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The humanisation of refugees: A discourse analysis of UK parliamentary debates on the European refugee ‘crisis’

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**Abstract**

Previous research has explored the 'othering' and dehumanisation of asylum seekers and refugees, yet comparatively little research has explored the opposite process: the humanisation of refugees. This article applies discursive psychological analysis to the transcripts of five UK Parliamentary debates on the European refugee ‘crisis’ from September 2015 to January 2016, examining an explicit form of humanisation: categorising refugees as ‘human beings’. The analysis focuses on the nature and function of such categorisations to explore the social functions of the discourse. It illustrates how politicians draw on the human qualities of both refugees and ‘us’ to make the government and nation morally accountable for protecting refugees. Moreover it shows how the humanisation or dehumanisation of others implicates or denies the self as morally responsible. This highlights how research on dehumanisation – and the opposite process of humanisation – needs to attend to the rhetorical, relational and dialogical aspects of discourse.

Key words: asylum seekers; refugees; discourse analysis; dehumanisation
Introduction

Over the course of 2015 – in a situation that is ongoing at the time of writing – hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees entered Europe. European leaders gave public statements on the issue and the question of how the refugees ought to be received gained prominence. At the start of September 2015, the UK government’s response was a scheme for assisting Syrian refugees and a focus on humanitarian aid in the region. However, a few days after the worldwide circulation of a photograph of the dead body of three-year-old Alan Kurdi, a Syrian boy who died on the journey from Turkey to Greece (El-Enany, 2016), the Prime Minister issued a statement pledging to provide refuge for up to 20,000 Syrian refugees over five years (although this number would only include people in refugee camps, not those who had entered Europe).

This constitutes an instance whereby refugees were ‘humanised’ and received a noticeable increase in sympathy and support (Vis & Goriunova, 2015). While much discursive research regarding asylum seekers and refugees has explored the ways that refugees and asylum seekers are dehumanised, ‘othered’ or portrayed as undeserving of support, comparatively less research has examined how they are humanised. This article explores these processes of humanisation through analysis of parliamentary debates in the United Kingdom in 2015/16 in response to the European refugee ‘crisis’. It contributes to the growing literature on dehumanisation (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), applying a discursive approach to the topic (Tileagă, 2007).

Discursive psychology treats language as actively constructing reality and focuses on how talk is use to accomplish social actions (Edwards & Potter, 1992). In common with discursive research on racism (Augoustinos & Reynolds, 2001; Goodman, 2014; Wetherell & Potter, 1992), discursive research regarding refugees highlights how arguments are constructed in ways that avoid labelling the speaker as racist, and instead function to portray speakers as being moral, having humanitarian concerns, having a concern for the interests of the nation, fairness, and even with the interests of asylum seekers and refugees, while arguing against their presence (Capdevila & Callaghan, 2008; Every, 2008; Goodman, 2008, 2010; Goodman & Burke, 2010; Hanson-Easey & Augoustinos, 2011; Lynn & Lea, 2003). One aspect of these arguments is the extent to which asylum seekers and refugees are ‘othered’ or ‘dehumanised’. Tileagă (2006) suggests ‘othering’ involves portraying people as being outside the ‘moral order’. This often involves an ‘us and them’ way of constructing people (Lynn & Lea, 2003) that implies they are undeserving of support.

‘Dehumanisation’ is a related process whereby people are portrayed as lacking human qualities

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2 http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201516/cmhansrd/cm150907/debtext/150907-0001.htm#1509074000002
(Haslam & Loughnan, 2014). This can be overt, in terms of describing people using non-human categories, such as ‘cockroaches’ (Reicher, Haslam, & Rath, 2008), ‘swarms’ (Ibrahim & Howarth, 2015) or ‘rats’ (Tileagă, 2006), which presents them as threats that need to be defended against or associates them with ‘dirt’ that needs to be removed. For example, in the context of the European refugee ‘crisis’, the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, referred to ‘a swarm of people coming across the Mediterranean’ (ITV, 2015). It can also involve ‘infrahumanisation’, which is the process of attributing people with inferior qualities, such as not abiding by notions of fairness or not caring for their children, or through applying degrading descriptions (Pickering, 2001). From the perspective of discursive psychology, dehumanisation is not a passive cognitive response to a pre-existing reality, but rather a process of actively constructing reality (Reicher et al., 2008). Othering and dehumanisation function to delineate certain others from ‘our’ group, assigning them undesirable characteristics and immoral behaviours that render support unnecessary or inappropriate, or even to legitimise punitive, defensive or hostile responses in order to protect ‘us’ from their threatening nature.

