

The Archbishop writes about the Illegal Migration Bill in The Times. Read the full opinion piece, published on 24th May 2023, here:

We must control our borders. We must stop the boats. We must have limits to those coming because we cannot take everyone. I said all this in the opening sentences of my speech in the House of Lords the week before last.

As the Illegal Migration Bill enters committee stage in the Lords, everyone agrees the status quo position on asylum fails. Those that arrive use dangerous means and face chaotic, ineffective treatment at tremendous cost, which creates discontent among those in the UK who feel their generosity is being exploited. We need a new approach that loves mercy and does justice, to use words from scripture.

But this bill will do little to resolve the existing problems, and will exacerbate others, all while causing serious suffering to the most vulnerable. The primary purpose of the Lords is to improve legislation, not block it. That's why I have tabled helpful, not destructive amendments to the bill, with cross-party support, requiring the government to produce long-term strategies to tackle human trafficking and the refugee crisis.

The crisis is global, vast and long term. No nation can offer simple, quick fixes on its own. Successive governments have implemented deterrence policies to prevent asylum seekers arriving. They face indefinite detention in grim conditions, at constant risk of severe destitution, and now face the prospect of being sent to Rwanda. And yet Channel crossings are set to see record numbers this year.

Constructive alternatives have consistently been set out by refugee charities, NGOs, faith groups and those with longstanding professional and personal experience of the issues. Anyone who suggests those opposing this policy are indifferent to the challenges we face, or in favour of open-door immigration, or on the side of people smugglers, or even content to see desperate people drown, is not engaging with this debate in good faith.

Last December, in a debate in the House of Lords, bishops proposed approaches. One is to make better use of the existing system to speed up the processing of the vast backlog of asylum seekers the Home Office has allowed to build up, better facilitate removals of those whose asylum claim has been refused, and work more closely with groups organising voluntary returns.

A second is to undercut the smugglers' business model. With very few exceptions there are no safe routes for people to arrive in the UK. There is no route for the Iranian Christian under threat of death for their faith, the Nigerian atheist under threat for blasphemy, or someone fleeing war in Sudan. An alternative, safe route, combined with UK-led international policing against people smuggling, will sharply reduce the number of people crossing the Channel.

Third is for the UK to lead a review of the 1951 convention, which the UK drafted, and in collaboration suggest ways to ensure that all nations accept their fair share of what is a global problem. Eighty per cent of refugees are in neighbouring and often very poor countries, and no nation should be allowed to simply freeload while others take most of the strain.

Climate change and related conflicts will increase up to tenfold the number of people fleeing their homes for safety over the coming decades. The best long-term way to address this crisis is to support the infrastructure and development of their own states. We have an aid budget precisely for this purpose, albeit a budget the government has reduced and up to a third of which it spends housing asylum seekers in this country. Spending it effectively in countries that need it will provide better value for money than constructing a vast detention state or giving £120 million to Rwanda not to house a single refugee to date.

No solution can stop Channel crossings entirely. But these alternatives are more likely to alleviate the situation without compromising the UK's approach to international law or neglecting the victims of slavery, and while maintaining the commitment to dignity and hospitality that defines our country at its best.

Those who sit on the bishops' bench will not abandon our duty to point out when governments propose legislation that is impractical or immoral. We will not abandon the most vulnerable people that Jesus Christ specifically calls us to love. And we will not abandon our hopes and efforts for a nation and a world that helps those in trouble and supports those in need.

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