the compensation of 90m gold francs Haiti was forced, under threat of military invasion, to pay to France after its independence 200 years ago. This is estimated to amount

Refugee legal charity closes

A major charity providing legal advice to immigrants and asylum seekers has been forced to close by changes in the Government's legal aid procedures.

Refugee and Migrant Justice had 13 branches and employed over 300 staff. It dealt with the most difficult and complex cases involving, for example, torture, people trafficking and unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. A new scheme for paying legal advice costs has put enormous strain on agencies providing such help, with dozens of advice centres being enabled to survive only by help from charities such as the London Legal Support Trust. However RMJ's overdue payments were so large that they could not survive, and the Ministry of Justice refused to help. Ken Clarke, the Justice Minister, said that the government could not 'suddenly start diverting huge sums out of the legal aid budget to bail out a voluntary body that got itself into a financial mess'.

The chief executive of RMJ, Caroline Slocock, explained that its difficulties arose because it took on complex cases and stuck with them. RMJ had been told that if it opened and closed more cases more quickly it might survive.

Refugee Action Plymouth

Refugee Action are to close their Plymouth office. They provide services for asylum seekers, refugees and other agencies, including working with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS). They also offer training to agencies working with asylum seekers and refugees and run a Friends of Refugee Action project for Cornwall and Devon.

Their closure will put more pressure on other Devon agencies, including Refugees First, the Devon and Cornwall Refugee Support Council and, of course, RSG.

to £14bn in modern money. Meanwhile only 10% of the cash aid promised for rebuilding after the earthquake has been paid (none of it by France).

Legal aid to be slashed again

Meanwhile the Ministry of Justice have proposed to stop all funding for asylum appeals. Ken Clarke has said that he will discontinue payments to lawyers who make repeated challenges to rejections of asylum claims or last-minute challenges to deportation, which he considers to be abuses. 10% of the £900m civil legal aid budget was spent on asylum and immigration cases last year. Ministers believe this measure will restore the public's trust in the immigration and asylum systems.

What we owe to the rest of the world

Much of the discussion about international aid is based on the assumption that people in poor countries need to change their ways, and it is our charitable duty to help them. There is another way of looking at it, involving not charity but repairing the damage we have caused.

Discussion of aid often focuses on 'development'. In these terms we and other rich nations are seen as 'developed', others as 'undeveloped'. The underlying assumption is, of course, that we are further on than they are in some direction which it is desirable to pursue. We can see ourselves in the position of a person who, seeing someone drowning, throws a lifebelt. The drowning person is, almost by definition, unable to help himself. The rescuer receives praise in proportion to the extent to which he risks his own safety.

There is another way of seeing it. This would suggest a scenario where the person on the bank had first broken up and sold off the bridge and then charged a toll for people to use the ford; then opened the floodgates upstream and taken the lifebelts home for his children to play with.

In other words, if 'third world' countries are poor, we did it to them, and continue to do so. In previous centuries European states (and later the US) used military force to occupy other countries so that their merchants could make money and their manufacturers could get cheap imported raw materials (and slave labour, in earlier times). This proved to be expensive and also came to be seen as morally unacceptable. Nowadays we still make money and we still get cheap imported materials: but we don't usually invade and occupy third world countries (and when we do the generally catastrophic results reinforce the need to find other ways). In this way we achieve the moral high ground and save the trouble of occupying other countries, which tends to be expensive both in money and in blood.

This new process is often called 'neocolonialism'. This sounds technical, but there is nothing subtle about it in practice.

How does it work?

'Development' was invented just after the Second World War, when it be-

came obvious that communism (or at least socialism) was going to be seriously attractive to colonised societies, which would make them amenable to the influence of the USSR. Development was supposed (in the words of President Truman, who invented it) to 'make the benefits of our scientific advance with industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of the underdeveloped areas'. In other words: don't listen to the Russians; we will make you rich.

Now, science, and associated industrial progress, had already become dominant in the 'first world' (the 'second' was the Communist Bloc; hence 'third' for the rest) economies. The first to follow this route was Britain. Because this enabled us to produce goods more cheaply, we relied on (and where possible enforced on others) free trade, since this would maximise the amount we could sell.

Other nations then followed us. But because they did not want their infant industries overwhelmed by cheap British exports they all put steep taxes on imports, starting with the USA in the 1860s. Other advanced states followed, including France, Germany and Japan. Under the shelter of these taxes their industries developed and in many cases came to be more efficient than the older British enterprises. This forced Britain too to adopt 'fair trade' (in other words, import taxes) after 1932, to protect herself from competing imports.

So if, now, we intended 'developing' countries to follow our own route to wealth, we would encourage them to protect their new industries until they were operating efficiently enough to face foreign competition.

Actually, we do exactly the opposite: the 'first world' created the World Trade Organisation, which aims at removing as far as possible all barriers to trade. The theory is that if everything is traded freely goods will be produced only where the process is

most efficient. Grow bananas in hot countries, not in expensive greenhouses in cold countries.

Unfortunately for 'developing' nations, this does not work. The reason is that new industries do not spring to life as effective competitors to the existing system. So in conditions of strict free trade 'developing' countries will not be able to sell their manufactures abroad. In fact, they won't be able to sell them at home either, since cheap imports from industrially advanced nations will crowd them out.

The result is a situation where poor countries mostly sell things they can produce at home which are needed by rich countries (bananas, again: also oil, coal, metal ores, other agricultural products, cheap textiles produced by sweated labour, and so on). This is fine, except that the price they get is largely controlled by the rich world, which ensures that it stays low but also fluctuates violently (as rich world institutions speculate on the price).

Not content with this huge advantage, the rich world also cheats. The complement to an import tax is an export subsidy. Rich nations subsidise their producers so that they can sell abroad at even lower prices: thus, American rice farmers receive a subsidy (\$1.1bn in 2004, or 14%); which has effectively ruined Haiti's farmers, since Haiti has not been permitted to impose a corresponding import tax. The total of US farm subsidies in 2005 was \$8bn. The EU has similar subsidies.

Other ways of cheating include exporting toxic waste and industrial fishing in other people's waters (the original causes of Somali piracy), restricting intellectual rights (e.g. to chemicals derived from plants by indigenous peoples), and, of course, dumping carbon, which bids fair to be the biggest exploitation yet.

All this (and there is much more) amounts to appalling injustice. People are poor because we make them so. They are angry. They are right. [JC]