Unlike dehumanisation, there is little research or theory specifically on the process of humanisation. If dehumanisation and othering function to reduce the scope for empathy and to delegitimise support for people subject to these processes (Haslam & Loughnan, 2014), then humanisation is the process (and effect) of portraying others in ways that encourage empathy and legitimise support. Like dehumanisation, it can be assumed that there are explicit forms of humanisation, where people are directly referred to as ‘human’, and implicit forms of humanisation, where people are attributed with human qualities. These are particular aspects of broad processes that constitute the opposite of ‘othering’: those ways of discursively constructing people as belonging to a common moral community, of acting in ways that are understandable, and as deserving of support.

Some research has touched on the humanisation of asylum seekers and refugees. Grillo (2005) found arguments in favour of asylum seekers may emphasise that they are ‘human too’ and highlight their vulnerability and need for help. Kirkwood, Goodman, McVittie and McKinlay (2015) quoted an asylum seeker stating: ‘I’m an asylum-seeker [...] what difference between me and refugee? only a one word [...] and what is label of an asylum-seeker? we are human’ (p. 176). In this way, the speaker brought attention to the function of language, in particular highlighting the way minimal differences in terminology have consequences in terms of rights and therefore life chances. Kirkwood et al. (2015) found some Scottish locals talked about asylum seekers as ‘children’ or ‘families’ in ways that implicitly criticised the use of detention and dawn raids through contrasting the harshness of such responses with their implied innocence or vulnerability. This is line with the
findings of Lynn and Lea (2003), who found people could challenge the use of detention through highlighting the harshness of this response and portraying asylum seekers as ‘children, pregnant women, the elderly, the ill and survivors of torture’ (p. 442), which functions to argue against their detention, albeit while emphasising aspects of vulnerability. As the authors state: ‘they are made human once again’ (p. 443). In terms of the local people’s attempts to thwart dawn raids, one of Kirkwood et al.’s (2015) ‘locals’ said ‘we only done I think what any decent human being would’ (p. 170), and presented herself as having a familial relationship with asylum seeker children (she says they called her ‘auntie’). This discourse orients to the humanity of the speaker, thus suggesting that assisting asylum seekers is a natural response and normalising it, which implicitly criticises those who support harsh responses to asylum seekers. As argued by Reicher, Haslam and Rath (2008), definitions of ‘us’ are at least as important as ‘our’ definitions of ‘them’ when it comes to feelings towards others. Furthermore, presenting asylum seekers as existing in a connected way with locals works to support their rights, as it implies they should be treated in the same way as we would treat members of our family.

Given how little research exists on humanisation, this study focuses on an explicit form of humanisation: categorising people as ‘human beings’. The study focuses on late 2015 and early 2016, when there was a noticeable increase in positive statements regarding refugees in the public and political sphere (albeit this was by no means uniform, there were still some very negative responses, and this positivity may have been relatively short-lived; ComRes, 2016). The study takes advantage of this context to explore some of these relatively positive responses to refugees, focusing on how UK politicians explicitly humanise refugees and the functions of these accounts.

Methodology

The data consist of five UK parliamentary debates regarding the European refugee ‘crisis’ (see appendix A for details). I chose these data sources as they can be treated as relatively representative of the spectrum of political views from elected politicians in the UK at that time. Given the lack of existing research on ‘humanisation’, this article focuses on an explicit form of humanisation: categorising refugees as ‘human beings’. Due to space constraints, it does not extend to other aspects of humanisation. For instance, politicians’ accounts of individual refugees and their stories, including Alan Kurdi, constitute forms of humanisation that deserve attention in their own right (e.g., Vis & Goriunova, 2015), as does the use of ‘normalising’ categories, such as ‘mums’ and ‘dads’ (Goodman, 2005), and these feature in the present analysis to the extent that they appear alongside explicit categorisations of refugees as ‘human beings’. Similarly, the analysis does not extend to
‘humanitarian’ or ‘human rights’ discourses as such (see Every, 2008) or portrayals of ‘human traffickers / smugglers’.

