

Conversation

with Howard Adelman

At 4 p.m. this afternoon, Howard Adelman, professor of Philosophy at Atkinson College, will hold a talk in the Junior Common Room of Vanier College on Southeast Asia.

During this past summer, Professor Adelman was actively involved in the movement to sponsor refugees. The organization he founded, Operation Lifeline, has acted as the intermediary for the sponsorship of close to 2,000 families, as well as helping to focus both public and government attention on the growing problem.

Last week, Excalibur's Mark Monfette spoke to Professor Adelman about the problems and implications of introducing 50,000 refugees into a different culture.

Do you think there are similarities between what is happening in Southeast Asia today and what happened to European Jews in the 30's and 40's?

No, there is no comparison. Even though people talk of a Holocaust in the making it's not of the same order. It may be a human disaster of a large proportion but it isn't a holocaust in the same sense as the Jews were treated. In terms of public knowledge, the situation of the Jews was worse and potentially much worse. The vision of imminent death wasn't in the public mind in the same way it was when you saw Malasians pushing the boat back out and you saw people being deliberately drowned because nobody was taking them in.

It's interesting to note, as well, that it's not just the Communist countries which are persecuting the ethnic Chinese. Indonesia has wiped out almost a million ethnic Chinese within the last ten years or so. Some scholars say this is a potential within other countries, quite independent of political ideology. It has to do with the role of a large minority and the significant role they play at the stage of rising nationalism and rising self-determination. It's a very complex picture.

Are Canadians being receptive enough to the problem?

In general the leadership is overwhelmingly in favor—all the levels of government and education. But it's not as unanimous as I had thought. First of all it's not unanimous in the number of individuals who are very insecure. I can tell by the hate calls I get.

Do you get many?

I'd say we were getting a dozen a day and then they dropped off. Some of the callers are anti-semitic—"Why don't you take them all to Tel Aviv?" or "This is a Jewish conspiracy of rich Jews to get cheap labor"—things like that. And I would say the bulk of them are from people who are in an older age group, who tend to be economically marginal and who tend to be lonely people. And my interpretation is that they feel very angry at the care and material outpouring going out to strangers while they sit there lonely and on a marginal existence and resent it.

What groups of people do you find most willing to sponsor refugees?

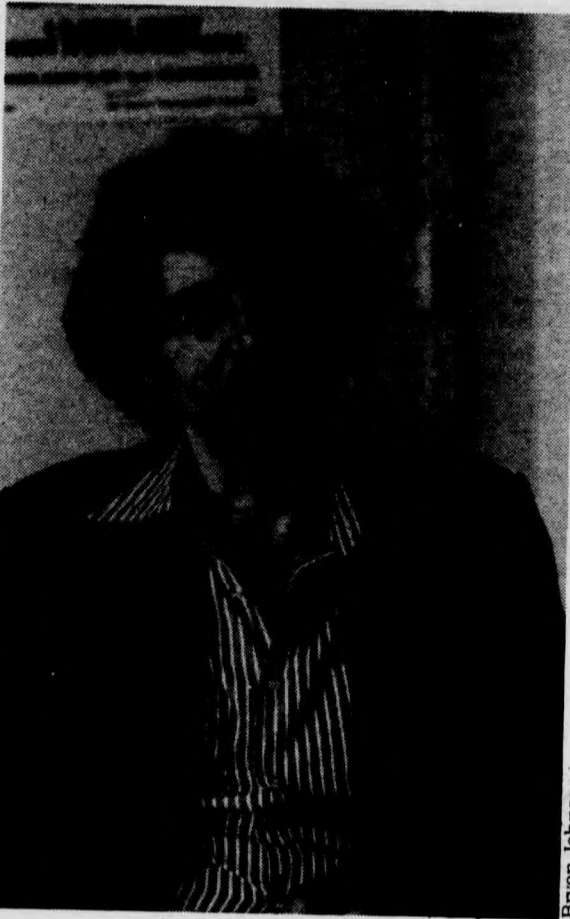
It's funny kinds of groups. I'll tell you. The Mennonites are the most committed. At the forefront are people who are committed by a tradition of sacrifice and humanitarianism. The Jews, for instance, who will probably end up sponsoring 10 percent of the refugees, represent only two percent of the population. Again, a tradition of both their own refugee experience and of giving.

What has the response been like from the business community?

Well, the leadership is not as strong in this area. We sent a letter to many business inviting them to get involved by offering jobs, giving information to employees, donating money and what have you. The number of cold, blank "Nos" has astounded me. The corporations that have come out to help us are in a minority. The corporate leadership, if it's at all controversial, won't come near it. They're not socially responsible leaders, they're more worried about their image.

Is the fact that the working class has to compete with these immigrants for jobs and housing a factor as well?

