

ASYLUM SEEKERS AND POLITICS IN SCOTLAND: AUGUST 2001

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The month of August 2001 will be portrayed by many as a tumultuous turning-point in Scotland, the time when Westminster flexed its muscles against Holyrood, Scottish politicians woke to the realisation that they have new responsibilities in a more dangerous world, and when there was abrupt puncturing of assumptions that Scotland was well placed for the task of receiving refugees seeking asylum. A Kurdish refugee was killed in the early hours of Sunday 4th on his way home to Sighthill, after weeks of serious communal tension. On Tuesday 7th, the city council ordered bailiffs and police to evict protesters from Govanhill pool, where there had been a five-month occupation. There was violent confrontation between police and the crowd of protesters; the crowd included young asians in dangerously angry mood against the authorities. At first sight, the issues in Sighthill appeared to be about racism against refugees and in Govanhill about an extraordinary outbreak of crowd violence. But, when one explores deeper, the issues are more far-reaching and deeper. Scotland has failed to develop strategies to challenge racism and support ethnic diversity; Scotland has failed to close the gulf between rich and poor; Scotland has failed to deal with its democratic deficit - the gap between people and their elected representatives.

It is crucial that the tumult of 2001 is recorded. There must be analysis of the reasons why Sighthill was allowed to drift towards what had been widely predicted as the inevitable end – the death of a refugee. Equally, there must be analysis of the meaning of the developments in Govanhill where police and protest leaders know they came perilously to a street riot (the like of which Scotland has not known for many years) or even, possibly, a 'race riot' because angry asian youth were at the forefront of the conflict. The

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developments in Sighthill should not be analysed in isolation from developments the other side of the river Clyde, but at this stage in my research it is not possible to achieve equivalence. Sighthill was given much higher profile as a scandal of international proportions, and there are vast column inches devoted by journalists to analysis and commentary. Govanhill was not given the same priority, and so the archive of newscuttings is smaller and requires supplementing with interviews that I have not been able to undertake.

Sighthill's greater prominence lies not in the fact that a refugee was attacked, because such attacks had been reported for months, nor in the fact that a refugee was killed, because the 1989 murder of the Somali refugee, Axmed Sheekh, in Edinburgh did not raise the same furore (Kelly 2000a, pp.150-151). Sighthill entered the eye of a storm that had been brewing ever since Jack Straw's 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act was passed. This Act introduced a punitive and authoritarian regime of tightly budgeted resources, led from Westminster by Home Office ministers who spoke not about Britain's human rights obligations in international law, but of 'bogus' asylum seekers and 'benefits cheats'. The Act forced the hand of local authorities, especially those with any empty properties. Either they could negotiate contracts with the Home Office, or they would be forced to accept asylum seekers dispersed from London and the Channel ports. No corner of Great Britain was to be exempt; any Scottish legislation that stood in the way of the new regime was amended.

Scotland's response to the challenge from Westminster was fraught with risk from the start. Years of neglect of the need to challenge racism and to work with minority ethnic communities and their neighbours mean that the most basic of infrastructures exist only in fragmentary, ad hoc and erratic form. The all-white Scottish Parliament has generated no sense of urgency about establishing a national framework for monitoring and responding to racist incidents and attacks or about creating a national resource for interpreting. Local authorities, and their police forces, are extremely variable in their willingness and capacity to respond to communal tensions as and when they arise; crisis management rather than strategy prevails (Kelly 2000a and 2000b).

Glasgow was the only city to volunteer for the dispersal programme. Rather than wait to be ordered to accept asylum-seekers under the draconian powers of the new legislation, they negotiated the most favourable contract they

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could achieve, offering lettings in their large stock of empty properties, the greatest concentration of which are in the constituency of Springburn. The Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) had already negotiated a private contract with Westminster's newly created National Asylum Support Service (NASS) to provide full board for asylum seekers in their Red Road hostel, and Kosovars had been housed in tower blocks in Red Road and Sighthill. So, by default, this one constituency gained strategic significance for Scotland as a whole. The success or failure of Scotland's entry into the new world of refugees hung on the responses of the people of Springburn, and of Sighthill in particular.

JACK STRAW'S ASYLUM REGIME 1999-2001

In the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, the Home Secretary, Jack Straw, embarked on a dangerous experiment, pandering to tabloid-type analysis of Britain as a 'soft touch' for 'bogus refugees'. In search of deterrence, he sought to create a punitive regime for asylum seekers while they waited for their cases to be decided, subjecting them to authoritarian measures of tight bureaucratic control, dispersing them to cheap housing, with no allowance for the essential services they would require for protection from racist violence and for legal aid, and depriving them of cash by issuing them with vouchers. This regime was, supposedly, only a temporary, short-term price to be paid in return for the 'fairer, faster and firmer' decision-making that would result from his reform of what he described as the 'shambles' that prevailed in the Immigration and Nationality Directorate of his ministry (Home Office White Paper, July 1998).

Straw was prepared to run the risk that 'asylum seekers' could be housed in conditions that are grossly unsuitable and often dangerous, stigmatised by being required to use vouchers and live on benefits 30% below the official poverty line, terrorised by submission to tight rules and regulations about everything from restrictions on issue of vouchers through to the ways in which they must submit their cases (in English, and within two weeks of the papers being issued). He made no allowance for the fact that it was wildly unrealistic to expect that he could achieve the scale and pace of reform that he was planning, in a department that had been grossly neglected for many years. He made no allowance for the fact that if he created a new central structure, the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), and gave it swingeing powers to determine where asylum seekers should be housed, he

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would reduce the capacity of local authorities and refugee agencies to plan and prepare. He took no account of the fact that he was dispersing 'asylum seekers' of many different nationalities and ethnic groups, speaking many different languages, into areas where infrastructures of essential services just do not exist. He took no responsibility for the fact that if large numbers of foreigners are moved (under conditions that resemble influx) into neighbourhoods where no community development has been undertaken to prepare the way, there would be reaction of a kind that was shaped by the negative propaganda and stigmatising that he had initiated.

