



HANSARD  
SOCIETY

## HeadsUp Forum

[www.headsup.org.uk](http://www.headsup.org.uk)

'Asylum-seekers: Are they getting a fair deal?' (January 26th - February 6th 2004)

A debate offering students a secure and structured space to discuss the UK asylum system and the Asylum & Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Bill.

Of all topical political issues, there is perhaps none so emotive as asylum. It has many complexities and often polarises opinion. Young people have also identified asylum as being one of the most important issues affecting their lives and those of their communities. However, when questioned about the issue in a previous HeadsUp forum, young people complained about a lack of opportunity to discuss the topic in a purposeful manner.

With its secure, anonymous and structured forum space The Hansard Society felt that the HeadsUp website was uniquely positioned to offer young people a platform for sharing their ideas, opinions and experiences. Having also identified a shortage in objective background information, designed for secondary students, HeadsUp was able to provide extensive facts and figures in the student-centred 'BackUp' section (which supports every forum).

The Asylum Forum ran from January 26<sup>th</sup> - February 6<sup>th</sup>. Ten schools from around the UK took part; for four of these it was their student's first foray into online debating. Over the duration, participating students were encouraged to tackle the following points of the asylum debate:

- The Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Bill
- The differences and relationships between terms such as asylum-seeker, refugee, immigrant etc.
- The factors motivating people to seek asylum
- Asylum in the UK from a global perspective
- The experiences of asylum-seekers in the UK
- The perceptions of asylum-seekers fostered by the public, media, Parliament and Government

What stood out most of all in this forum was the frequency at which the students logged-in to the forum to follow its progression. With many of the 55 students making at least one post a day over the course of the forum,

these visiting patterns inevitably led to a great deal of synchronous discussion between participants.

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**Asylum-seekers: Are they getting a fair deal?**

Key Findings

Where an issue has many dimensions, confusion often occurs. This is true of the public debate surrounding the UK asylum system. Often the loudest voices are those of the media; their influence is exacerbated by the role they play in providing information. Amongst the adult population this can result in polarised opinions that discourage open, objective discussion.

The effect the media and family has on young people's awareness of political issues has been well-documented. This was apparent during the HeadsUp debate on asylum. Many of the participants' contributions were marked by their inability to grasp that asylum was a multi-faceted issue.

### Ill-feeling

Ill-feeling toward those seeking asylum in the UK was palpable in some students' posts. Ranging from:

**MissVic...** I think asylum seekers should go back to there own contries and stop benefiting from my dads taxes!

to:

**GSXRTT...** i say chuck them back into there own country and let them suffer

When the students spoke about their perceptions of the 'typical' asylum-seeker, stereotypes pervaded. On the one hand, was the image of the destitute asylum-seeker:

**JamesBourne...** the average image is wearing scruffy clothes & being dirty

On the other, asylum-seekers were portrayed as living a comfortable life on the back of state-handouts:

**Goldilocks...** They come here, get given money, a home and some times a job. They even give them free driving lessons and it costs us a fortune.

Though differing in the detail, both profiles were negative in context.

### Self-sufficiency

A number of students also viewed the motivations that led people to seek asylum in a cynical light. For most of these students, the term 'asylum-seeker' was interchangeable with the pejorative 'benefit-scrounge':

**Roohi...** They use the system and do not respect any of the law... They get cars, have mobile phones and dont even have to work. On top of that they get other benifits...I think this is unjust!

There was concern that special treatment was being meted out to asylum-seekers at a directly detrimental cost to other pertinent problems facing UK society:

**littles...** the only thing i'm against is the fact that many people are coming here for no reason, when there are british peepz on the streets.

Abuse and dependency on the UK's welfare system was a definite gripe amongst many of the participants. One potential yet controversial suggestion was that legislation should be passed permitting asylum-seekers to take up employment whilst their applications were being processed. This, it was proposed, would allow them to actively contribute to their subsistence:

**HappyCow...** i think working illegally does contribute to the bad press the Asylum seekers get and if the law was changed then maybe it would contribute to their benefit.

As this line of thought progressed it was proposed that asylum-seekers could be given a loan when they first apply for asylum. They would then pay it off over an extended period of time should they be granted refugee status.

