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## The Observer

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# Don't pillory Benedict Cumberbatch – at least he cares

*Barbara Ellen*



Celebrities can generate headlines and raise awareness; they don't have to take in a refugee to prove they're sincere

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Is it time to stop boorishly calling out the supposed liberal hypocritical elite (what one might term the hypocрати)? [Benedict Cumberbatch](#) has spoken about when he was playing *Hamlet* in 2015 and made an on-stage appeal on behalf of Syrian refugees, passing around a collection bucket and decrying the Tory government (which had agreed to accept only 20,000 Syrian refugees in five years), shouting: “Fuck the politicians!”

Cumberbatch now says he doesn’t regret speaking up, though he “got overexcited and said things in a rather grand manner some nights”.

He also said that he was aware of censure for not giving a refugee a home himself, thought about doing it, but he and his wife had a young son to look after, and...

Let’s stop Cumberbatch there. Why should he have to justify himself?

I’ve had issues with Cumberbatch in the past, not least when he farcically whinged about other people complaining (quite rightly) that there was far too much posh-dominance in British acting. Nothing to be alarmed about – just a bit of friendly, arts-based class war.

However, this time, I felt sympathy for him. This trend for demanding that famous people do life-changing things such as house refugees to prove they “mean it, man!” is ridiculous. Why does it follow that if someone such as Cumberbatch criticises a government policy he is then instantly morally obliged to take a refugee into his home? The rationale is seemingly that then (and only then, mind!) could they be judged to be sincere in what they had said.

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■ Benedict Cumberbatch calls on Hamlet audience to support refugees – video Guardian

It has become embedded in the culture – famous people who speak out made to jump through every hoop going in order to “prove” their sincerity, when plenty of people wouldn’t dream of taking in a refugee, even if they had the room or if they didn’t have a young child. And not because they don’t care about the plight of refugees, but because, for different reasons, most simply aren’t willing or able to offer one a home. Instead, people offer what they can – giving money, signing petitions, pressuring the government or, as in Cumberbatch’s case, standing on a stage with a collection bucket, getting “overexcited”.

There’s a feeling that celebrities should put their actions where their agonised, mewling gobs are

Understandably, people sometimes become a bit cynical and weary when they see yet another celebrity “bleeding heart” veritably bursting an aorta over some worthy cause. Some feel, with a certain justification, that too often it’s all about display without consequences (“Look how wonderful and caring I am!”). There’s a feeling that celebrities should put their actions

where their agonised, mewling gobs are. On the other hand, isn’t this sometimes rather ungenerous, not to mention nonsensical? When major celebrities such as Cumberbatch speak up, they generate national and international headlines, raising awareness in a manner that few others could manage. Is it truly more important that he makes up a bed in the spare room?

Obviously, a famous person homing a refugee would be very valuable in terms of publicity and visibility. It also goes without saying that *anyone* who opens a home to a refugee is amazing. However, it’s also a major decision and even celebrities have real lives and families going on. The point is that, if someone such as Cumberbatch decides that they can’t do it, they’re no more “hypocritical” than anyone else who worries about refugees, donates money, signs petitions, raises awareness, but doesn’t feel able to actually house someone.

It isn’t hypocrisy to draw a line about what you can and can’t do. Nor should the famous be under any pressure to make grand gestures to prove that they care. All this does is perhaps make them question whether it’s worth the inevitable bashing they receive when they get involved. While celebrities are by no means beyond reproach, ultimately this becomes yet another way of shutting high-profile caring people down. Anyone want to applaud that?

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