As the dispersal programme started in Scotland, the Audit Commission published its review of the first months of the new regime. They warned that inadequate local services and poor community relations hamper progress; good practice was far from universal; local agencies must develop co-ordinated strategies to meet the needs of this vulnerable group; central government should help by making parallel improvements in the national framework (June 2000). The Commission undertook its own research of local press articles and found that it was overwhelmingly negative - only 6 per cent cited positive contribution made by asylum seekers and refugees. It was therefore crucial to ensure that local communities had accurate information. 'Elected members should consider equity issues when determining policy; differential provision may be appropriate, but the rationale must be both justifiable and explicit' (2000, p.6).

Jack Straw's new regime is undoubtedly 'firmer', and soon became 'faster', but it is not 'fairer' because he exposed asylum seekers to unacceptable levels of risk. He led from the front in negative campaigning about the threat that asylum seekers posed to Britain. He did not require his creation, NASS, to monitor racist incidents in which their clients are targeted, or to work with housing providers to ensure their safety and security. Indeed NASS 'is probably the only housing body in the country with no coherent policies against racial harassment and no apparent overall strategy to promote good race relations' (Fekete 2001, p.2). Racist attacks on 'asylum seekers' were likely; precautions needed to be taken. The scale and intensity of attacks that ensued in different cities in England, and in Glasgow, was, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees, 'predictable given the climate of vilification of asylum-seekers that has taken hold in the UK in recent years' (Kris Janowski, 10 August, 2001).

NEGATIVE CAMPAIGNING AND RACISM

The ties between racist attacks and negative campaigning by politicians and media are close and immediate; the temperature of racist tensions always rises after inflammatory statements about immigration and asylum. But politicians, and the media, are caught by the populist ambition that there are votes to be won. In 1995, Andrew Lansley, then research director at Conservative Central office, summarised the electoral game that was to be played: 'It is clear that negative campaigning does deliver votes ... Immigration plays particularly well in the tabloids and has more potential to hurt. If Labour lines up with the civil liberties lobby, then Blair's efforts to remove crime as a Labour negative will be reversed' (quoted in the **Observer**, 3 September 1995). The Labour Party took Lansley's equation so seriously that they campaigned to the law and order lobby in 1997 and on negative aspects of asylum in 2001. Jack Straw's regime was introduced two years ahead of the 2001 general election that could win Labour an unprecedented second term, and so Straw and his ministers sought to occupy the moral high ground while the Conservatives, under William Hague, sought to find a niche within which they could campaign on traditional right-wing policies. Both Straw and Hague vied for position as the 'firmest' in dealing with 'bogus' claims.

Their hands were partially tied by the Commission for Racial Equality's all-party electoral compact they had signed because it was quoted against them on a number of occasions, most woundingly for the Labour Party by the black trade union leader Bill Morris and for the Conservatives by Lord Taylor, their black member in the House of Lords. Straw, Hague and Widdicombe (shadow Home Secretary) struggled to create electoral advantage out of asylum, but only achieved a strange form of stalemate. As a result, there was something of a political vacuum, into which extremists could insert themselves. In the 2001 General Election, the British National Party, campaigning in carefully selected seats on a platform against asylum, immigration and Muslims, won a higher proportion of the vote than ever before.

The political vacuum also created opportunities for the media. As indicated above, the Audit Commission was sufficiently concerned about the hue and cry that ensued from the passage of Jack Straw's Immigration and Asylum Act to carry out their own survey of newspapers. Not only the tabloids but also the broadsheets were implicated, journalists having fallen into the trap of using the language of the Home Secretary as if it were descriptive rather than

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pejorative. By early 2000, the Press Complaints Commission felt the need to caution newspaper editors about 'the danger that inaccurate and misleading reporting may generate an atmosphere of fear and hostility which is not borne out by the facts' (quoted in Mollard 2001, p.9) and in August the United Nations International Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination appealed to the government to 'take the lead in sending out positive messages about asylum seekers and protecting them from racial harassment' (2001, paras 346-372).

In Scotland, Oxfam studied the content of articles in six Scottish newspapers between 6 March and 28 April 2000. They found that emotive language (such as 'flood', 'wave', 'influx') was used to describe the numbers applying for asylum, blatant untruths were told about the cost of supporting asylum seekers, a hierarchy of deservingness was generated – picking out groups such as the Roma for vilification as 'bogus' but sustaining support for the Kosovars. The headline articles were backed by editorials and opinion pieces that often expressed open hostility, and by selections of letters from readers that were overwhelmingly negative. Only a small proportion of coverage was given to interviews with asylum seekers and refugees, and refugee agencies. Feature articles, in which journalists had carried out more thorough investigations, were positive, but they accounted for only 5 per cent of total coverage.

Oxfam concluded that

most of the press coverage was negative to the point of being hostile; in order to sustain this level of hostility the reporting had to be partial; government policy is no longer subject to independent scrutiny: the press reflects the government's line that making conditions less welcoming and more hostile to asylum seekers will deter them from travelling to Britain; the impact of all this hostility is to increase the threat under which the asylum-seeking community lives and to enable the government to send potentially legitimate claimants back to situations where they will face personal danger.
(Mollard, p.25)

Clearly Oxfam were fearful of the consequences if the content and tone of press coverage did not become more balanced.

VOUCHERS

The withdrawal of vouchers in favour of a cash-based system of asylum support represents a significant victory for all those who fought to see the scheme scrapped. The reason why the voucher scheme fell - and fell so quickly - is that no MP would defend it. That was a direct result of the superb work of campaigners ... a huge number of MPs were sent letters detailing why vouchers have to go. One MP forwarded one of these letters to the Home Secretary with a note saying that he feels privileged to represent people who want to play a part in helping to improve the lives of those less fortunate than themselves.

