

Asylum seeker ate my hamster

Ashley Drage
Region 10

HAS everyone read their *Daily Mail* lately? Well, would you believe it, our good old traditional way of life is under threat again! And who is it this time?

We've had a long list of subjects for the rabid, right-wingers to get their teeth into in the past. What with 'devil dogs' (remember them?), munching their way through our kids – obviously dogs don't bite anymore – not according to the press anyway.

Then there were single mothers who either got pregnant to get a council house or had the audacity to be left with the kids by their partners and still expect to feed and clothe them.

NO. There's an election coming up so the boot boys target this time will be "bogus" asylum seekers. So, before some bigot on your Branch starts waving his *Daily Mail* in the air and spits venom over your cheese rolls, let's dispel a few media myths about asylum seekers.

ARE MOST ASYLUM SEEKERS BOGUS?

NO. The Government's own statistics show that 90-95 per cent of claims are reasonable. Of the 46 per cent refused in 1999 only 5-10 per cent were turned down because their claims were "manifestly unfounded".

DO THEY GET HUGE HANDOUTS IN BENEFITS?

NO. Asylum seekers receive only 70 per cent of income support, which makes them the poorest people in the country. The largest part of their benefits is given in vouchers, which can only be used in certain shops.

WILL THEY TAKE OUR JOBS?

NO. Asylum seekers are not allowed to work for the first six months of their claim or while on appeal. Their skills are wasted.

DON'T THEY PUSH UP OUR COUNCIL TAX AND TAKE OUR HOUSING?

NO. Boroughs will be repaid in full by Central Government and asylum seekers cost less than 0.25 per cent of Government

spending. Asylum seekers who are working pay tax too. Lack of housing has been caused by years of cuts and privatisation of council property. It has nothing to do with asylum seekers.

WHY SHOULD WE TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR OTHER COUNTRIES' PROBLEMS?

Because countries such as ours have grown rich at the expense of most of the world's poorest countries. Since the seventies, world inequality has risen to the highest levels in history. Today the poorest countries owe the richest countries \$2.6 Trillion. Every day they spend \$16 Million to the West. As a prominent debt campaigner argued, "It should come as no surprise that there is instability, economic disintegration and civil wars resulting in a massive displacement of people." These problems are created by countries like Britain. People come here because they really are desperate.

DO WE TAKE MORE THAN OUR FAIR SHARE?

NO. Only 5 per cent of the world's refugees try to come to Western Europe. Britain is ninth in the list of European Countries when it comes to asylum seekers. In fact, more people emigrate from this country each year than try to come in.

BUT AREN'T WE A SOFT TOUCH?

NO. Britain's asylum and immigration laws are some of the toughest in Europe. Asylum seekers are held in detention centres and criminalised. They have no choice as to where they live and are distributed around the country away from people who share their language and experiences. This leaves them isolated and vulnerable to racist attacks.

SO WHY ARE WE LIED TO?

Because politicians love to grab votes by blaming society's problems on the most vulnerable. The people least likely to be able to fight back. Single mothers, the homeless, immigrants and asylum seekers are soft targets. They will exaggerate the numbers and appeal to the most basic of emotions, fear. They will exaggerate the cost of asylum seekers whilst playing down the cost of bombing their countries in the first place. They will encourage arms companies to sell weapons to unstable countries to make a nice profit by encouraging war and suffering and then blame the victims they create.

For centuries, this country has provided a safe haven for people fleeing persecution. Each group has been met with fear and prejudice.

Two hundred years ago, the percentage of ethnic minorities living in London was comparable with London today. Where are these people's descendants now? My own ancestors were French Protestants fleeing persecution in the seventeenth century. My greatgrandfather was an East European Jew fleeing the pogroms at the turn of the century. Your family history may well be the same.

So put down your *Daily Mail* and chill out!