I think that is one reason. They are not only



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competing with them for jobs, they are also competing with them to bring over relatives as well. They don't distinguish between the needs of refugees and their own needs for understandable reasons. But there are other things that are more serious that I found. For instance we've had a hard time penetrating the Italian community. It appears to be a lot of prejudice against groups from Asia. There's nothing more you can say. I didn't know it existed, in the way it does. But I think it's a bringing over of certain old kind of prejudices against certain ethnic groups when they're used to living in a more homogeneous culture. And it doesn't matter if they're WASPs or Italian or anything. There is a class reaction, there is an ethnic reaction. I think the ethnic reaction is stronger than the class reaction personally.

With these people there is an inability to challenge the authority structure. They want an underdog for their own problems instead of challenging, because it would take too much strength in them to challenge the authority figure. This is at the root of a lot of this thing. There are quite a few of those people around. Partly our neglect of people in our society, partly their own failings. And it's not coalesced, but that's part of it. And that's a need for an education but that group I found to be much, much more extensive that I would have thought it was.

Prime Minister Kriangsak of Thailand has complained that the West, including Canada, takes the cream of the refugees—the fittest, best educated and most employable—and leaves them with the burden of the rest. Have we been selective in the refugees we take in?

We are creamy, yes. We don't take the ill, the maimed, someone with a background totally incompatible with ours. You take people who are willing to work. We can take a lot of both skilled and the unskilled. The real thing you're aimed against are the illiterates, etc. The explanation the government gives is that we take people who have a really good chance of adjusting to Canada. We don't have the humanitarianism that really goes overboard and takes cross sections of refugees.

Is this fair?

Personally, no. Otherwise you end up leaving Malasia and Thailand, which are countries far poorer equipped to deal with them, with the problems and I think, that we should take our share of the problems.

Are we taking enough in?

Yeah, we are. In proportion to the problem now we are doing very much our fair share. No question about it. No one has taken as high a proportion in relation to its population.

By the end of 1980 we will have taken in 50,000 refugees. Considering the number of refugees in South East Asia, isn't this a rather insignificant amount?

No.

Are most of the refugees you sponsor "boat people" or are they land-based refugees?

Our campaign centered around the boat people but, of course, half the refugees are boat people. In our sponsorship we don't discriminate. In our publicity the boat people have been emphasized.

Why?

It's just that that's the way the story emerged and, personally, I didn't know one refugee from another at the start. Like anybody else I responded to the boat people message because that was in the media. It was not out of detailed knowledge.

Is this a "media event"?

No doubt about it. If it wasn't for the media I doubt if the public would be involved in the way it is. You can take that as a virtue or a fault. The fact is, when media, namely television, wasn't around we let Jews die, before the second world war. Without the media before the second world war. Without the media I don't think it would have been a Canadian political issue. I don't think there would have been a decision made.

The National Citizens Coalition has suggested that every refugee will bring over 15 relatives as well, creating a major cultural problem for Canada. Do you think there is any validity to this at all?

Oh no. We made fun of that, of course, because if every person brings 15 relatives, and they do it in sequence, than taking the Chinese population of Canada in 1958, which was 37,000, there would now be 23 billion Chinese in the country. It's that kind of crazy statistic. No, figures show, and I've checked with several authorities on this, that for every one you have here, one more will enter in the long run. And of course that's restricted by quotas that all immigrants must abide by.

The problem in Southeast Asia looks like it will continue for quite some time. Will Operation Lifeline?

There is the potential within the Vietnam area alone for another million refugees. If there are only 50,000 refugees and their relatives then the work of our organization is basically done. There is an element of public education needed to see that they're well integrated. But if you're talking about a longer term problem in which there might be another 50,000 or 100,000 to take, then there may need to be a larger educational campaign. And here the element of ethnicity and racism shows its importance because in 1956 we had no trouble taking in 37,500 Hungarian refugees within half the period. We're given twice the length of time for the government to take in three-quarters of the number of people and yet there's been a reaction. It shows the distinction made in a lot of people's minds between white Europeans and Asians. I find this very repulsive, personally.

Has this experience taught you anything?

Have I learned anything? Oh, tremendous amounts, tremendous amounts. Anything from how to say thank you for having Chinese tea poured for you (I've had six Chinese meals in the last week) to shock at the employment situation. We've had huge numbers of jobs phoned in here by employers who can't get people to work for \$4.50 to \$6.00 an hour. My former belief that the government ought to do something to solve the employment problem has been... well, I'm not sure that's the solution anymore. But there's something sick when we bring people up who aren't willing to struggle in school and who want the world to be given to them. This was the biggest shake-up, quite independent of the refugee movement.

The best thing I've learned is that the amount of good will and sacrifice and dedication among Canadians is just tremendous. Whatever numbers the backlash has, and it may have a significant percentage, the percentage of good committed Canadians is phenomenal and I found they exist in all sectors of life.