(Nick Hardwick, Chief Executive, Refugee Council, November 2001)

It is difficult to recall any single measure that has been as widely loathed as the cumbersome, inefficient, expensive and humiliating system of vouchers that refugees are required to use while they are categorised as asylum seekers. The vouchers drew together refugees, trade unions, refugee agencies, campaigners for racial justice, churches of all denominations, other faith groups, members of parliament, and journalists - a formidable opposition. Bill Morris, the General Secretary of the Transport and General Workers Union first opened the onslaught in April 2000 with a stinging attack on the Home Office's record on immigration and asylum (Kelly 2000b, pp.33-36). Morris returned repeatedly and vociferously to the attack, and his union worked with Oxfam and the Refugee Council in a study that demonstrated asylum seekers were being left hungry because of bureaucratic breakdowns (quoted in the **Guardian** special investigation, p.42). The new Home Secretary, David Blunkett, bowed to the weighty pressure and agreed to end the voucher system in 2002. But, even now, he is refusing to allow asylum seekers a cash regime - the vouchers will be replaced by smart cards.

By the time that Straw forced Scotland into line on vouchers by superseding the Scottish legislation that had empowered local authorities to pay cash benefits, some English councils had already experimented with the scheme. A **Big Issue** survey found that few supermarkets accepted them, and so asylum-seekers had to travel longer journeys in order to buy provisions; those supermarkets that did accept vouchers refused asylum-seekers cash change if they did not spend up to the limit; asylum-seekers found themselves embarrassed by all the extra time they required at the till, abused by other shoppers and bullied by shop assistants who refused to allow them to buy some goods that were 'luxuries'. Pooling vouchers for communal cooking

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resulted in the arrest of a man who was shopping on behalf of a group; a 'black market' immediately developed as asylum seekers sold their vouchers, at less than face value, in order to obtain the cash they required for phone calls, transport and payment of bills to utilities that would not deal in vouchers; some asylum seekers refused to collect their vouchers after being humiliated by shop staff in front of their children. (For more details see Fekete (2000) and the **Guardian** special investigation.)

Stories are legion about, on the one hand, the ingenuity of asylum-seekers who find ways round the stranglehold of the vouchers, and, on the other, of the grinding down of dignity and hope as they trek round the designated post office where they receive their vouchers (often miles from their residence), the few shops that will accept their currency, and juggle priorities of need when they are 30% below poverty level. Plans were being made by refugee agencies, trade unions and churches to engage in civil disobedience, buying the vouchers at full value, then demanding the cash in return. The government realised that they would not win a Parliamentary vote if the issue was forced.

DISPERSAL AND SCOTLAND'S PREPAREDNESS

There are no signs, however, that there will be any change in the components of the enforced dispersal programme that have caused the greatest concern and that was to bring refugee agencies and asylum support teams in Glasgow to their knees. Whether in Britain, or the other European countries that have developed this approach, it has been realised that disproportionate burdens fall on the poorest authorities not because they have the appropriate infrastructures, but because they have vacant housing (Boswell 2001). Because NASS, and equivalent government agencies elsewhere, take no responsibility for protecting refugees from hostility and ensuring racial harmony, they do not require strategies, policies and mechanisms to be established by the receiving authorities. Indeed, NASS regards racism, like health, as issues that should be undertaken without any additional financial support (British Medical Association 2001).

The dispersal programme has been starved of resources and incentives to ensure partnership with the local authorities and assistance in creating social assistance and essential community infrastructures, such as the refugee community organisations that could play an effective part in support of new arrivals (Margaret Lally, of the Refugee Council, BBC News, 8 August 2001). Dispersal can work, but not if it is accommodation-led to the exclusion

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of social planning and investment, and if the central government agency in the lead is itself functioning slowly, failing to give positive messages to abate negative media coverage and failing to give funding that covers the reasonable costs of local services (Audit Commission 2000)

It was widely known that within months of the Act coming into effect, there would be several thousand refugees sent to Scotland as asylum seekers in the new regime. The asylum seekers would be of diverse national and ethnic origins, faiths and mutually incomprehensible languages - a veritable tower of babel. For the first nine months, Glasgow was not allowed to choose where the asylum seekers were housed but had to accept the diktat of NASS from London, with, inevitably, the chaotic consequence that the dispersal within the city was bizarrely random. When the city wrested back control of allocations, there was some possibility that a strategic, rather than reactive, response could be developed, but, by then, the newly created council teams, and the local network of refugee agencies, had been overwhelmed. They started shakily, extricating themselves from the abrupt disbanding of the Kosovar programme, unable to sustain any momentum in the core services of interpreting, legal advice, English language training, health, education and social work facilities. As the contracts for the Kosovar programme teams were terminated, there was bitter rivalry as refugees and council staff competed for new posts. The council asylum support teams were established *after* the programme started and *after* hundreds of asylum seekers had already arrived.

As predicted 'Scotland's tentative, ad hoc and erratic infrastructures for the challenging of racism and integration of minorities were too fragile to withstand the new strains' (Kelly 2000b, p.41). For instance: the Refugee Forums that had been initiated during the Bosnian evacuations of 1992 no longer functioned, and so multi-agency working had to start from scratch; the community safety branch of Strathclyde Police and the multi-agency racial incident monitoring (MARIM) groups do not report directly and regularly to leading politicians, and so crucial intelligence about community response to the arrival of the asylum seekers was lost; the legal service of the Scottish Refugee Council was closed down; the public service interpreting service in Glasgow had been left unreformed within the council's Social Work Department, but was now expected to meet complex demands for a wider range of languages and in more life-threatening situations than ever before (Sunday Herald: 27 May 2001); the new Home Office rules about the resourcing of asylum seekers' education were disruptive and intrusive; the

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inefficiency of NASS in administering the vouchers meant that many asylum seekers had to be supplied with food parcels for weeks on end; Scotland had very few immigration lawyers who were prepared to take asylum cases (Audit Commission 2000; Smith 2001). Indeed, there was reason to fear that asylum seekers could be severely disadvantaged by being sent to Scotland.

Instead of the sophisticated strategic approach that was required to steer departments and agencies through this fraught, unhappy time, a quarrelsome, rivalrous environment of inefficiency and guilt was generated, and many asylum seekers fell through the net, abandoned to their lonely fates, in YMCA rooms and council flats. Council teams and refugee agencies were in 'fire fighting' mode, working hard and fast to keep pace with the complexities of their casework, and finding their way through the labyrinths of NASS and other Home office departments. All the signs and symptoms of near-breakdown were evident – staff frequently working overtime, abnormally high sickness rates, crisis-working in place of community development.