However, other students felt that if asylum-seekers were allowed to take up employment, the competition they posed to UK workers would create hostility. Other students also highlighted the practical shortfalls of such an idea:

**Genius...** I don't think Asylum seekers should get a job while their request is being processed because to be paid they'd have to open a bank account which needs an address etc, and if their application to live here gets turned down, what would they do with the money?

## Under Siege

For some participants, their understanding of the motivations behind seeking asylum were blinkered by established concepts of law and order:

**Cookie...** I think before people are allowed in the country they should be checked out to make sure they are not trying to escape the law

This reveals that for some students, asylum-seekers were bad because they were evading authorities in their country of origin. They were not able to understand that in some situations a person might be justified in evading the law if, for example, the authorities were committing human rights abuses.

The students struggled with feelings of insecurity, believing that 'outsiders' were intent on bringing instability to UK society. These feelings of being 'invaded' were expressed in a manner that called on other countries to shoulder a share of the burden:

**Keano10...** I dont think that these asylum seekers have to come to our country, they should go to places like germany and france.

The concept of countries co-ordinating their efforts to process asylum-seekers is a route favoured by the UN's Refugee Agency. It was also welcomed by students taking part in the HeadsUp forum:

**eranny70...** I think that Britain should team up with other european countries and tackle the problem together. Countries in and out of the EU. They could form a sort of Asylum Alliance/Agency and all help fund it.

## Defining the Issue

It was very evident that at the root of a lot of the students' negative perceptions was a misreading of facts, figures and definitions. Most troublesome was the failure to see the distinction between key terms like 'asylum-seeker', 'refugee' and 'illegal' immigrant.

Students who did understand the difference between the different classifications found tackling the asylum issue a great deal easier. These students were much more likely to have more tolerance for asylum-seekers and see the topic of asylum less in terms of 'black and white' and more in 'shades of grey'.

Across the forum there was agreement that bogus asylum-seeking was a big problem for communities in the UK, but also that illegal immigration directly tarnished those applying through the proper channels:

**Genius...** Illegal immigrants are a big problem. They aren't asylum seekers. They come in without any documents and have to work illegally. They may not even have need help in their own country, they just like the look of ours better!

It was in condemning illegal immigration that the participants were able to find a consensus:

**MadCow...** i think you are right to think that we should help, but sneaking into the country isn't right and they are costing us money.

Separating bogus asylum-seekers from those with genuine cases enabled the students to analyse what constituted justifiable grounds for applying for asylum. Suggestions ranged from emotional appeals:

**geolau...** I am worried that asylum-seekers aren't being treated fairly and with the proper respect, they suffer abuse from their homelands and come to England as a haven. The british population should treat them with more respect instead of chucking them back to the horrors of their homes. I know some asylum seekers are just coming to Britain for money and a better life but some have horrible and disturbing backgrounds which they need to get away from. Please help them.

To arguments based on an economic rationale:

**Goldilocks...** these people come to Britain for fear of there own lives and there childrens. They do jobs which many people in Britain feel they are too good to do.

Whether it was in the interest of protecting basic human rights:

**citizeng...** y so much fuss 4 notin. the fact is that we are all humans and that we need to help our neighbours, wether black, white, yellow, red or pink.

or the interest of Britain's future development, the majority of students saw the value in giving those living in fear or danger the opportunity to improve their lives:

**Genius...** You seem to think we waste our money on asylum seekers, but all we're really doing is helping them out so they can eventually get a job, pay taxes etc and become active members of society!

## Finding Solutions

Understandably, the students, though able to make the distinction between different types of immigrant, were not so forthcoming when asked for solutions on how to judge which asylum seekers were genuine and which were bogus.

During the HeadsUp asylum forum, Parliament was scrutinising the Government's Asylum and immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Bill. In the supporting background notes, a student-centred breakdown of the Bill was provided. After an initial reticence, a number of students were encouraged to give their opinions on the proposals.

On the whole there was support for the impetus behind the Bill. The students agreed that it was important to properly investigate each case but acknowledged that there was a range of obstacles that could impede such investigations.

