

LEWES ORGANISATION IN SUPPORT OF REFUGEES & ASYLUM SEEKERS

www.losras.org

October 2024

LOSRRAS Annual General Meeting, 2024

Wednesday November 20th (7- 9 pm)

Friends Meeting House, Friars Walk, Lewes, BN7 2LE.

Our focus for this AGM will be our face-to-face work with refugees in the district.

All are welcome and we look forward to seeing you!

The relevant documents will be sent out to you at the end of October.

Labour's First Three Months and the Shape of LOSRRAS Campaigning

From the perspective of what LOSRRAS strives to achieve, we were delighted that on July 4th, James MacCleary was elected as the new LibDem MP for the Lewes Constituency. The LibDem manifesto was by far the most progressive of the major parties on issues around protecting the human rights of people seeking asylum. Determined to develop a productive working relationship with James (more so than we were able to with the former MP for Lewes), we had a first meeting with him in August. We discussed our concerns around the imprisonment of young asylum seekers at Lewes Prison and the proposed expansion of the detention estate by re-opening Haslar and Campsfield Immigration Removal Centres.

We found James receptive, well-informed and, most importantly, on the same humanitarian page.

That was a positive start at the local level. But how have the first 100 days of the **Labour government** shaped-up in terms of our priorities as a campaigning organisation? As you may know, Labour has enacted positive reversals of some of the worst aspects of the Tories' immigration legislation. The Rwanda scheme has been abandoned; the Bibby Stockholm barge is to be closed down in January 2025 and Labour has pledged to re-unite more Afghan nationals with their families. The government is also restarting asylum decision-making and addressing the massive backlog of claims which *should* allow people to receive status and begin their lives anew.

However, whilst yet more people have tragically lost their lives in the English Channel, Keir Starmer has been discussing immigration policy with Giorgia Meloni - the far-right Prime Minister of Italy and leader of the “Brothers of Italy” party - who has negotiated an offshoring of migrants agreement (which includes people seeking asylum) with Albania. Labour’s push to end the small boat crossings appears to focus on law enforcement and tackling the people-smuggling gangs, rather than looking at humanitarian resettlement schemes and humanitarian visas.

The forthcoming Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill looks to be a noisy and headline-grabbing affair, designed to appease the more right-leaning members and voters. Immigration raids, detention and deportation are all being lauded as valuable tools for dealing with immigration enforcement, while measures such as affordable routes to settlement and accessible pathways to citizenship, have received no attention at all.

Zoe Gardner writing in the *Byline Times* in July, has summed up Labour’s trajectory on immigration policy as trapping itself in the same cruel “rhetorical cul-de-sac as

their predecessors”. Their challenge is to break with that narrative and “restore compassion and proportion to the system.”

The urgent need to change the toxic narrative on migration and asylum was starkly and frighteningly illustrated by the anti-migrant and Islamophobic attacks in August, when libraries, mosques and a hotel housing people seeking asylum came under attack from far-right agitators and other, seemingly ordinary, local people.

Children as young as 12 are facing criminal prosecution for their part in these violent riots. It therefore seems imperative that a raft of anti-racist and fact-based education programmes is initiated to address the spread of misinformation on social media and to start to build cohesive and supportive communities, so that these atrocious scenes are never repeated. We will be addressing these issues when we return to our workshops for the year 8s at Priory School, and the Year 12s at Plumpton College, this November.

LOSRAS intends to keep holding the Government to account, by campaigning for:

- the fair and just treatment for those seeking asylum in the UK;
- a rejection of government plans to expand the detention estate;
- an end to the criminalisation of those arriving in the UK; and
- that people receive expert assessment and legal support to determine their asylum claims.

Maria Caulfield was reportedly the MP who received the most mail regarding refugee issues! Let's not break with that honourable tradition, despite the welcome change of political hue in our local MP.

The address for correspondence is:

james.maccleary.mp@parliament.uk

(Reference: Zoe Gardner, Byline Times, 23rd July, 2024)

Vigil for refugees

On Friday 6 September the newly formed Lewes Stand Up to Racism group organised a vigil on Cliffe Bridge, Lewes to remember the twelve people, mainly women and children, who died after the boat in which they hoped to reach safety in the UK was wrecked. About 50

people attended the vigil, including members of LOSRAS, to express their solidarity with people seeking asylum and to mourn the unnecessary deaths. A number of speakers spoke about the positive contributions that refugees had made to this country and a speaker from Lewes Trades Council recited *Greetings to the People of Europe*, a moving poem by the exiled Ethiopian journalist, poet and human rights campaigner **Alemu Tebeje**, who now lives next to Grenfell Tower in London. Tebeje's poem was projected on public buildings in Denmark, Italy, USA and UK by US artist, Jenny Holzer in 2017:

Greetings to the people of Europe

Over land and sea, your fathers came to Africa
and unpacked bibles by the thousand,
filling our ancestors with words of love:

*if someone slaps your right cheek,
let him slap your left cheek too!
if someone takes your coat,
let him have your trousers too!*

Now we, their children's children,
inheriting the words your fathers left behind,
our bodies slapped and stripped
by our lifetime presidents,

are braving seas and leaky boats,
cold waves of fear – let salt winds punch
our faces and your coastguards
pluck us from the water like oily birds!

but here we are at last to knock
at your front door,
hoping against hope that you remember
all the lovely words your fathers preached to
ours.

https://www.poetryinternational.com/en/poets-poems/poets/poet/102-30196_Tebeje

Howard Taylor (1936-2024)
A tribute

We were very sad to hear of the death of Howard Taylor, a long-time member of LOSRAS. Howard has been described as ‘joyfully generous’ and we remember his interested presence at our meetings and his sense of humour.

While acknowledging his own privileges in life, he gave staunch support to refugees both through his experienced prison visiting and his generosity, financially. In fact, through one of his many donations we were able to bargain with M&S to provide a hundred boxer shorts at much reduced prices!

We greatly appreciate his effective, steadfast contribution to the work of LOSRAS.

Our warmest thanks to **Gill Mills** who at the age of 91 likes to keep herself occupied by knitting. Gill has knitted five colourful and cosy blankets which she has donated to LOSRAS ‘to support refugees’. Our thanks to Gill for her efforts and her kindness!



LOSRAS aims to promote the welfare of refugees & people seeking asylum in and beyond the Lewes District:

Co-chairs: Alison Bell & Gill Tipping

Treasurer: Tony Sims

Membership Secretary: Belinda Kirby
01273 474935 belinda.kirbyte@gmail.com

Committee Members: Annie Ralph, Marta Paluch & Teresa O’Brien.