

Foreword

Alf Dubs, House of Lords

I am delighted to give my support to this collection, *Unaccompanied young migrants: identity, care and justice*, written and edited by leading advocates and experts on this topic in law, social sciences and social work, social geography, media and psychotherapy. I would like to share some thoughts on the current climate in Europe and beyond, to underline why this new, and holistic, analysis is so important at the current time.

From 1938 and 1940 Britain accepted almost 10,000 children from Germany, Austria, Poland and Czechoslovakia in the *Kindertransport* mobilisation. I know – I was one of them. This operation almost certainly saved our lives, as we would not have survived the Nazi regime otherwise. Prior to this, in 1937 Britain rescued almost 4,000 Basque children from the Spanish civil war, most of them orphaned after the bombing of Guernica. Local people built a tent settlement on Eastleigh Common in Hampshire, and the children were enthusiastically looked after there by local people of every age, class and political persuasion. The children went on to be fostered all over the UK. Many were later repatriated, while those with no-one to go back to made their lives here.

This offering of sanctuary to vulnerable children and young people, victims of war or persecution, is part of Britain's great humanitarian tradition of which we should be very proud. It was in this same humanitarian spirit that I responded to the recent refugee crisis in Europe by proposing in 2016 an Amendment to the UK Immigration Bill, committing the UK to admit vulnerable migrant children from the tens of thousands stranded in Europe – especially those in France, Greece and Italy. Fortunately the Amendment was passed despite initial resistance from the government. However the government subsequently and arbitrarily capped the numbers at 480 – and there have been, and still are, lengthy delays in the children coming here to the UK.

What has changed, and why the lack of welcome? We in Britain currently live under a government with a declared policy to create a 'hostile environment' for those seeking asylum. And all of us are subject to the negative stereotyping of refugees as criminal and aliens, from politicians and sections of the press.

This hostility is a relatively recent thing, and worryingly it seems to be mirrored across many of the world's wealthier nations. As the global south suffers crises of war and hardship, we see borders closing and walls being built across America, Australia and all over Europe. We see children in cages at the Mexican border. We see children living rough on the Greek islands, their futures uncertain, many in desperate conditions. We see children living in containers, and children living in the open, their tents slashed nightly by police, just across the Channel in Calais, France.

Fortunately there are many of us in Britain and around the world who care enough to put this right, and who, either through our professional work or as volunteers, academics or advisers, are working to protect the safety of these young people's journeys, and to secure good outcomes for them after arrival. This edited collection, written by people working on child refugee issues and directly with the young people themselves, is of immense value as it provides a nuanced and interdisciplinary view of the many challenges these young people face, and identifies best practices in working with them – as well as offering a much-needed current overview of the political, legal and other factors that frame their place in society.

From a UK perspective, there is critical discussion here around the Children Act of 1989, which ensures Local Authority care for any minor arriving in the UK from accepted crisis regions. However, as lawyers, social workers and others writing in this book draw out, the terms of the Children Act are often in conflict with immigration law, so that the rights and needs of young people as minors are subsumed by the demands and penalties of border control.

The collection also explores what a 'border' can be – is it determined by geographical features, the practices of state officials or international treaties – or all three? With comparisons to the US, the Nordic countries and Australia, the authors here look at how nation states in retreat from international cooperation present their own rules and defences, which in many cases breach international protocols. How to navigate such a minefield of conflicting rules and regulations is one of the greatest challenges for unaccompanied young people and their supporters.

The book goes on to look at issues of ongoing support for young people, particularly in the UK. We know that local authorities are their first port of call, but the authors caution that that provision of care can vary considerably. We also see discussed here, the tensions caused within foster families, school and the child's personal life, by the lack of certainty about their future status – as often their refugee case is

not officially resolved so that a heavy cloud, of potential removal at age 18, hangs over them.

The chapters here that also should concern us all are those on the media, showing how the press often paints the picture of refugees as a swarm, a plague – something not even human, people who will threaten ‘our’ way of life. This ignores how many Britons came from elsewhere, and what a great contribution they have made to British life. Countering this, the writers here take care to present children’s own stories, in their own words, and look at what psychological issues they may face, in their difficult transition to our culture and our asylum system. In this way, the writers always see them as human beings with dignity, and hopes for the future, unlike the press stereotypes.

Finally, I note that the authors have included the word ‘Justice’ in the title of their collection. This chimes very much with my own work and campaigns. For unaccompanied minors, their social care, education, future prospects – all these things – must be founded on good laws and good application of these laws, so that we do not confuse the care of refugee children, and our humanitarian tradition of welcoming refugees, with the exigencies of border policing, immigration targets and quotas.

I hope this book will offer some inspiration to the thousands of professionals and volunteers who have supported these young people both on their journeys and here at home – and to the young people themselves, who only ask for a chance to build themselves a future, whether uniting with family, or turning to us to be that family. The humanitarian will is there, and our laws and institutional practices need to support it.

*Alf Dubs, House of Lords
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