Entering the UK without the proper documentation was identified as one such obstacle. Still, the students were cautious of making this a criminal offence on the grounds that in some cases asylum-seekers would be advised by trafficking gangs to destroy documentation, and in others they might never have been issued a passport in the first place.

There was not a great deal of support for proposals for a compacted asylum appeals system. The basis for criticism was that there was plenty of room for error and that the ability to appeal would provide a vital safeguard:

eranny70... i think that a tribunal with no appeals is unfair, because the jury/judge in the first case could be biased. or maybe the applicant's representative said or did something stupid.

Subsidised deportation was felt to be a reasonable course of action, if after a fair hearing an applicant's request for asylum had been rejected. However, when the students looked through the 'white' list of countries, there was surprise at some of the countries deemed safe by the Home Office.

The passing of new laws was one way of convincing the public that the Government was addressing their concerns. Still, the forum participants felt that other measures should be considered as a means of reassuring the British public that the asylum process was both fair and effective.

Citizenship ceremonies and oaths of allegiance were widely regarded as being an acceptable means of welcoming successful asylum applicants. Accommodating applicants whilst they are being processed proved to be more contentious. For some students, applicants should be housed in established UK communities. They were not keen on the idea of asylum-seekers being detained in processing centres:

**Genius...** These people are not criminals and there for shouldn't be treated as criminals!

Still, other students did not see lodging applicants in processing centres as too much of an affront on human rights:

**HappyCow...** maybe bieng locked up with a roof over their head is a better life!

Some even voicing support for the controversial idea of centres being established offshore.

### Conclusions

The students involved in this HeadsUp Forum showed their enthusiasm for discussing a most contentious and intricate issue. Yet despite the availability of background notes, a sizable proportion of students were unable and, in places, unwilling to tackle new ideas and information.

Some of the students themselves, when prompted to consider where they got their information on the subject, felt that their knowledge of asylum and related issues was insufficient:

**littles...** i feel many children do not have adequate education in the matter- Often causing racism

One of the main recommendations, therefore, to emerge from this HeadsUp Forum is that young people in the UK must be educated on the varying dimensions that make up the asylum debate. Charities, the media, schools or parents are all in a position to deliver such a programme of education, but it is Parliament and Government who must provide the impetus. Making the effort to educate our young people today, will no doubt prove a good investment in terms of securing positive community relations in the future.

As with previous forum topics, The Hansard Society is confident that it has demonstrated - in HeadsUp - one means of addressing the deficit in asylum education. In keeping with all forums staged on the site, the student and teachers' notes will continue to be freely accessible. Those students who were able to participate in this online debate have not only been encouraged to tackle new and complex concepts but have also been exposed to alternative perspectives amongst their peer group. Creating opportunities for promoting these forms of awareness and participation is central to the success of the HeadsUp project.

Asylum-seekers: Are they getting a fair deal?

Key Quotes

**Goldilocks...** They come here, get given money, a home and some times a job. They even give them free driving lessons and it costs us a fortune.

**Roohi...** I understand the concept of asylum seekers and the need for it... but in my opinion these people are being given far more facilities. It is not even sure if they entered the country because they needed asylum. Many people have somehow catogrizd themselves in paper work just to use the facilites in the uk which they would have to get by working hard in their countries...so i think the most important thing is actually making sure these the people who enter the country under asylum are the ones who need it. Their case should be investigated properly before allowing them to enter uk.

**Genius...** Don't you think you're being unfair? These people come to England asking for help because they may have suffered terribly in their own country. How can you not want to help them? True, if they just come over here because they feel like moving to England they should be turned away, but I think we should try to help people who have been through ordeals as much as we can!!

**SleepyCow...** I think Asylum is a big problem. We are letting foriegn people into our country that dont belong here. I think they should be stopped. It isnt a fuss about nothing its a big problem. Why can't they go to America!

**Roohi...** They use the system and do not respect any of the law... They get cars, have mobile phones and dont even have to work. On top of that they get other benifits...I think this is unjust!

**MadCow...** i think you are right to think that we should help, but sneeking into the country isn't right and they are costing us money.