The facts summarised above were 'known' but there was no evidence that their significance had been grasped in the corridors of power. In a dangerous display of complacency, leading politicians in the Scottish Executive in Holyrood and the City Chambers in George Square, Glasgow, seemed to be resting on the laurels of a mythical past and Glasgow's 'reputation for friendliness'. The facts of what was happening down on the ground were reported but the lines of communication to the politicians who could release the essential resources were blocked; they were not paying attention. There were warning signs that tension was rising, there were repeated, and increasingly brazen, attacks on refugees. There were also reminders that refugees who have managed to flee persecution and penetrate the formidable barriers that lie in the way of their reaching a safe haven have remarkable skills and abilities. It was only a matter of time before some, once they had won the right to stay in Britain, would succeed in cracking the codes of language and Scottish systems and start to speak for themselves or, of immediate significance for community relations, start to take action to protect themselves.

Somehow, even the fact that the reception of asylum seekers would be closely observed by opponents of Jack Straw's regime did not alert the politicians to the risks they were running. Instead of analysing the key components of the Kosovar programme that should be replicated, they neglected even the most fundamental community development precautions. Indeed, the district of

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Glasgow that was to receive the greatest number of refugees on a scale that swung its demographic balance by 20-25% learnt about the impending change through the (mainly hostile) analysis of the tabloid press, and council workmen arriving to refurbish flats in tower blocks that had been neglected for many years. Gossip and rumour were rife; community tensions rose; refugees experienced harassment and attack, and could not believe that anyone would take action to protect them.

SPRINGBURN – THE STRATEGIC SITE

Springburn constituency is one of the poorest in Glasgow, Scotland and Europe, remarkable both for the poverty of its inhabitants, and for the lack of community infrastructures. Springburn has been devastated over the years not only by the loss of industrial employment, but also by the brutality of demolition without humane replacement, and by the dangerous barriers created by Scotland's busiest railway line (to Edinburgh) and motorway (the M8 that links Glasgow with the east coast and the south). Springburn is scarred by boundaries that isolate its different communities, the constituency functions almost like an archipelago with islands of habitation that tend towards introversion, and retention of ancient 'tribal' loyalties. Springburn has more than its share of intimidating tower block habitation, and less than its share of the facilities that make life tolerable for people on low incomes. The support given to Springburn, and to the neighbourhoods within its boundaries, was therefore crucial to the success or failure of Scotland's response. After all, if there were hundreds of empty flats because Glaswegians chose not to live there, then there must be problems to be solved.

That support was not forthcoming. No preparatory fieldwork was undertaken, no community development initiated, no project office installed. Red Road and Sighthill residents (including Kosovars who had been living there for the past two years) were given no information about the influx they were to experience. They watched and waited for the inevitable reaction as services were withdrawn and the new arrivals moved into a vacuum. The rate of harassment and attack was obscured because refugees were fearful of authorities and it would take time for word-of-mouth reassurance to break through the barrage of hostility. In the Spring of 2000, a network of volunteer refugee workers in Glasgow Asylum Rights Campaign (GARC) compiled a dossier of racial attacks. They concluded: 'During the first year of dispersal,

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racial attacks increased in frequency and severity ... GARC is regularly asked if it will take the murder of an asylum seekers to draw attention to the racial violence they experienced every day in Glasgow. ... Something is going terribly wrong with current support systems' (GARC, February 2001; also Grandon 2001).

One public agency that seemed able to sustain essential lines of communication and authority and was prepared to challenge tight budgetary rules was the police. Increasingly alarmed by the tensions rising in the neighbourhoods where the asylum seekers were housed, aware of the kinds of abusive hatred that were being expressed, and well-informed about criminality, they took action. A Chief Inspector was appointed to maintain strategic oversight across the city; the sergeant in Springburn who had worked full-time in liaison with the Kosovar refugees was transferred to asylum duties; a police constable was appointed to work full-time with him as 'asylum liaison officer'. As asylum seekers were moved into other parts of the city, the police maintained a watchful oversight, sometime refusing to approve accommodation in areas they considered too dangerous. As time went by, the police were to take a leading role in communal relations, trusted by refugees who had fled state persecution.

THE DEATH OF FIRSAT YILDIZ DAG

It would take a lot to make me ashamed to say that I live and work in Glasgow. But the treatment meted out to asylum seekers in recent weeks by some of our fellow citizens comes close to forcing those words to be uttered. The face of our city has been disfigured by brutal acts of aggression against people whose only crime is to flee persecution and seek refuge in a foreign country. As Archbishop of Glasgow, I feel duty-bound to denounce the violence, intimidation, and bullying of asylum-seekers in our midst. ... But our concern should extend beyond violent incidents. The church condemns not only the intimidation, but also the institutionalised discrimination suffered by asylum-seekers. ... Such sanctions are an affront to the human dignity of the individuals concerned ... As a Christian, I cannot approve of such blatant discrimination. (Thomas Winning, Archbishop and Cardinal, **Herald**, 1 June 2001)

In this trenchant statement, made poignant by his sudden death a few days later, Cardinal Winning, Scotland's most prominent Catholic, denounced not

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only the violent attacks on asylum seekers, but the regime that discriminated against them by condemning them to poverty and vouchers and refusing them the chance to work for six months. The strength of his statement was an indicator not only of the polarising of opinion for and against the new asylum regime, but also of deep fear about its consequences for Scotland. There was mounting evidence that the corrosive effects of politically-led tabloid denigration of 'bogus asylum cheats' were penetrating deep not only in the communities where refugees were being housed, but elsewhere. 'Asylum seeker' had become a widespread term of abuse, an incitement to harassment and attack.

