

Dear Sir/madam,

I feel sure that most right minded people will agree that when the Deputy Chair of the Tory party said asylum seekers should 'F*** off back to France' it represented a new low in British politics. I keep asking myself what is it that stops our government from treating asylum seekers as human beings, ones deserving of our compassion, help and support? Rather than constantly pushing the right wing narrative that they are all freeloaders who have wilfully chosen to come to the UK?

When I was volunteering with asylum seekers at the Dilkhusa Hotel in Ilfracombe earlier this year, I met people who had made the most difficult decision of their lives to leave their home, family, friends and pets, to make, in most cases, a precarious and dangerous journey to the UK. The government's narrative constantly portrays them as a liability to our country, rather than considering them as potential assets with skills and capabilities that might help our struggling economy.

During my time as a volunteer, I met people who, as well as having specific needs and issues, also had an amazing range of skills and capabilities, the kind our country is crying out for. I met people who had made a journey they knew would be difficult and dangerous and one where they could easily face the risk of being trafficked or ending up a victim of modern day slavery. When they told me why they felt they had to leave, they more often than not said it felt less dangerous to make the journey than staying where they were. Continuing to live in a place where they faced the daily threat of persecution and often death. Many of the people I met had seen friends and family being killed, disabled or imprisoned and been encouraged by friends and family members to flee and save themselves.

I met people who had been asked to bomb army bases and had said no and in doing so put their own lives and that of their families in grave danger. I met others who were being persecuted or faced death for being a member of the wrong religious group. Yet others held the 'wrong' beliefs about things like the role of women and young girls in their society or had the desire to strive towards democracy rather than simply accept theocracy. I didn't meet anyone who had made the journey in a wilful manner or in order to secure 'welfare benefits' in the UK. What I did hear people say was how the UK was seen as a beacon of light in a dangerous world and a place where you could be safe and have the chance for a better life.

The term asylum seeker or refugee masks the reality that these fellow human beings had rich lives with jobs and careers before political changes made it impossible for them to stay where they were.

The more I read and listen to what our politicians have to say, it feels to me that asylum seekers are being used as a means of directing our attention away from political failures in other areas like; climate change, housing and the NHS.

Many people ask me, why did I become involved with the residents of the hotel? My response pretty much follows the words of the great actress Ruth Gordon in one of my favourite films 'Harold and Maud'. When asked why she was good with people, she replied 'Well they are my species'. I feel proud to say asylum seekers are as much my species as is anyone who has taken the time to read this letter.

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