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## Reporting fairly on those seeking a safe home

THERE WAS a carnival atmosphere when I went to the Halkevi Centre last February, on a bright, blowy North London afternoon at the end of winter. Car horns blared, voices were raised in excitement and the chilly breeze caught the flags and sheaves of colourful posters as increasingly exasperated men tried to attach them to car windows with bluetack.

These were Turkish Kurds, staging an exuberant demonstration to mark the second anniversary of an important event in their liberation struggle. The capture of Abdullah Ocalan by Ankara's secret servicemen was replete with symbolism. Apparently a severe setback, his incarceration and the death sentence passed on him – though held in abeyance – focused global attention on the oppressive Turkish state. His dignified appeals for peace have put the onus on the Turks to engage meaningfully with his people's demands.

The Kurds are perhaps the world's outstanding example of a nation without a state, scattered, as they are, through Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria. Ten years ago, as they fled the oppression of Saddam Hussein, they were protected in a UN 'safe haven'. Today, US and British planes, patrolling the 'no-fly zone' which Washington and London have imposed on northern Iraq, turn a blind eye as the Turkish air force cross the border to bombard Kurdish positions.

Some time soon, in a Whitehall office just five miles or so south of the Halkevi Centre, bureaucrats will decide whether Britain should back the Ilisu Dam, which would flood 70 000 homes in the Kurdish heartland of southern Turkey.

This representation of one of Britain's biggest contingents of asylum seekers breaks several important conventions. Seldom are such people portrayed in media reports as active or capable of organising themselves. Seldom are we invited to reflect on the harrowing circumstances which drove many from their homeland.

As a native of North London, I can testify that over the last decade, the cultural vigour and business acumen these people brought with them has helped to transform what used to be a bleak, rundown urban thoroughfare into the vibrant high street of today, with the Halkevi Community Centre at one end and a cornucopia of eateries, shops and services. But this is an aspect of relations between asylum seekers and the wider community which is seldom aired.

Readers and audiences of mainstream news, at least those

North London, from forming. Immigration minister Barbara Roche said this was to "ease the burden on communities".

Anyone who has bought or sold a house in the capital recently knows that living round the corner from somewhere like Stoke Newington Road, full of thriving Kurdish businesses, is a much more desirable proposition than an area bare of such amenities as it used to be. Their presence has, in fact, contributed to the upward mobility of London N16 in estate agents' windows.

So how have they come to be portrayed as a 'burden', and how has this construction of the Kurds and people like them come to be a touchstone of discussions about asylum seekers and immigration?

'THEM'

"Londoners face a £63 bill per household for the capital's bogus asylum seekers," *The Daily Mail* raged in March of last year. "The decision and appeals process can take years and all applicants have the right to be housed and supported while their cases crawl through the overloaded system."

A familiar theme – the claim that Britain's generous welfare benefits draw economic migrants like a magnet from across the world. A Romanian asylum seeker arrested for begging with a baby "told how her family of eight live rent-free on £640 a month benefit", the same paper reported. Those accommodated in holding centres live "the kind of life many locals could only dream of", according to another *Mail* exclusive, this from a village in rural

Somerset where asylum seekers were to be housed in a former private school with its own grounds and swimming pool. Yet another "revealed" that it costs "nearly as much to keep an asylum seeker as a room at the luxurious Ritz Hotel".

Asylum seekers, by these accounts, are scroungers and layabouts, filling their hours with free use of swimming pools and subsidised visits to football matches. In the image which launched the campaign in the *Mail* and its sister paper, *London's Evening Standard*, they present a perverted, alien notion of family by thrusting their suspiciously docile babies under the noses of commuters, begging for cash. Romanian gypsies have "a code which values begging more highly than labour"; if they work at all, it is for "cash in hand", cheating the taxpayer. We are in danger of being

'swamped'

'rising tide'

# Responding to Difference

Media hysteria in Britain over the rights of asylum seekers – has further sharpened distinctions between 'them' and 'us'

**Jake Lynch** suggests ways to counter racist representation of 'the other'...



without benefit of such first-hand knowledge, might have been puzzled, therefore, to read in a recent edition of *The Economist* that "immigrants add to overall economic activity". The magazine quoted an American survey which suggested that, even without reckoning up the eventual contributions of their children to the US economy of the future, "the country as a whole gains from them, by about \$10 billion a year".

The occasion of my previous visit to the Halkevi was to report on the likely effects of the government's Asylum and Immigration Bill – recently enacted – which introduced a dispersal system to prevent large groups, such as the one in

"swamped" by a "rising tide" of would-be immigrants intent on grabbing a share of our prosperity.

Time for a dose of reality. Asylum seekers in Britain are not entitled to work for the first six months after their arrival, even if they wanted to; an authoritative UN study, released earlier this year, found that the overriding reason for people to seek asylum in a particular place is the presence of existing groups of their fellow countrymen and women, not the level of benefits. And in terms of the number of would-be refugees per head of the existing population, Britain comes about mid-table among European Union countries.