By January, broadsheet newspapers were reporting on alarming numbers of attacks on asylum seekers, some of whom were fleeing their council houses (**Independent** 23 January 2001); in March, the **Herald** reported that 80% of asylum seekers in Glasgow had suffered racist abuse or attacks, and almost all of their children had been victims. They also cited Strathclyde Police reports of 67 incidents in which refugees had been attacked, mostly by children under the age of 16! (**Herald** 17 March 2001). In April tensions rose when word reached the press about the contract with a private firm to run the Home Office detention centre that was being prepared in Lanarkshire, and the Conservative leader William Hague won publicity for his views on asylum and immigration in the General Election campaign (**Herald** 23 April 2001). Concern was growing about rising tensions in the Sighthill district in particular (**Scotsman** 23 April 2001).

On Tuesday 25th April, the news broke that two Palestinian refugees – the brothers Haitham and Iyad Saada – had been mobbed and beaten by a large crowd of youths, female as well as male, late on Saturday night in Sighthill. This was the first attack to gain high media and political profile – the brothers were visited in hospital by Shona Robison MSP, convener of the Scottish parliament's cross-party group on asylum seekers, given prominent support by George Galloway, MP in a neighbouring constituency and long-term campaigner for the rights of Palestinians, and the Lord Provost of Glasgow issued a statement:

I'm bitterly disappointed and upset. This is unacceptable to asylum seekers or anyone else. Our people are among the friendliest in the world and cowardly incidents go against all of that.
(**Daily Record** 25 April 2001)

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Mid-May, the Lord Provost convened a special inter-agency meeting to discuss the rate and severity of the attacks on the Saada brothers and other asylum seekers. Councillor Archie Graham admitted: 'I don't think there is any way we could have predicted the levels of abuse that have been meted out to these folks' (**Scotsman** 15 May 2001). Strathclyde police initiated night patrols in the areas where the attacks had been most frequent and severe, accompanied by interpreters in the key languages (**Herald** 8 June 2001). Tension was mounting within Sighthill as residents debated the furore that had been raised around the Saada brothers. They objected strongly to 'being branded' as anti-social elements not just in the tabloids, but also by broadsheet journalists such as David Aaronovitch who wrote about them 'too apathetic to vote, and yet they managed to hold their first demo ... to moan about "favouritism" for asylum-seekers' (**Independent** 10 May 2001). Some residents began to meet with asylum seekers in attempts to defuse the tension and build bridges; they began to win some sympathetic publicity in the broadsheets (**Herald**, **Sunday Herald** and **Sunday Telegraph** 19 May 2001 – 30 May 2001).

Late in May, Glasgow City Council took action, raising an eviction notice against the family of twin boys who had been involved in repeated confrontations with refugees (**Herald** 31 May 2001). To their surprise, this action was opposed by an alliance of leading figures in Scottish trade unions, NGOs and the Scottish Socialist Party who protested that evictions were not the solution, but would increase tensions because

the root of the problem lies in the long-term neglect of the area, the tenth poorest in Britain. ... Racism feeds off poverty. It is time for real and substantial economic regeneration ... Such economic support for the entire community, both longstanding tenants, and asylum seekers recently arrived in the area, would serve to unite the community regardless of race or creed; evictions will not.

(Letter to the **Herald** 6 June 2001)

In this letter is contained a political analysis that Holyrood and George Square were reluctant to share unless their hands were forced. Among the signatories to this letter was Mohammad Naveen Asif, a refugee from Afghanistan, granted asylum in February, founding member of the Glasgow Refugees Action Group. A man who speaks many of the key languages in Glasgow, he was to display extraordinary levels of political skill and astuteness as he worked to defuse the dangerously militant anger of Kurds

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and Afghans, some of whom had already defended themselves against their persecutors, and wanted to carry weapons.

Throughout June, revelations about the failings of the asylum regime, and the conditions endured by asylum seekers, in hostels, in council housing and homeless on the streets, were commonplace in some Scottish newspapers, while others continued the onslaught against the asylum seekers themselves. But still there seemed to be no political sense of urgency within Holyrood or George Square. Indeed, Glasgow was fortunate that Strathclyde Police continued to take the lead in defusing tensions, working to win the confidence of refugee representatives and Sighthill residents, participating in sometimes volatile meetings, increasing the numbers of foot patrols. By mid-June they were able to announce that they had achieved a downturn in the rate of attacks on refugees, and they also announced that they would organise a cultural and sporting festival for June 30th.

The Festival was a success – each ethnic community, whether refugee or Glaswegian, was encouraged to display their dance, music, food, and the football skills of their youth. In the crowds and by the stalls could be seen many former adversaries, no longer shouting at each other, but making considerable efforts to display the better side of Sighthill. By late afternoon, more and more of the crowd joined the Kurds in their linked arms, swaying circle dancing. Sighthill residents, and their wellwishers from elsewhere, dispersed with a sense of hope and anticipation that more could be achieved. The momentum of community dialogue seemed to be gathering pace in a district that had been more destitute than any of the others to which asylum seekers were dispersed. Indeed, behind the scenes, dialogue was beginning to overcome the noisy contention that had been waged throughout May. The Glasgow Refugees Action Group was beginning to have inter-communal effect, some national groups were forming their own associations, and Sighthill tenants' leaders received support from Glasgow's most effective anti-racist campaigners.

Five weeks after the Festival, momentum was halted by shocking news. Firsat Yildiz Dag, a Kurdish refugee from Turkey who had arrived in Glasgow two weeks previously, had been killed in the early hours of Sunday 5th August, on his way back to Sighthill from the city centre. His young companion had frantically called on his mobile for help as Firsat was beaten and stabbed. This time, the fear and rage of the Kurds could not be contained; they massed for a demonstration and there were skirmishes on the street as Sighthill

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polarised (**Herald** 6 August 2001). Mohammad Asif, and other newly elected asylum community leaders, steered the demonstration towards George Square and, working fast across the different languages, encouraged the crowd to focus on demands that council leaders come out to meet them. After negotiations with council officers, the demonstration dispersed as the Kurds agreed to return to Sighthill for the night and the police organised buses to take them home.