**Genius...** Illegal immigrants are a big problem. They aren't asylum seekers. They come in without any documents and have to work illegally. They may not even have need help in their own country, they just like the look of ours better!

**eranny70...** There are already millions of A/S's in the US, Australia, Sweden and plenty of other countries. Britain is just another country that has thousands of good people volunteer to help asylum seekers. I know plenty of people who have come to the UK for help. Most of them don't have anything. No insurance, no cars, no phones, no houses. They get attacked on the streets and humiliated. They wouldn't be here unless they badly needed help. I'm sure they would rather have been in their country with their family

and their people, but most of them can't. They're here because they're threatened, attacked and abused in their own homes!

**littles...** the only thing i'm against is the fact that many people are coming here for no reason, when there are british peepz on the streets.

**eranny70...** i think that Clause 12 is a good idea, but the new appeals idea seems pretty stupid. i think that a tribunal with no appeals is unfair, because the jury/judge in the first case could be biased. or maybe the applicant's representative said or did something stupid.

**Goldilocks...** these people come to Britain for fear of there own lives and there childrens. They do jobs which many people in Britain feel they are too good to do.

**HappyCow...** Only those who have a deserving cause and can prove it, can come in!! those who just want to come in cos are countreys better cant!!

**Cookie...** I think before people are allowed in the country they should be checked out to make sure they are not trying to escape the law

**eranny70...** i don't think that children should ever be taken away from parents unless they were being neglected or abused or something like that. i really don't know if they should be jailed(and kept in camps with lots of other people like them) or deported forcibly.

**littles...** there arent many refugees or asylum seekers in my area. Many refugees are found in large towns such as london, manchester and birmingham, and should be distributed more evenly... Of course there are bound to be problems where people wont accept the refugees and asylum seekers into their area...

**eranny70...** where i live there's quite alot of refugees and i know a few of them personally. they're not crooks, their stories are really sad, and anyone who talks to them will see that they wish they could go back to their countries and their families with all their heart.

**unit...** I'm not against them, but I think that each country should recieve an equal amount of immigrants instead of putting them all in one, so that we can accomodate them all.

**Goldilocks...** perhaps you could ask questions like why do you want to come to britain? Are you coming here because you feel your life is under threat etc. But use genius' idea of a lie detector to see if they are telling the truth or if they are bogus!

**eranny70...** Some newspapers and other media groups distort the stories, but there are a few that tell the truth.

**Genius...** I think the media is constently sending out negative messages about asylum seekers. Some times they say they're waisting our money and

other times they say there are too many of them to accomidate. I think the media play a big role in peoples' dislike for asylum seekers.

**citizeng...** I think Britain should help all those people that need help and need to come to this country. I think mostly racism is making people be against this form of help.

**Genius...** You seem to think we waste our money on asylum seekers, but all we're really doing is helping them out so they can eventually get a job, pay taxes etc and become active members of society!

**eranny70...** I don't think they should be jailed for not having a passport. in some countries people who are running away might not be able to acquire legal passports.

**HappyCow...** i suppose if we can house them we should but if we cant they should stay in processing centres, because we shouldnt give up or build new houses just for them as they are the ones coming in to our country.

**Genius...** I think asylum seekers should be provided with housing while their requests are being prosessed because they come to our country looking for a better life. They shouldn't be locked up on arrival!

**HappyCow...** maybe bieng locked up with a roof over their head is a better life!

**Genius...** These people are not criminals and there for shouldn't be treated as criminals!

**blackelf...** Personally, I have never been affected by asylem seekers, so I can't really say I want them out.

But I have two veiws on this arguement. Firstly, they use our money, which we earn, and there is nothing we can do about it because of the way our democratic government is in place. On the other hand, they have no where else to go. It is not their fault what may be happening in their own countries. They just want refuge and a bit of peace - doesn't everyone deserve a second chance?

**hohoho...** What about the money wasted on weapons and defense? They are not really needed? Why can't we spend it on people who need it more?

**MissVic...** I think asylum seekers should go back to there own contries and stop benifiting from my dads taxes!

**GSXRTT...** i say chuck them back into there own country and let them suffer

**eranny70...** I think that Britain should team up with other europian countries and tackle the problem together. Countries in and out of the EU. They could form a sort of Asylum Alliance/Agency and all help fund it.

