

# Churches' Refugee Network

An informal network of



## Churches' Refugee Network A Scottish Perspective

The Churches' Refugee Network, part of Churches Together in Britain and Ireland, arranges seminars and meetings to focus the work of the Churches with relation to asylum policy and supporting refugees.

Kevin Franz, former General Secretary of Action of Churches Together in Scotland and now with Quaker Peace and Social Witness, spoke at a meeting at Westminster Abbey on 3 October 2007 about the situation regarding refugee, asylum, migration and cohesion issues in Scotland.

### Fresh perspectives

The Scottish dimension to this area of public life is interestingly different, a difference which reveals both the character of the devolution settlement and of the different experiential base in Scotland. . . John Snow's recent television programme on immigration revealed many of the difficult questions and challenges faced by the Churches across Britain. CRN model of ecumenism is not confined by the formal status of the ecumenical instruments so is perhaps freer to be more flexible.

### Family Experience

Kevin spoke about how his father was a forced migrant – a former Prisoner of War. He said that there was never any sense that he was not welcome in the UK: it is possible to welcome people from an enemy state. His story of loss, of leaving a familiar place because of a policy of ethnic cleansing is shared by many people. Lots of us have stories in our family that shape our ideas and views.

### Scotland

A Scottish perspective is different to the view from London, or elsewhere in the UK. For example, popular culture: an Ian Rankin 'Rebus' crime novel, has a story set around the death of an illegal immigrant and a detention centre.<sup>1</sup> The views expressed reflect what it means to be Scottish.

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<sup>1</sup> Fleshmarket Close, Ian Rankin (Orion: 2004) . Synopsis:  
<http://www.ianrankin.net/pages/books/index.asp?PageID=35>

On 8 October 2007 a day long Holyrood Conference consultation will take place in Glasgow, bringing together activists, MSPs and others.<sup>2</sup> Some of the key debates in Scotland include:

- Government Policy. Asylum questions are at the heart of the devolution settlement. The SNP Government may seek greater freedom for Scotland on this, which remains a London-based issue. In July 2006 there were 450,000 legacy cases in the UK, of which just 4,000 were in Scotland. The Directorate in London has 1,000 staff. There is clearly friction between the Scottish and London ways of doing things.
- Scotland's Experience. How have asylum seekers fitted in? Only Glasgow accepts dispersed asylum seekers. In North Lanarkshire, 80 Congolese people are now living and being welcomed in community. Scotland as a whole is just beginning to move beyond a Glasgow-only experience.
- The role of the Independent Asylum Commission.

## Challenges and Responses

The Scottish Government website provides information about dispersal policy and the numbers of refugees settling in Scotland. Scotland has seen much emigration, so any immigration is seen as 'large', though on a UK scale is fairly modest. There might be around 10,000 asylum seekers and refugees living mainly in Glasgow.<sup>3</sup>

One main response has been from the Scottish Refugee Integration Forum.<sup>4</sup> In 2003 they looked at three areas: access to services, translation and breaking down barriers. In 2004-05 they also looked at housing, justice, employment, health and social care, and children.<sup>5</sup>

The SNP have worked on a new approach. Labour's message was 'One Scotland, Many Cultures', though Scotland is barely a multi-faith society. Jack McConnell was keen to attract fresh talent and encourage migration from the EU accession states. This migration should be managed, as Scotland is a small country.

The new SNP Government have focused on more specific policy ideas. In September 2007 the Minister Fiona Hyslop spoke about education prospects for children in families of asylum seekers.<sup>6</sup> If they are here for three years then they get the same rights as others with regard to access to education. There are also nursery places for asylum seekers for three and four year olds, at least in Glasgow.

Dungavel detention centre is a sore in the Scots view of the issue – and one over which they feel they have no control: it is a canker. The SNP are trying to work with the Home Office.<sup>7</sup> Increasing the political acceptance of the rights of children is quite a shift – it has been a way in to discuss the issues seriously. There are now moves to look at the rights to work and other issues.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://conferences.holyrood.com/> - Seeking Asylum: A Scottish Perspective, Glasgow Royal Concert Hall, 8 October 2007.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/Refugees-asylum>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Equality/Refugees-asylum/integration>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2005/04/04142815/28180>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/08/03082811>

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/News/Releases/2007/08/03082811>

This way of working with the Home Office may be successful. It would be interesting to know whether the situation is similar in Wales.

## **Political Context**

Will Storrar gave the 2007 SCPO lecture on the political context of Scotland.<sup>8</sup> He said that the cultural question of immigration is the most important to Scotland. There is a demographic problem where the population of Scotland is static, at just above 5m. If Scotland wants to be economically upbeat, it needs enough people, and therefore it needs to grow.

Alan Greenspan predicts that the US needs 300,000-400,000 skilled workers per year to keep the economy growing. Scotland's immigration from Poland numbers according to some estimates around 30,000-40,000. They are skilled, but are generally short-term.

This concentration on economic benefit may have the unintended consequence of fuelling a right-wing view of migration, and does not take into full consideration the ways in which people can enrich society in other ways.

