

## Question Time



**Panel:** Lisa Nandy, Children’s Society  
Jeremy Corbyn MP

Almamy Taal, exiled journalist

Helen Bamber, Medical Foundation / Helen Bamber Foundation

Zrinka Bral, Executive Director of Migrant and Refugee Communities Forum in London and Commissioner of the Independent Asylum Commission

### **Q: What are the underlying policy reasons for denying people the right to work?**

ZB: Fears that this will encourage people to come to this country. It is linked with all the other ways of reducing “pull factors”. The government fears what people will say, and that the UK won’t look good. It forms part of the restriction of economic and social rights that refugees face.

HB: We need to find a way to ask, ‘Why do you think these destitute, tortured people are prepared to put up with that degree of destitution?’ The UK has produced a system of destitution – why would people be prepared to live like that?

AT: Imagine locking your brothers and sisters in a house, they want to work, but you tell them. ‘You don’t have the right to work’ and you pay everything for them. This does not make sense! People can contribute to society and the economic development of the UK, but taxpayers are ending up paying for this. When refugees are detained, the bill twice as high.

JC: The Daily Mail exerts a malevolent influence on British policy making. They believe there are 2 million people out there who vote according to their xenophobic and racist tendencies when in truth there are only a few like this and there are decent people. In 1973, there was an influx of Chilean people who sought and received asylum. They worked and had housing and made a great contribution to society. But now it is damaging for people with skills to be left to beg. The idea of “pull factors” associated with benefits is strange; there is no evidence for it and no reason behind it.

### **Q: What are the best ways to counter public attitudes? How do we influence those who are apathetic?**

AT: It is important to consider whether it is positive to always be reactive. Personally, I would prefer to be proactive, to interact with people, reply honestly to questions, go to schools and universities etc.

ZB: People just don’t know enough. Education and information is key. Bare facts are not enough, however. People’s stories are the way forward. It is also important to change our language: for example, instead of ‘asylum’ use a word

which people understand like ‘sanctuary’ because people can’t relate to the word ‘asylum’.

Audience: - One idea would be to put up information posters in toilets, because there is a captive audience. Perhaps give an asylum seeker’s story that people can read.

- We need to de-politicize the message and make it all about people and their experiences, not about policy.

HB: When the message does reach the public, it can very often change opinion. For example, Juliet Stevenson put on a very simple play at the Young Vic, and it was a good opportunity to reach the “unconverted”. The play used the words of women and children in Yarl’s Wood and made the message accessible. It is important to find the right material and the audience. Getting someone who is known as an actor is also useful.

<http://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/2008/03/07/motherland-is-a-must/>  
(blog comment about Motherland, not from HB)

ZB: Actors for Human Rights <http://www.iceandfire.co.uk/afhr/index.html> put on plays for free for whoever asks for them. They have a play called ‘Asylum Monologues’ – contact Christine Bacon.

Audience: Education and talking to children is very important. Speaking about the plight of children who will be deported brings the issue to the fore.

JC: People connect with individual stories. Everyone supports children / families when they might be removed. One example is the public support generated when a Watford footballer was threatened with deportation:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/jan/15/immigration.football> Also, in 1983 when the Home Office tried to remove a child from his school, hundreds of children turned up to a meeting with the Immigration Minister and they won the case. See “Schools Against Deportations” for other examples:

<http://www.schoolsagainstdeportations.org/>

Audience: The play “Bogus Woman” was put on in Oxford: it’s a one-person play and was put on in the street. It’s really effective and cheap. See the Facebook group at <http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=13722542098>. Also, going in to schools as part of citizenship classes with this message is possible and raises awareness.

**Q: Should asylum be granted to those with criminal records from their country of origin?**

ZB: Yes. A good example is Nelson Mandela who had a criminal record in his country of origin but who was not a criminal. Asylum is not about a personality competition, it’s about protection – about people having value outside their country of origin.

Audience: But not everyone is Nelson Mandela – does this not give a message that we are defending criminals, and thus defeating the cause of asylum seekers?

AT: What does criminal actually mean? For example, we wouldn't want to give asylum to perpetrators of genocide.

JC: I have supported asylum applications from people with whom I didn't agree. If they qualify for status under the terms of the 1951 UN Convention then they should be granted asylum. If we do not hold to this, we are presupposing a trust in the criminal justice system of the country of origin. Accusations are easy to make but hard to prove. We should make an effort to support the International Criminal Courts.

**Audience: In trying to encourage a positive attitude towards asylum seekers it is great to think of refugees and asylum seekers who are involved in music – this will appeal to students. It is also useful to get a broad range of publications to put in an insert providing information and stories – for example the free London papers, or the Big Issue.**

**Q: When the Home Office claim people's 'torture' marks are self-inflicted, how can they be disproved?**

HB: It is not difficult to test wounds, and there are effective forensic methods. What is distressing is the constant querying of the medical evidence. They often do not produce a professional to challenge claims. It's also about the psychological issues – Home Office often tries to attribute these to other problems in asylum seekers' backgrounds. It is important not just to look at the wound, but also at the context, at their narrative.

AT: I have met women who have suffered torture and couldn't explain to Immigration because of cultural differences. I suffered torture myself, was electrocuted, hung upside-down, but the Home Office didn't believe me. It's difficult for people to understand and believe.

JC: It is very difficult for people to get medical help. Women especially have evidence that could turn their case, but they are often terrified of the stigma of rape among their family and community. There is a culture of disbelief in this country and we must understand that those who have suffered appalling psychological abuse can take a long time to open up and be able to talk about it.

HB: I have read letters from the Home Office where they agree that the person has suffered torture but still think that it is safe for them to return home.

**Q: What can be done about the opening and extension of detention centres?**

JC: The debate on this in Parliament is nasty and anti-immigrants. In order to get politicians to engage with this, I have asked if they are proud of the fact that they imprison children. Government rejected 42 days detention for the investigation of crimes but continue to allow unlimited detention of asylum seekers who are not accused of a crime. Emphasise that children are being held in bad conditions for lengthy periods of time.

LN: The Children's Society just launched a campaign on the detention of children. It is the noise that people and groups make that makes a difference, not just MPs. See Children's Society site for more details:

[http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats\\_happening/media\\_office/latest\\_news/7354\\_pr.html](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/whats_happening/media_office/latest_news/7354_pr.html)