**Keano10...** I dont think that these asylum seekers have to come to our country, they should go to places like germany and france.

**ZoomAir...** send them to america instead of little island england. They should get a job if there going to stay in england and pay tax!!

**Lilemz21...** i think they do need help but they shuld go about it a different ways instead of sneakingin hidden in freezers and sponging off our taxes!

**DioTom...** i can see why thered want to come here. but i just dont care

**citizeng...** y so much fuss 4 notin. the fact is that we are all humans and that we need to help our neighbours, wether black, white, yellow, red or pink.

**eranny70...** I don't think that the government should take any position that they think is wrong just to appear as tough and macho as a neo-nazi political party the BNP

**GSXRTT...** i got my info from skool and parents

**littles...** i feel many children do not have adequate education in the matter- Often causing racism

**unit...** Well how would you feel if in your country you and your family were living in a place where you might be killed, if you went abroad and people said that you were annoying and didn't deserve to have a free life

**JediYoda...** I THINK ASYLUM SEEKERS HAVE THE SAME FEELINGS AS US BUT IT JUST THEIR PAST AND THEIR PROBLEMS THAT MAKE US JUDGE THEM DIFFERENTLY.

**mendieta...** Where does the money go? health, education possibly, oh yeah i forgot about dr. kelly. its all war isn't it and media coverage. We need to contribute towards asylum more

**eranny70...** I think that Britain should team up with other european countries and tackle the problem together. Countries in and out of the EU. They could form a sort of Asylum Alliance/Agency and all help fund it.

**JamesBourne...** the average image is wearing scruffy clothes & being dirty

**geolau...** I am worried that asylum-seekers aren't being treated fairly and with the proper respect, they suffer abuse from their homelands and come to England as a haven. The british population should treat them with more respect instead of chucking them back to the horrors of their homes. I know some asylum seekers are just coming to Britain for money and a better life but some have horrible and disturbing backgrounds which they need to get away from. Please help them.

**eranny70...** the government should like them. they can contribute loads if we only let them. apparently the population in scotland is slowly decreasing, so asylum seekrs would be great to improve the economy.

**Brawny...** I think that everyone deserves a chance. Some asylum seekers come to Britain to get Jobs or raise a family that seems fair enough but some just come to get income support, cheat the system or sometimes are members of the black market or drug dealers. But not all are bad or cheating on the system some come here to escape the persecution in their home country. I think that these people have the right to come to Britain. But the people who just come to cheat the system should be evicted from our society.

**Genius...** I don't think Asylum seekers should get a job while their request is being processed because to be paid they'd have to open a bank account which needs an address etc, and if their application to live here gets turned down, what would they do with the money?

**HappyCow...** i think working illegally does contribute to the bad press the Asylum seekers get and if the law was changed then maybe it would contribute to their benefit. However, that will make it harder for the unemployed British to get jobs,

**Goldilocks...** people who are looking for Jobs who are British would be at a disadvantage because asylum seekers who are working illegally could be exploited by employers. They well may make them work longer hours but for cheeper fees.

**batleax...** I think the government should let less asylum seekers here, but treat the ones that are here better

**Genius...** I think aged -18 asylum seekers who arrived in the UK on their own should be allowed to go to school because in Britain we have the right to an education, so why should other people be denied this right just because they weren't born here?

**Goldilocks...** I as Genius does, think those who are under 18 should have the right to an education when they come here. Those who genuinley seek asylum here for threat of their own lives should recieve all the help we can give them. Saying that though our state schools are filled to capacity and taking on more people would only increase this problem. So perhaps special schools could be built to help solve this dilema!!!!!!

**Genius...** I think asylum seekers are attracted to the UK because we have the right to education, free speech and free health care etc that people may be denied in other countries.

**bstepp...** i have been involved in a protest against an asylum seeker camp where my grandparents live. not every1 at the protest was arguing for the same things! some wanted asylum seekers to go and others to not live on

this landfill site and others thought they didnt matter and could live anywhere!