Numbers have recently dropped to the lowest monthly

'bogus asylum seekers'

figure in two years – 5 000 in April – though appeals against refusal of asylum are now at record levels. Fewer than one in 10 are officially deemed genuine claims – though 16% are granted exceptional leave to remain. A list of the main places of origin reads like a who's who of the world's most oppressive or trouble-torn countries, such as Afghanistan, Sri Lanka and Somalia.

An old journalist's maxim – never let the facts get in the way of a good story. What we have here is a classic campaign of demonisation, conjuring up a menacing 'other', threatening our way of life. It bears closer examination. If asylum seekers are 'them', who are 'we'?

'Us'

The Concorde crash in Paris last year posed a particular problem to London's popular press. A story of obvious global importance, worthy of a front-page lead, but for one highly inconvenient detail – all the victims were Germans. Sympathy for the old enemy is not a prominent feature in the shrill rhetorical conventions of British tabloids. So, the victims were framed as "hard-working family members"



Iraqi Kurds celebrate Nawrooz, the first uprising against tyranny thousands of years ago.

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who'd saved up for the holiday of a lifetime, when disaster struck.

Tragedy reached even deeper into the 'self' with the fatal train crash at London's Paddington Station in 1999. What really caught reporters' imaginations was that people in the foremost carriage suffered the worst impact. "They were among the best of us," the *Mail* gushed in its front-page lead, "hard-working family contributors" conscientiously trying to reach the office on time, moving to the front of the train to disembark as it came to rest.

It is a formula which crops up in the unlikelyst of circumstances. A special report on Zimbabwe's land conflict featured one white farming family, the wife and mother a former model, whose plight "hard-working families everywhere" would recognise.

### TACTICS

This study of the terms in which 'us' and 'them', the 'self' and a threatening 'other' are being constructed affords essential clues for the reporter seeking to challenge the categories

and defended the exclusivity of 'Britishness'.

by transgressing the boundary between them. A three-point plan for fairer coverage:

- Focus on the hard work many asylum seekers and members of immigrant communities do, if allowed to get on with it. The facts are an ally here. Most immigrant communities in Britain place a high premium on hard work and family values.

So I included, in my report for *Sky News* on the Asylum Bill, an interview with Halkevi Centre Director Yeshar Ismailoglu, in which he proudly described his training programmes and their outstanding success in placing people in jobs and helping them start their own businesses.

- Hard-working families everywhere need security in their homes almost before everything else.

In order to properly contextualise the story, I included, in the same package, shots of one of the Turkish army's periodic bombardments of 'targets' in Kurdish areas. On this occasion, asylum seekers had gathered at the centre to watch reports about the conflict on a satellite TV channel, so the shots naturally belonged in the piece.

- Just talking to asylum seekers themselves is often enough to transgress the boundary between 'us' and 'them' and unravel the process of demonisation.

Ekrem Aksu, the young man I interviewed on that bright winter's day, had modest enough aims of gaining qualifications, getting a job and settling down. As the representative of 'other'-ness – alterity, in the interesting sense of alter-ego – he left something to be desired.

### ABSURDITIES

Part of the point in going to Halkevi to cover the Asylum Bill, with its provision for dispersal, was to illustrate the argument that asylum seekers, if allowed to gather in communities capable of supporting themselves with things like language and computer classes, can thrive. They are more likely to become a 'burden' if they are split up.

This is one of several reasons why the bill, published on the high tide of media hysteria led by the *Mail and Standard*, was greeted by groups working for immigrants rights as absurd. Voltaire said that someone who can persuade us to believe absurdities can persuade us to commit atrocities. While 'atrocities' is a much-overused word in journalism, it is certain that racism in all its forms, including physical violence and intimidation, has flourished as a result of this media and political discourse about asylum seekers.

No less an authority than the Association of Chief Police Officers found that racist attacks rose on the back of such coverage. They warned news organisations to be more responsible to avoid placing themselves on the wrong side of the law and inciting more offences to be committed. They

also found that such offences rose in response to reporting of the inflammatory speeches some politicians have now begun to make, playing to the gallery the media has created.

These have become useful points to mention in adding context to reports, since another plank of the 'self' is respect for the law. The original rash of scare stories made much of asylum seekers engaging in "illegal begging". If demonising them leads to more unlawful behaviour, not less, then once again the facile distinctions begin to break down.

What is at stake here is one of the essential questions in a diverse society – how we respond to difference. Are we threatened – or complemented and completed – by it? Journalists have an opportunity to help us see elements of the other in the self and vice versa, something which can help us know ourselves better. Or they can erect rhetorical barricades which can all too easily lead to real ones dividing us, playing on our fears about what may lie on the far side.

The last word perhaps belongs with Amnesty International, which has just condemned Britain for its attitude. The journey from Afghanistan, country of origin for Britain's biggest contingent of asylum seekers today, is one from "desperation to despair", Amnesty's report said. It singled out the lack of legal advice and interpreters for applicants 'dispersed' under the Asylum and Immigration Act as a particular concern.

Underlying all this is a contest over the meaning of Britishness and the British archetype. Is it ethnically based, the 'white ratepayer' of the suburbs whose home is his castle? Or a freedom-loving exponent of fair play and support for the underdog? The issue for journalists is to consider how we are representing ourselves, before we begin thinking about how to represent anyone else.

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'illegal begging'

'burden'