Now, Glasgow city council demonstrated some urgency. The council leader, Charles Gordon, met a delegation of asylum seekers on Monday morning, agreed to consider their demands and respond within a week. He also announced that the pressure on Sighthill would be eased by halting dispersal for the time being and sending new arrivals elsewhere. On Monday afternoon, the Kurds again marched towards George Square and held a silent vigil, when they were joined by hundreds of supporters, deeply shocked by what had happened in our city. By the evening, a large crowd of other Sighthill residents gathered in a counter demonstration, demanding that they should also be heard. The police maintained a strong presence, keeping the two sides apart, and talking to both about their concerns, especially after an Iranian was knifed by three men inside one of the tower blocks.

The next day, the council leader, Charles Gordon, gave an extended interview to the **Herald**, and confirmed that urgent measures were being taken, including the appointment of a senior officer to act as 'trouble shooter and mediator'. In this interview, Gordon stated:

We like to maintain the image of Glasgow as being a friendly city – and it is – but these events raise the question that maybe we are seeing an aspect of Glasgow that we don't want to see. ... We've been housing refugees in Sighthill for 14 years and all sorts of communities have passed through there. They've all got on fine with the local residents. A lot of the problems you get are caused by the indigenous anti-social element and they affect both the local population and the asylum-seekers. Of course, when it affects the asylum-seekers, people are always ready to suggest it's racially motivated. I'm not going to say it isn't, but a lot of this anti-social element would cause harm to you whether you're white, black or yellow.
(**Herald** 9 August 2001)

This was an extraordinary statement on the part of the politician who had chosen to assume responsibility for steering his city through the rigours of

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Jack Straw's regime and who was speaking while Glasgow was at the epicentre of an international storm. On 8th August, Glasgow's own tabloid, the **Daily Record**, stepped way beyond the bounds of decency by publishing a front page with large headlines 'Turk stabbing victim conned his way in as asylum seeker' after obtaining details from the embassy of the country that Yildiz had fled! On Thursday 9th August, the **Daily Star** joined the fray:

The racial problems of Glasgow's inner city areas have disappeared almost overnight thanks to a recent influx of alleged asylum seekers shipped there against their will by our caring, sharing Government ... the locals were a little bit peeved when said asylum seekers were given newly-refurbished homes and preferential treatment. So peeved, in fact, that some of them – Catholic and Protestant alike – united to complain. OK, so they went a bit far by stabbing a couple of them but at least they stopped beating the living daylights out of each other.

All the worst predictions had been exceeded and the torrent of press coverage that was unleashed on Glasgow was overwhelmingly hostile, to the council that dared to offer to take refugees, but now had a murder on its hands, to the people of Glasgow that were treated with disdain as the inheritors of the traditions of No Mean City, to the asylum seekers themselves. Immense damage was done on all sides, to Glasgow, Scotland and Britain.

THE POLITICAL VACUUM IN SCOTLAND

I can't blame the people of Sighthill for the way they felt. They should have been consulted. They should have been told: 'These people are here because their lives are in danger. They've seen their mothers and fathers killed in front of them. They're in fear just through having spoken out in the papers.' Nobody was speaking to anybody. There was frustration. Then, when the boy got murdered in the park, people thought they were doing right by taking things into their own hands. On the day of the asylum seekers' march, there was almost a war in the street.
(Margaret Thompson, Sighthill resident, **Herald** 31 August 2001).

As the noose of Jack Straw's regime tightened, refugees in Scotland were revealed as the victims of democratic deficit and political vacuum when they took action against the conditions of fear under which they were living. They pressed political points that were sensitive because there was such widespread

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distaste for the new regime among journalists in the broadsheets, radio and television who were willing to give high profile publicity to the issues, and to ensure that the experiences of the refugees were heard. Closely in touch with refugee agencies, church and faith organisations, trade unions and the refugee communities themselves, they ensured that there was a steady flow of stories and critical analysis informing their public of the very issues that government politicians were seeking to bury. For once, the tabloids found themselves out of step with public mood and even the **Daily Record** had to retreat from its scabrous attack on the reputation of Firsat Dag, by publishing a full page of letters of protest from readers (Saturday 11 August 2001; see also **Big Issue in Scotland**, 16-22 August 2001).

Scotland's opportunity lay in the fact that, whatever the scale of arrival in the ports of southern England, they would receive smaller numbers, were forewarned, and had previous experience of creating the infrastructures of support that are required if refugees, and their host communities, are to be guided through the complex processes of arrival, settlement and integration. Scotland certainly had adjustments to make because Straw had refused to allow the continuation of the housing and welfare benefits that had been given to refugees in the past; also, it was clear from the start of the dispersal into Scotland that there would be greater national, ethnic and linguistic diversity than ever before. If the archives had been checked, then it would have been realised that every incoming refugee group in Scotland has experienced hostility, including instances of serious harassment, attack and even murder, and that most refugees have chosen to leave Scotland at the earliest opportunity.

If consulted, Scottish refugees would have emphasised that when they first arrive, their dominant concern, their immediate priority is security and safety. They cannot settle, start to recover from the past, deal with the legal complexities of their applications, housing, health, welfare, educational and social issues if they live in fear of their neighbours. Initially, they needed immediate and ready access to advice and guidance for everything from the simplest of everyday tasks, through to the daunting process of representing their cases for asylum. If they are supported effectively in the first days of settlement, then many could start to apply their skills in their new context and could rapidly grow in effectiveness.

The Kosovars experienced precisely the conditions that were required to solve problems as they arose. They were housed in areas of poverty and they

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were watched warily by their neighbours, but they arrived to high profile political and media support for their plight. They, and their neighbours, had ready access to a locally based, on-site project office where not only council staff but also interpreters were available. They were given cash, and so were able to shop wherever they chose. Education was provided not only for children in school, but for adults in their community education classes, where they rapidly gained skills in everyday communication and computing. There was a hierarchy of preference in their housing – the tower blocks of Red Road and Sighthill were feared - but the level of harassment and attack they experienced was not as high as it would become in the newly hostile environment.