## **Scottish Identity**

Scotland is developing a new identity which is more at ease with itself. Ken Loach's 'Ae Fond Kiss...'<sup>9</sup> is an example.

- Questions remain: What is a sense of citizenship?
- To participate in civil society is an unqualified good – but when do migrants become citizens?
- Are there any comparisons with Turkish immigration and lack of integration in Germany in the 1950s-70s?
- When does a sense of belonging develop?
- How do people participate appropriately?

## **Role of the Churches**

The Churches play an important role. They are reservoirs and builders of social capital. They create networks and belonging. They are a bandage for broken lives.

Scottish Churches reflect the fact that r .compared to other parts of Britain there are few Black Majority Churches. Most non-white people are non-Christians or of other faiths.

Scots need to participate in the wider debate. The Churches Commission on Racial Justice Migration and Asylum Principles documents need to be taken up.

The Scottish Churches Racial Justice Officer has a key role to play.<sup>10</sup> As a society, Scotland still has some way to go on the ways in which the distinct experiences of migration, refuge, and asylum interact in Scotland.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.actsparl.org/update3.htm> - William Storrar, The SCPO Annual Lecture, 29 March 2007 at the Netherbrow, Edinburgh: A Dazzling Mixture: Scotland on the 300<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Union.

<sup>9</sup> Ae Fond Kiss (2004) Ken Loach / Bianca Film. Review at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A3009098>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.acts-scotland.org/racialjustice/index.shtml>

## **Discussion from members of the meeting.**

How does the Churches' Refugee Network help others, or how can it be more effective? Does it need to be capable at being heard at a national as well as a UK level?

When bringing the Churches together in London on refugee issues it has been important to respond regionally. London has 7m people, and 140 churches are linked with the London Network. A Bishop is looking at the issue. The Churches need to respond to initiatives, such as one recently undertaken by the Mayor. These ideas need to be shared with Church leaders.

The distribution of CCRJ documents on Asylum and Migration have not been followed through adequately. More resources are needed. It is important to differentiate between asylum and migration issues.

How can the churches change the political discourse? There is an increasing discussion about the role of citizenship. Some Churches are involved in a Home Office consultation on ministers from overseas. What does it mean to be a citizen? Is there a role for religious communities – how do we imagine and live out these views?

What can we do? Is the informal space of this network helpful? Can it do more? It is not just about Churches Together groups, but about local congregations and community groups.

It is good to be in touch with academics, exploring how faith relates to the world. It is good to have some input from the Church of England.

There are some settled Scottish communities, such as the Italian-Scots (around 20,000-30,000) and the Pakistani community. Scotland has dealt with these issues differently to the rest of the UK. Now many Presbyterian Churches are closing and there are many new places of worship opening, such as Buddhist temples, Muslim prayer rooms etc. However, these faiths have been around for many years. There are lots of undocumented migrants – perhaps more per capita than anywhere else in the UK. Lots of people are working on the black market. In city centres you can see people working illegally, and being exploited. The Jesuit Refugee Service is meant to be a national body, though much of its information is limited to England and Wales.

The SNP is making a visible difference – it is heartening in some ways, but it might stir up an anti-immigration backlash.

The Iona Community network is important. There is general outcry at dawn raids, especially in the papers. At a local level there are positive sounds being made. Birmingham Churches' Together RESTORE project have been housed three times on Iona. It can be an influential place.

There needs to be thought about whether CRN gets into a debate about community cohesion, integration and migration, or whether it remains focused on refugees and asylum seekers. Are these wider issues too broad for this forum? Do we need to seek greater clarity about what the group is for?

The SCRJ and CCRJ should be working effectively together, though it is recognised that there are some challenges that need to be addressed.

The Independent Asylum Commission visited Glasgow, and the message they received was that things do look different in the devolved administrations. Issues are much more focused. 80% of dispersals in Glasgow are family groups. Dawn raids are an issue talked about in wider society. This is seen as an 'English' policy foisted on Scottish communities, and Scottish families.

The IAC was refused entry into Dungavel – which is disturbing. Issues are being raised in Scotland which are not talked about in England. Topics which are non-controversial in Scotland are dynamite in England.

Changes to the BIA and Home Office reorganisation, and NAM are changing the structures. Should asylum become a devolved issue? There is a political debate on new methods of processing claims and getting rid of centralisation.

The asylum versus migration debate reminds us that as a church organisation our definition of 'refugee' is wider than most. Our terms of reference however are limited by resources. Religious orders outside the church structures – e.g. Companions of Jesus, Loretta Sisters, Spirituals in Glasgow and Manchester, the John of God brothers in Euston and others – are all contributing in their own ways. How is it all co-ordinated? There needs to be proper co-ordination and organisation.

The Quakers have offices at the UN in New York and Geneva. In talking about small arms David Atwood said that their presence is like a gnat on a concrete wall – but that their job is to find a crack. Nothing is monolithic. We need to encourage imagination and boldness. We need to support ideas of shelter and help, such as what the Iona Community does. The launch of Asylum Voices was very important.

Ecumenical bodies exist to relate people to one another. A key focus should not be about creating new structures, but about reanimating structures that are already there. CRN is a good model and should be bold in its ecumenical engagement.

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