

The noble campaign by Lord Dubs calling for the Government to relocate 3,000 children from Europe is not one that we should dismiss lightly. I entirely recognise the need for the Government to do ever more to respond to the continuing migration crisis and how best we can support the most vulnerable people affected by this appalling situation. The Government is taking further action which I want to explain.

The Government has already announced last week the establishment of a new resettlement scheme focused on the children at risk in the Middle East and North Africa which is supported by the UNHCR and which will see up to 3,000 children relocated to the UK over the next four years. This is in addition to the existing commitment to resettle 20,000 Syrians under the Vulnerable Persons Relocation scheme.

In Europe, DfID have committed £46m to help support refugees and a £10m fund focused specifically on the needs of children in Europe. This includes how we can support reunification with family they may have been separated from and who are in other EU countries including the UK. This fund will be administered by three specialist organisations including Save the Children and UNHCR. Separately, 75 UK experts are being deployed to Greece to support more effective reception screening and processing of newly arrived migrants which will also help identify children and see that they are given appropriate support and care at the earliest opportunity.

I note concerns over how I voted. I can assure you that a key part of my decision-making process on this difficult issue was to both listen to the debate, but also to pray for guidance as to what the 'just' thing to do was. The example of Pope Francis in Lesbos in taking in Syrian refugees is one that we should not so much seek to imitate, but rather use as a provocation to our own consciences. We should always seek to live up to the highest of ideals, even if we may differ over how we do that. If all we do is seek to remedy the problems we see on our TV screens – essential as that is – but do nothing to try to bring peace to Syria as best we can, then we are solving nothing ultimately. The worst outcome in the world would be a depopulated, unviable Syria – something Syrian refugees themselves do not want to see.

This is also an issue where the head and the heart at times by necessity must divide. Anyone who has visited camps such as Lesbos, Idomeni or Calais cannot fail to be moved by the individual stories. Save the Children estimates there are some 95,000 children currently unaccompanied in Europe alone. Far, far more will be in that position in Syria. Deciding on the correct response is not an easy matter though. Walking by on the other side is never the right option, but nor is a solution which sounds benevolent, but actually does little to solve the underlying problem.

The purely emotional response is to seek to take all who need refuge – far more even than the proposed 3,000. But why 3,000, why not more? There is never a correct number. If the criteria is need alone, then everyone in need should have a theoretical right to be accommodated – a right if exercised we could not cope with. The number of people offering refuge in Blackpool is in single figures, for example, I gather. At some point, we have to say how many is 'too many' – not in such blunt terms, but through working to ensure a more effective European agreement. There are far too many European countries refusing to take

a single refugee, who have sought to erect barbed wire rather than open their arms. I support the idea that we should accept our 'fair share' but we also need to exhort others to take their fair share as well. The fate of 10,000 "missing" children requires us to work with other European countries to ensure undocumented children are less likely to go "missing" – a reference as much to the chaos that means their location is unknowable, as the presumption they are in particular danger.

We have already had 3,000 asylum applications from unaccompanied children in the UK over the past year. In addition, we need to consider whether we should be shouldering a burden that other countries in Europe should also shoulder. I recognise Greece in particular is struggling to cope – it is one reason we have sent 75 Home Office officials to Greece to help process unaccompanied children and identify those suitable for family reunification. But with such numbers in need, we cannot meet every individual's requirement for help across the continent, however heart-rending their story may be.

It should be noted that the many charities, including Save the Children, who do believe the Government should be doing more nonetheless recognise that we have done far more than many other countries already. With specialist provision such as HMS Bulwark which has been rescuing migrants from the sea, we have actually been forestalling greater tragedies. Such nuance has been entirely missing from many of the reactions to the actual vote. Save the Children estimate there are currently some 95,000 unaccompanied children. It would be morally difficult to 'choose' 3,000 to take – but rather I believe we need to ensure the words of European ministers to share burdens are matched by actions, which has hitherto not been the case. I would like the UK to lead a pan-European initiative to win agreement on a common programme – and have been urging that course on Ministers.

I would also observe that the existing generosity of the UK taxpayer as almost the largest single foreign donor meeting the needs of refugees in the Middle East and even in Europe is too often either overlooked or taken for granted. I also believe we need to tackle the difficult issue of age, since the definition of an unaccompanied child is any individual aged under 18. Sadly, as so many lack documents, age can be hard to prove. If we wish to focus on those perhaps most in need, it may be necessary to be narrower in terms of the age groups. At the same time, such a choice risks excluding older age groups of young people most vulnerable from people-trafficking or sexual exploitation. The hierarchy of need, and the consequences of maturity, do not make this an easy set of decisions to navigate through – and someone somewhere who is vulnerable will continue to be at risk.

In something of a rare departure for me, it may be worth quoting the Labour spokesman's words from the debate where he said "The Government are not saying that nothing needs to be done, or that they are perfectly catered for and are not at risk. The Government recognise that something needs to be done and that they are at risk, but the Government are still resisting [the Dubs amendment]". The question at stake is how best to take action. Our focus has to be on how we can play the most effective role in an extremely difficult situation. This should categorically not be about making ourselves feel good because we perceive ourselves to have been 'generous' but rather points the way to a better future. Just as in 1945-46, the UN Works & Relief Administration worked tirelessly to reunite those displaced by war, in the end I believe a similar United Nations effort – unclouded by the

internal politics of the EU and its constituent members – will be needed to heal a broken region.

I also want to see more done to enable those who have been willing to offer their homes to refugees to be enabled to do so without being put off by unhelpful local councils. Campaigning group Citizens UK is actively recruiting landlords to join their “Homes for Resettled Refugees Register” which you can find out more about at www.citizensuk.org/help_find_homes_for_syrian_refugees. I am also looking to meet with Ministers to discuss how parishes and other faith communities can be enabled, should they wish to, to provide the wrap-around support these families will need in addition to local councils.

I believe that the UK can be proud of the contribution we are making and where we have said that we will do something we have got on and taken action to make it happen. While recognising the sincere feelings of those who supported Lord Dubs amendment in the Lord's I believe that the approach set out by the Government – on fine balance - provides the best way to support our European partners and focus on the most vulnerable in the conflict region. I recognise the moral imperative to act, but I also wish action to be both targeted, and to deliver real improvement for the many. No-one should presume the choice of voting lobby was an easy one, but in the end I want to ensure that all 95,000 – if that is the true number – can be kept safe because of a concerted action by the developed world as a whole.

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