

Letter from Scotland



Glasgow welcomes
first Syrian
refugees

On a wild, wet, typically-November afternoon, their plane touched down at Glasgow airport. They are the first 100 refugees from the war in Syria to arrive in Britain under the UK government's new resettlement scheme. These "vulnerable" families from the refugee camps in Jordan are now being found homes in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Inverclyde, Renfrewshire and North Ayrshire.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon told MSPs: " We should be proud that we are providing refuge for some very vulnerable individuals who are fleeing for safety from the type of people who carried out the Paris attacks." By a strange quirk of fate, the Scottish parliament was that same afternoon passing a motion of condolence for the people of France after last Friday's massacre. In a sombre and emotional debate, MSPs linked Scotland into the troubles of our times – civil war, refugees and terrorism.

Proud we may be, but it is a small gesture in the face of the global refugee crisis. Scotland is expected to home around 2,000 of the 20,000 refugees Britain has pledged to take in over the next five years. This compares with the 800,000 Germany has already accepted from Syria and elsewhere, not to mention the one million living in refugee camps in Lebanon, the 600,000 in Jordan and the 1.8 million in Turkey.

The British Government says it is not only accepting refugees at home but it is the second biggest donor of aid to the refugee camps in the Middle East – £900m already pledged. But the Scottish government and others are arguing for Britain to

do much more. Church leaders are suggesting that the UK should treble its intake of refugees over the next five years.

Others are not so welcoming. They point to the 150,000 people in Scotland on the housing waiting lists. Some worry that there might be jihadists among the refugees, despite the Home Office's reassurance that all the incomers have been carefully screened. The most recent opinion poll by YouGov found that 54 per cent of people in Scotland support the idea of their local council taking in a modest number of refugees. In the UK as a whole, however, only 41 per cent were in favour.

Scotland, then, seems to be leading the way on the refugee issue. And this week I was struck by a suggestion that we should lead the way also on child poverty. It came from our richest man, Sir Tom Hunter, who declared: "Scotland should lead the world in becoming the first nation to eradicate child poverty." He was speaking at Hampden Park at the launch of next year's "Kiltwalk", the series of fund-raising walks to benefit disadvantaged children.

It's an ambitious goal Sir Tom has set us. The Child Poverty Action Group reckons there are 210,000 children living in poverty in Scotland, 22 per cent of all children, and the figure has been rising in recent years. "In poverty" is defined as living in a household which has less than 60 per cent of average income. The SNP government has talked long and hard about this shameful issue and has spoken of doubling state childcare provision and closing the attainment gap at school. But governments before them have also spoken brave words and still we have one in five children living in poverty.

I fear that government programmes and philanthropy are not enough, important though they are (Sir Tom is a Carnegie-style philanthropist and is underwriting Kiltwalk 2016.) A real change in attitude is required to make our society more equal. The key is a decent job for everyone – permanent,

fulfilling and paying a living wage. We need to value each other's labour much more equally, which means paying less at the top and more at the bottom. That really is an ambitious goal.

This time last year the Fraserburgh fishing boat "Ocean Way" was lost at sea off the Northumberland coast. The skipper James Nobel and two Filipino crewmen perished. This week we finally learned what probably caused the tragedy. The Marine Accident Investigation Branch found that the boat was deluged by large waves and the water was unable to flow off the deck because the scuppers had been reduced in size. The boat turned turtle and only two of the crew were able to clamber onto the up-turned hull and be rescued.

Fortunately such accidents at sea are getting rarer but still an average of eight fishermen lose their lives every year around the coast of Britain and 20 vessels are lost. This year alone, there have been incidents off Shetland, Barra, Mull, Fraserburgh and Aberdeen. Four fishermen have lost their lives.

Finally, you may be surprised to learn that Edinburgh is to go ahead with an extension to its tram network, despite the fiasco over the building of the first section, from the airport to the city centre. The trams only started to run 18 months ago and the inquiry into why we only got half a line for twice the cost has not even begun. But on Thursday councillors voted in favour of a £145m extension to Leith and Newhaven. (or to look into it all a bit more...this money (some £1.6m) is for exploring the 'business case' Ed.)

It actually makes economic sense, since half a tram line is less viable than a full line and, with the recession coming to an end, the development of Leith and Newhaven as "commuter towns" for Edinburgh may now be possible. The immediate cost is to be met by borrowing and it's hoped the £9m annual repayments will be covered by the profits made by the buses

and trams combined.

Councillors, including reluctant SNP councillors, have obviously been convinced that lessons have been learnt, even before we know who was to blame for the mistakes made last time. A triumph of faith over experience and all the better for it.