Scottish politicians failed to engage in analysis of what could be predicted and what should be put in place in spite of the straitjacket of Straw's regime. If political rhetoric has changed to negative; if refugees are tarred as 'asylum seekers'; if they are refused the cash that allows them to shop around for best value; if they are exposed to humiliation at the hands of shop assistants and shoppers in the queues that build up behind them; if they are concentrated in housing that had been neglected for years, where levels of crime and violence were high - then surely refugees are at risk. Oblivious to the immediate dangers, Scottish politicians fell into the trap of the 'accommodation-led' dispersal programme within which Glasgow City Council negotiated its substantial contract with the Home Office. No provision was made for a strategic, and resourced, approach to safety and security.

The politicians were oblivious also to other dangers because no forms of community audit were carried out, to check on the capacity of, for instance, councillors and tenants' groups to respond to the new demands, and to identify training and resource needs if refugees were to live free from fear. Positive Action in Housing (PAIH) in recent surveys has found that there is effectively segregation between minority ethnic and mainstream housing advice agencies and between tenants' organisations and black and minority ethnic residents. None of the housing advice agencies interviewed had had any training in dealing with cases of racial harassment although this was the main problem reported; of 133 tenants organisations, only 4 had minority ethnic members (PAIH 2001).

If such community audits had been carried out, then it would have been clear that Sighthill in particular was in urgent need of resource. Unlike Drumchapel and Castlemilk, where refugees were also housed, Sighthill was cut off from

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the church networks, community organisations and higher morale of neighbourhoods where there had been recent refurbishment and improvement programmes (**Independent on Sunday** 12 August 2001). Sighthill, under the conditions that prevailed at the time of onset of the dispersal programme, was clearly ill-equipped to meet the new demands, and yet it was chosen as the strategic site. It almost defies belief that the residents were left to learn about the impending inflow through the tabloids and the arrival of council workmen to refurbish the flats for refugees. But that was what happened.

By a curious twist of fate, the drama documentary, **Gas Attack**, to which many of Scotland's Kurdish refugees had contributed as advisers during the research for the script, and extras during filming, was scheduled for screening in the August Edinburgh Film Festival, three weeks after the death of Firsat. After some discussion by councillors (by now very anxious and tempted to withhold its licence) the film was also shown in Glasgow Film Theatre (**Scotsman** 14 August 2001). The script was first devised in 2000, in response to the 1995 Sarin nerve gas attack in Tokyo's subway, and the 1999 nail bomb attack in London. Influenced by the Kurdish refugees he met, the scriptwriter, Rowan Joffe, decided to extend the story line with cross-reference to the gas attack launched by Saddam Hussein's regime against Halabja in the Kurdish region. It was an extraordinarily moving experience to participate in the film and to view the film alongside Robina Qureshi (of Positive Action in Housing), Peri Ibrahim, a Kurdish interpreter, and other refugees who took leading roles. For many this was their first experience of being heard in ways that influenced a public event. It is important also to add that components in the film were to prove uncannily prophetic – intent to murder refugees, the use of anthrax spores to terrorise.

On Saturday August 25th, the morning after the Glasgow screening, members of the film cast and crew, along with other leading Scottish actors and directors, went to Sighthill in order to join a demonstration that was the culmination of weeks of work by residents and refugees. 'Sighthill United against Racism and Poverty' was launched with a march to George Square and the laying of a wreath on Glasgow's war memorial, in memory of Firsat, by two Sighthill residents and two refugees. Aamer Anwar, one of the organisers of the march and rally, who had worked closely with Mohammad Asif in Sighthill, spoke powerfully on the platform and published an article the next day, spelling out the lessons to be learned from Sighthill (**Sunday Herald** 26 August 2001). A leading member of Sighthill United and the newly residents' committee, Margaret Thompson, spoke for many when she

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compared the happier situation they were winning with the resentful and fearful past.

We began to communicate. We've made friends. They're people like me ... or maybe they're actually more educated than me, but they're still grateful to speak to me and be listened to. Since Saturday's march, we've had congratulations faxed from Ayr, Saltcoats, Dundee, Manchester, London, Madrid. People have been so genuine, it's unbelievable. (Margaret Thompson, Sighthill resident, **Herald** 31 August 2001).

In the weeks that followed the death of Firsat, Glasgow city council appointed its first senior coordinator, Dawn Corbett, working directly to the Chief Executive and council leader; the Scottish Executive agreed that the cabinet minister for Social Justice and Communities - Jackie Baillie - should bring the brief on asylum into her portfolio; the leaders of the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Liberal Democrats (who is also minister for Justice) paid their first visits to Sighthill; Princes Charles and William toured Sighthill in order to promote the Prince's Trust projects that are being initiated in the area; Edinburgh Council announced that it was now ready to start accepting refugees in a phased dispersal.

Was this the turning of the tide?

CONCLUSIONS: GLASGOW, REFUGEES AND COMMUNITIES

What surprises me is the liberal shock the discovery of racism in Scotland seems to have occasioned. It's as if we thought it had gone away for good or perhaps had never been here. Racism was never something we could declare extinct, like the sabre-toothed tiger. It's a disease to which we remain continually susceptible.

This is what happened in Sighthill. There may be a few racists in Sighthill, but there are thousands of people there who are not racist and who have been treated with appalling dismissiveness in the business of locating asylum seekers. Let's confront racism wherever we find it but let's not pretend it's some weird phenomenon which has occurred incomprehensibly among us. For if it has no causes it can have no cure.

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The ugly recent eruption of racism has its causes all right. But you won't find them in the nature of the people of Sighthill. You will find them in the successive stages by which a major issue has been chronically mismanaged.

(William McIlvanney, **Scotland on Sunday** 12 August 2001)

McIlvanney's impassioned piece encapsulates the key points that refugees and refugee agencies have been making whenever they had the ear of politicians – racism is a fact of life in Scotland; refugees, especially asylum seekers, are the target of racist attacks; racism becomes dangerous when 'unhealthy and septic conditions' have been created; Glaswegians living in poverty have been treated dismissively; the influx of refugees was 'chronically mismanaged'; it is a 'major issue'. Scotland cannot continue to indulge itself in the belief that there is no racism here (Ian MacWhirter, **Sunday Herald** 12 August 2001).

