

The lack of collective will in Europe regarding refugees is indefensible

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As the refugee crisis intensifies and pressure mounts for a pan-Europe strategy, [Melanie Henwood](#) examines the confused debate and argues that Britain must not stand by as a mere spectator to an unfolding tragedy.



The mass movement of people attempting to cross Europe in search of a safe haven and a better life is believed to be the largest such migration since the Second World War. Recent weeks and months have seen the reporting of ever more desperate stories of people on the move, culminating with nightly reports of people attempting to flee ‘the jungle’ camp near Calais and get aboard vehicles entering the channel tunnel; the discovery in [Austria of 71 decomposing bodies](#) of people hidden in a container truck; of people walking across Greece into Macedonia; of the large numbers [encamped on the island of Lesbos](#) having made the shortest crossing possible from Turkey to Greece; of the erection of a [100 miles razor wire fence](#) along the borders between Hungary, Serbia and Romania, and hundreds of people being corralled outside the railway station in Budapest; and of thousands who have drowned in the Mediterranean and Aegean seas, and particularly the [publicity surrounding a photo](#) of the tiny body of a three year old boy washed up on the beach near Bodrum.

Welcome to the New World Order. The response of most countries directly affected is to contain or deter migrants – stop them getting into countries or taking advantage of the supposed freedom of movement through the Schengen area. The lack of humanity of some of the reaction is astonishing – stories abound of coastguards allegedly using water cannon to sink flimsy, overloaded inflatables, of brutality from border guards, and of widespread indifference or hostility from destination countries.

In the UK the conflation of alarm and moral panic over [net migration figures recently hitting 330,000](#), and the crisis in numbers of would-be asylum seekers and refugees crossing Europe, is unhelpful and damaging. They are two completely separate issues, and the lack of clarity – or apparent understanding – of the distinction has done nothing to inform debate or support developing constructive ways forward. With a new [Immigration Bill](#) expected to be introduced to Parliament in the autumn, we can expect more febrile hyperbole and the stoking of knee-jerk xenophobia.

It is impossible to watch the news reports of people scrambling ashore, trying to get through fences unscathed, or plodding mile after mile in the heat and dust, carrying the few things they own and trying to keep their children alive and safe without feeling their desperation. And yet, it seems much of the political response – and that of the wider population – is not one of compassion or empathy, but of fear and loathing.

Nigel Farage’s talk of opening the door “to an exodus of biblical proportions” was predictable but also breathtakingly irresponsible and callous. Speaking on Radio 4’s [Today programme](#) on September 1st he went on to argue that people had “lost sight” of the distinction between ‘genuine refugees’ and economic migrants seeking a better life. Perhaps that is because it is not a black and white distinction where categories can be easily separated.

Emergency [talks are to be held in the EU](#) on 14 September to address the situation, and many of those participating would do well to reflect on the history of Europe and the plight of people desperate to escape Nazi persecution. More than 70 years ago some individuals, communities and nations made extraordinary efforts to help those refugees, including the children who fled in the notorious kinder transport. Their prospects today would be far less hopeful; how many of them would make it now?

The current crisis is complicated; migration is happening on a wide front as people try to leave Syria, Libya, Afghanistan, Iraq and other war-ravaged nations, but the importance of developing a coherent response across Europe is vital. Germany alone has opened its doors unconditionally, but cannot be expected to take sole responsibility and its stance is creating further difficulty for neighbouring countries as people try to push on to the promised land.

The Prime Minister, David Cameron, has said that accepting more people into the country 'is not the answer', but rather efforts need to be focused on [bringing 'peace and stability'](#) to the areas people are fleeing. This is nonsense; both elements are vital – bringing peace is a long term goal (with no clarity on how it would be achieved), and one that offers nothing to those in need of immediate assistance and asylum.

Labour leadership contender and shadow home secretary Yvette Cooper has stepped into the debate and [suggested a quota system](#) might be adopted across the UK with every city, borough or council accepting 10 families, which would generate 10,000 places of refuge. It's a thought and certainly one that offers more than either the pointless handwringing or dismissive 'not our problem', 'man the barricades' mentality that has characterised much recent discourse. The implications for those councils could be profound; this is not just about offering space, but about meeting the care, health and support needs of traumatised people, including many young children, who have experienced and witnessed unimaginable terror and distress.

The EU summit *must* come up with a workable and humane solution that can be implemented quickly to relieve the immediate pressures on borders and to ensure there is a plan to cope with the refugee crisis. The lack of collective will to develop a coherent strategy sooner is indefensible; this is the greatest humanitarian challenge of our times and so far as a nation we are failing abysmally and shamefully, apparently standing on the sidelines as spectators to an unfolding tragedy.

The flight of large numbers of people from their homes and countries and their arrival in Europe has opened up questions about the free movement of populations through the EU and about immigration, but this is a distraction from the much bigger question about collective responsibility and human compassion. We can be proud that in WW2 Britain played a vital role in welcoming refugees and supporting people fleeing persecution and death; we have a moral and ethical duty to do so once more.

About the Author

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