

Letter from Scotland

The collapse of the Assad regime in Syria brought cheers from the small Syrian community in Scotland. Some 2,500 have fled to Scotland since the civil war started there in 2015 and they are now dispersed across the country.

One of the biggest cheers came from a group of 70 who turned out in the streets of Inverurie, Aberdeenshire, waving their green and white Syrian flags.

One family who have featured a lot in the news this week are the Melmi family who fled from a town outside Damascus in 2015 and were settled in Rothesay on the island of Bute. They started a bakery which has now grown into a chain of three bakeries in and around Glasgow. Tasnim Melmi's town of Darayya was besieged by Assad's forces, 700 of its citizens were killed and her father was imprisoned and tortured. She said that while she had doubts about the future of Syria, there is nothing worse than what the country has been through under the Assad regime.

Glasgow has been the entry point for refugees to Scotland for the last 30 years, taking in the victims of wars in Bosnia, Kosovo, Vietnam, Congo, Afghanistan, Syria and Ukraine. The city has a long history of immigration, taking in waves of economic migrants from Ireland, Italy, Pakistan, Poland and now has over 4,500 asylum seekers from all over the troubled world. It has more asylum seekers than any city in Britain,

except Birmingham.



Glasgow welcomes New Scots. Glasgow City Chambers. Photo John Knox

During the height of the Ukrainian refugee crisis, some 25,000 Ukrainians came to Scotland, at least temporarily. Housing was in such short supply that Glasgow and Edinburgh councils had to board some refugees on cruise ships in the harbour. Others were packed into hotels, two to a room.

Generally though, immigration is not such a toxic subject in Scotland as it is in England, partly because we have fewer people from other ethnic backgrounds – 96 per cent of Scots classed themselves as “white” in the latest census, compared to 82 per cent in England and Wales. And partly because Scotland needs more immigrants to make up for our falling and aging population.

According to the 2022 census Scotland’s population is just

over 5.4 million. It has risen by 43,000 since then because of inward migration, two-thirds of that coming from out-with the UK. Yet there is a need for many more young, active people to staff our hospitals and care services, hotels and restaurants and harvest our fruit and vegetables.

The Scottish government has long argued for a more relaxed immigration policy north of the border but the matter is reserved to the Westminster government which is faced with a hostile public attitude towards immigration. The problem is partly of its own making by leaving the common migration policy of the European Union and by failing to staff its immigration offices properly. If asylum applications were processed more quickly, we wouldn't end up with hotels and old army camps full of stranded people.

Some wait for years to find out if they can stay in Britain or if they will be deported. In the meantime, the Scottish government says asylum seekers should be given the right to work in Scotland so they can support themselves and fill the labour gaps we have in our economy. But such calls have gone unheeded in London. Asylum seekers do get free bus travel in Scotland, although the Conservatives tried to raise this in Holyrood earlier in the week as part of their opposition debate.

No matter where we stand on refugees and economic migration, there is no doubt that our culture is changing. But it's changing for lots of reasons – work patterns, family ties, weakening religion, the role of women, the use of language, accents, social media, globalisation, attitudes to risk. Ethnic mix is only one of them.

And very often the chafing point on immigration is a lack of investment in housing, and health and education services, which affects everybody as well as new arrivals.

As we look out on the world's troubled spots, New Scots or Old

Scots, we've got to be thankful we live in one of the richest and luckiest countries on the planet. We haven't had a war for 80 years, nor a civil war for 280 years, and we've discovered how to live under the rule of law and run a decent economy.

Let's not make a culture war out of immigration and the plight of refugees.