Politicians should have been alert and aware, they should have anticipated what councillor Archie Graham called 'the levels of abuse that have been meted out to these folks'; they should have prepared the way; they should have kept a watchful eye on the attacks that were being reported; they should have ensured that their staff were working within a strategy, not firefighting on all sides. Why were leading politicians so oblivious to the fact that if they neglected Springburn, their strategic centre, Glasgow and Scotland would be held to account? Why did they not realise that the refugees and their host communities required injection of social resource if they were to shake down together?

Across the city, in Govanhill, tensions in another neglected community hit the headlines just days after the death of Firsat. Since March, there had been public protest against the council proposal to demolish Govanhill baths – an 87-year old Edwardian Baroque building on Calder Street alongside tenements and shops, close to the library, health centre, neighbourhood centre and the new Taleem Trust multicultural centre. Govanhill is located alongside Glasgow's East End and the Gorbals within Shettleston constituency which 'has the dubious honour of being rated the most unhealthy constituency in the whole of Britain' (Hassan and Lynch 2001, p.169). 42% of Shettleston live below the poverty line; male unemployment is the eighth highest in Scotland; Govanhill has been uneasily aware of the fact that while there has been urban regeneration for their neighbours in Gorbals, they have experienced rundown and loss of community facilities. The breast-screening clinic (that brought thousands of women into the area for their checks) was closed three months

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previously; the health centre has been downgraded; and there are rumours about the library closing. The bitterly opposed Victoria Road traffic system has restricted passing trade and led to the rundown of local shops. 'Seven years ago people didn't go into the city. This is where they shopped. You had everything on Victoria Road, from shoe shops to clothing shops to chemists, butchers, bakers. It was a wonderful area. And now there are only second hand shops and boarded up shops. It's becoming a ghetto' (Thomas Bernatzky 2001)

Gerry Hassan, local resident and political analyst, summarised key issues:

For many, the decision to shut the pool was the last straw. A vocal public protest challenged the council, with a picket outside the barricaded baths. Sheriff officers evicted protesters last week. Six demonstrators and six police officers were injured. ... Govanhill is a few miles from George Square, home of Glasgow City Council, yet the distance in terms of alienation and distrust is palpable. Jim MacCormick ... recently ran focus groups with Govanhill residents. 'There was strong agreement that the area had been on the slide and that no-one was really interested in their problems ... People felt more ignored, resentful and pessimistic than they have ever done'. ... MacCormick believes we need to reconsider the support offered to such communities and improve dialogue between elected representatives and constituents. The Govanhill experience shows that breaking the bonds of trust is easy but rebuilding them is a lot more difficult.

(**Sunday Herald** 12 August 2001).

The Glasgow council leader spoke of 'his toughest week' when Firsat Dag died in Sighthill and refugee protesters marched on city chambers, and when he ordered the bailiffs to evict Govanhill protesters and there was violence between police and the crowd that gathered in the street demonstrations. In Sighthill he refers to 'problems caused by the indigenous anti-social element'; in Govanhill, he states, 'people involved in the protest are not bona fide representatives ... it's pressure group politics, seizing upon Govanhill as a local issue in order to advance a wider political agenda. ... We are offering free swimming to every person under 16 in Glasgow. Does it really matter what pool you are using?' (**Herald** 10 August 2001).

How dangerously wrong can he be? The pool does matter to the many people who were using Govanhill baths – Jewish and Muslim women, elderly and

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disabled people, people too poor to travel to the lavish facilities in the Gorbals – want it to be transformed into a community facility, to sustain their embattled community. They want the decline of their neighbourhood to be stopped before it implodes. They want its ethnic diversity to be valued and resourced (where else in Scotland do orthodox Jewish and Muslim women swim together?). MacIlvanney spoke of 'thousands of people who have been treated with appalling dismissiveness', precisely what was experienced by the people of Sighthill and Govanhill. The violence in Sighthill was directed at refugees, but the moment of opportunity in the limelight won some of the resources they have requested for years. The violence in Govanhill was directed at the authorities, but no concessions have yet been won. This is a dangerous precedent.

The issues of class politics and racism are inextricably entwined. In their analysis of the first week of August, some journalists displayed arrogant contempt for people living in rough and tough conditions, and wilful ignorance about the conditions under which racism and violence flare. Sighthill and Govanhill should be acknowledged as strategic to the interests of the city, not marginal aberrations. Sighthill's tower blocks should be rescued from destitution, the drain of economic base and social vitality out of Govanhill's tenements should be stopped. The safety of refugees can be secured and ethnic diversity nurtured, within community development.

If, however, Scotland continues to meander in its leisurely way past the issues that are most urgent to refugees, minority ethnic groups, and their neighbours, then August 2001 will be remembered not as an early warning, a wake-up call, but as a sign of worse to come. Racism flourishes in conditions of neglect; it is endured on an everyday basis by people who are reluctant to complain; it will flare into communal violence if political representatives and council officers do not learn to listen, learn and respond.

The world of refugees has penetrated Scotland and collided with our democratic deficit and legacy of neglect. Even more testing times lie ahead, because the anger that flared in Sighthill and Govanhill has not been assuaged, and Jack Straw's regime is rolling forward. In September, the Home Office opened Scotland's first detention centre where women and children, as well as men, are being held after removal from their temporary homes; immigration raids into housing and small business premises are underway. Immigration officers are now working to targets for removal of 'overstayers' and asylum seekers who have lost the final stages of their appeals; the police

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are required to accompany immigration officers on raids of premises where asylum seekers may be employed. The Scottish Executive has not, as yet, wrested any concessions from the Home Office, even rights to inspection of the detention centre. There is considerable cause for concern, indeed for alarm, because there is no evidence as yet that our politicians have grasped the scale and intensity of the challenge that we face if we are to turn the tide on the past and lead Scotland forward with greater insight, assuredness and commitment to human rights and social justice for all.

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