

Compassion for Seekers of Refuge

Sir Peter Bottomley MP

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The channel drownings were dreadful, predicted and avoidable.

Those responsible are the irresponsible organisers and their agents involved in the attempted crossings. We prosecuted those whose actions previously led to deaths in containers on lorries.

There are many reasons to admire Philippa Bower, active in Angmering on Sea, known for dedicated political and public service, professionally rated in her health services and an enthusiastic artist.

She encouraged me to hear a brilliant talk and to watch a film on her kinsman Hubert Butler, the Irish essayist described as an abiding humanist whose work evinced unsurpassed moral and spiritual integrity. He worked with cousins of mine and used the Kilkenny Archaeological Society for Catholic-Protestant reconciliation.

In 1938, disgusted at antisemitic comments, he determined that Jewish refugees should come to Ireland and went to Vienna to save lives, working with Irish and American Quakers to secure exit visas.

Philippa wrote to me this week about how an informative speech by Lord Kerr on people crossing the Channel had changed her mind from annoyed to sympathetic. She quoted him: ' . . .the principal reason why clandestine numbers are up is that official resettlement routes are shut. . . . Our schemes, in practice, no longer exist.' She asks that official routes be open.

Leslie Griffiths, Lord Griffiths of Burryport, the warm inspiring Methodist with whom I cooperate on the desperate plight of Haiti, was at the same time presenting a report on the subject to the Council of Europe (not the EU). This year is the 70th anniversary of the 1951 Refugee Convention.

The Observer newspaper article on the scale and causes of the flows of people was sobering to read. The sane thought might be how impossible the problem is. One cannot take everyone from every war-torn country; global warming will make things worse, for an over-populated world.

Philippa declares we must have proper ways of processing asylum claims outside this country, close to where people are living to prevent these desperate journeys. I am proud to represent her.

Peace, stability, opportunities for prosperity, ability to turn out unpopular government, protection from arbitrary or unfair prosecution: these are some of the forces that cause families and predominantly energetic young men to risk life and to put themselves in debt to people smugglers.

Instability in Libya, civil war in too many countries, failures of governance leading to economies that fail: causes for migration, sometimes mass migration, are known. For all the faults in countries like the United States and the United Kingdom, we have few trying to flee; there are many who wish to come to us.

On Tuesday I joined a panel for the Institute for Government considering what the job of an MP is really about and what the public expects of their MPs. Their recording is available. Looking at those I most admired, I suggest adding courage and persistence to care and compassion. Your representative should want to conserve what is good and to change what is not. How to make possible for all what is valued by the few; how to help the many to escape unnecessary trials and tribulations.

There are issues and questions to which I think I know the correct ways forward. Often, I seek guidance and sound views from a teacher or minister of religion. Most insights come from the experiences and opinions expressed by constituents. I am grateful to all; I listen to all and I know I disappoint some.

See people in public service like people seeking refuge: human, neither starlike nor consistently villainous?