



Asylum and Refugee Network - QARN

Language matters: challenging the language of asylum and migration

'The tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark.' James 3, 5

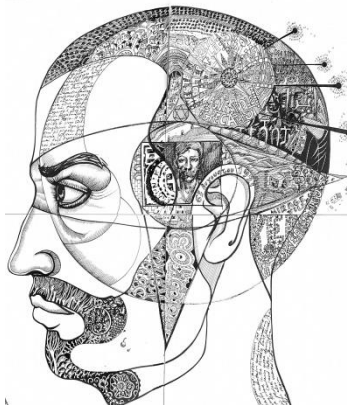
Why are Quakers concerned?

Quakers have always been careful in their use of language. The truth is of foundational importance: we follow the model of early Quakers who held by the biblical injunction that ye should be ye and nay, nay. Quakers were known for their plain speaking, for their refusal to differentiate when speaking to people of rank.

The language of asylum and migration is anything but straightforward, and often tends to obscure or mislead rather than clarify. Migration is complex, and distinctions between different 'types' of migrant are not clear-cut. Labels carry implicit judgements: the deserving 'refugee' as opposed to the undeserving 'economic migrant', for example. Organisations such as the UN increasingly refer to 'mixed migration'. Inequality in the language of migration has a long history: although we no longer speak of immigrants to the UK as 'aliens', we still refer to British people living abroad as 'ex-pats'.

From confusing to misleading

The words 'migrant' and 'refugee' are commonly treated as interchangeable by the British media. This is confusing; they do not mean the same thing. It is a small step from here to the deliberate use of language to mislead: the former Conservative Immigration Minister Brandon Lewis, cornered over the hunger strike at Yarl's Wood Immigration Detention Centre on BBC Question Time (February 2018), claimed that 'asylum seekers are not refugees', and described those seeking asylum as 'in this country illegally' rather than 'undocumented'. When politicians use language in this way it is legitimised.



Tabloids and mid-market newspapers frequently use the words 'asylum seeker' and 'illegal immigrant' interchangeably. It is not illegal to seek asylum, it is a right under international law. No human being can be 'illegal'; it is practically impossible to claim asylum in the UK unless you enter 'irregularly'.

'Deportation' and 'bail' are terms from the criminal justice system. Their use reinforces the popular belief that coming here and being refused sanctuary is a criminal offence. 'Enforced removal' might better describe what happens to refused (a more accurate description than 'failed') asylum seekers. We need to look at where words come from, and what this says about the asylum system.

Illustration by George Sfougaras

Bypassing reflective thought

In his essay on 'Politics and the English Language', George Orwell writes about 'language as an instrument for expressing and not concealing or preventing thought'. He is concerned about the use of what he calls 'glib phrases': 'Every such phrase anaesthetises a portion of one's brain.' The favourite Home Office phrase 'pull factor' carries the assumption that forced migrants are not 'pushed' from their countries by violence and persecution, but drawn towards ours by the lure of a better life. This has been used to justify policies including withdrawal of search and rescue operations in the Mediterranean and the refusal to accept refugees from Europe. Warsan Shire's words in her poem 'Home' are a good response to this: 'No-one leaves home unless home is the mouth of a shark.' Her language is direct and authentic.

The coupling of words in 'glib phrases' that serve to bypass critical thinking can be found everywhere in the language of the media. A study carried out by the Oxford Migration Observatory found 'illegal' to be the most frequent modifier of the word 'immigrant' in the British press between 2006-15. 'Fake' or 'bogus' is similarly attached to 'asylum seeker' (and, increasingly, to another marginalised group, homeless people).

Fearful narratives

Words like 'waves' and 'hordes', and David Cameron's infamous depiction of 'a swarm of people crossing the Mediterranean', play to our deepest fears of loss of control and invasion. Disturbingly, they echo British attitudes to Jewish refugees in the 1930s found in papers including the Daily Mail and the Daily Express. The Mail, December 27th 1938, quotes approvingly the words of a magistrate: 'The way stateless Jews from Germany are pouring in from every port of this country is becoming an outrage.' Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, warns we are in danger of forgetting the lessons of the two world wars, 'what happens when fear and anger are stoked by half-truths and outright lies'.

A UNHCR survey of European media published in 2016 found British tabloids 'campaigning aggressively against refugees and migrants' and concluded the media are 'actively constructing our understanding and perception'. The idea of people coming here from other countries being a 'threat to our way of life' and to 'British values' is found in populist far-right groups across Europe, such as Pegida (an acronym in German for Patriotic Europeans against the Islamisation of the West). Heather Grabbe, in her keynote speech at the QCEA/QPSW conference in December 2017, spoke about the psychological need for an enemy and how populism builds on this need. She described populism as 'not so much an ideology as a narrative in search of an enemy'. Such a narrative feeds straight into the insecurities of people living in a society of widening social inequality.

What kind of crisis?

The words 'migrant crisis' or 'refugee crisis' suggest that it is the migrants or refugees that are the problem. Global Justice Now challenges the term 'migrant crisis' in its April 2016 policy briefing: 'This is not a crisis caused by migrants. It is a crisis caused by war, poverty and inequality.' But it could also be seen as a crisis of response. Kenneth Roth of Human Rights Watch characterises it as a crisis of politics and values.

What can we do?

Challenge the misuse of language in your day-to-day conversations with family, friends and neighbours.

Write, email or tweet to local and national papers and other media which misuse language. Watch parliament and the press for misuse of language, and write in protest when this occurs. Follow social media and use your rights of response.

Watch for tendentious language in official letters and documents.

Help give refugees a voice. When we are confronted by another human being, the negative views fostered by politicians and the media begin to crumble.

Visit the QARN website for more ideas, or sign up to join our email group. QUAKER ASYLUM AND REFUGEE NETWORK (QARN) c/o Leicester Quaker Meeting House, 16 Queens Rd, Leicester LE2 1WP
website: qarn.org.uk contact: info@qarn.org.uk

Ask your Meeting to become a Meeting of Sanctuary. The Sanctuary Everywhere programme encourages Quakers to act in solidarity with refugees and migrants. Meetings are supported from Friends House with briefings, training, retreats, conference calls and an online discussion forum. The Sanctuary Everywhere Manifesto expresses the commitment of Britain Yearly Meeting to this work.

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