The analysis draws on discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992; McKinlay & McVittie, 2009; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) to analyse how refugees are constructed through language. This approach treats language as actively constructing reality and fulfilling a range of social functions, such as blaming, justifying and criticising. While most research on dehumanisation has taken a cognitive approach, Tileagă (2007) argued that discursive approaches help understand the social and discursive aspects of dehumanisation. Similarly, the present article focuses on the nature and social functions of humanisation.

Analysis

The category ‘human being(s)’ was used 38 times in the debates. It was used 25 times by Scottish National Party (SNP) politicians, eight times by Labour politicians, and once each by politicians from the Conservatives, Green, Ulster Unionist Party, Sinn Féin and Welsh Liberal Democrats. Members of the ruling party at Westminster, the Conservative Party, tended not to use the term (the one instance related to those involved in ‘human trafficking’, rather than refugees themselves), whereas SNP politicians had a relatively high use of the term. Overall, politicians tended to emphasise the importance of providing refuge, with opposition parties generally being critical of the government’s position of not providing refuge to who had travelled to Europe and / or arguing that the number of 20,000 was too small.

One of the most common ways in which politicians used this category was to assert that refugees are ‘human beings’, often linking this to the obligations ‘we’ have in terms of caring about their situation and providing support. This is demonstrated in this first extract, which came after the speaker argued that UK Government support should extend beyond those in refugee camps.

Extract 1: Sandra White, SNP – Scottish Parliament

We must remember that refugees are human beings and we are human beings. We have a moral obligation to ensure that they can live a peaceful and happy life.

In extract 1, the category ‘human beings’ is applied to both ‘refugees’ and ‘we’, suggesting a common identity. The term ‘human beings’ is overdetermined (Drew, 1998) in that ‘human’ would suffice, therefore it brings attention to people’s existence as human, hinting at moral implications. ‘Human beings’ could be considered as belonging to the membership categorization device (Stokoe,
2012) of ‘humanity’, within which human beings are treated as having inherent connections with each other. Reference to people as ‘human beings’ is also a self-sufficient argument (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) as such statements are commonsensically true. The speaker makes the moral implications explicit by saying: ‘We have a moral obligation...’. The construction works up responsibility to refugees on the grounds that they are part of a common group that is defined by implied ‘human’ characteristics that include moral ways of relating to one another and the right to live a good life. However, whereas ‘our’ moral obligation is presented as necessary (‘We have...’), ‘their’ right to ‘live a peaceful and happy life’ is treated as conditional (‘...they can...’), which reintroduces moral asymmetry and potential difference.

The next extract addresses the response that people deserve when understood as ‘human beings’; this comes before the speaker describes the various causes of displacement.

Extract 2: Patrick Harvie, Scottish Green – Scottish Parliament

I want to talk about the difference between refugees and economic migrants. Yes, the two are legally distinct, but they are all human beings and whichever legal category a person is described as being in, their innate dignity deserves the same level of respect.

Here the speaker uses two ‘legal’ definitions: ‘refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’. He treats these categories as belonging to a separate family of terms from ‘human beings’, suggesting the terms ‘refugee’ and ‘economic migrant’ can be applied independently of someone’s status as a ‘human being’. The term ‘human being’ is treated as trumping the legal definition – through the coordinating conjunction ‘but’ – specifically in relation to having ‘innate dignity’ and deserving ‘respect’. Such accounts counter arguments that put a sharp distinction between deserving ‘genuine refugees’ and undeserving ‘economic migrants’ and encourage hostility towards those portrayed as having economic motivations (Leudar, Hayes, Nekvapil, & Turner Baker, 2008). Asylum seekers may also assert their humanity in the face of technical definitions that limit their rights (Kirkwood et al., 2015). Here the category ‘human being’ is treated as implying moral consequences in terms of how ‘we’ ought to treat those who are placed in this category.

The next extract also makes reference to ‘economic migrants’; this comes during criticism of the Prime Minister and language he had used to describe refugees.

Extract 3: Gavin Newlands, SNP – House of Commons Emergency Debate
Let me be clear: these are not economic migrants who, as some on the Government Benches would have us think, want to come to our country to live a life of luxury on benefits; they are human beings. They are mums, dads, grans, uncles and, yes, sons and daughters too.

Whereas the speaker in extract 2 suggests people can be both economic migrants and ‘human beings’ (with the second category given supremacy), the speaker in extract 3 explicitly states ‘these are not economic migrants’. Stating flatly that they are ‘human beings’ asserts the speaker’s epistemic authority and presents this as a settled matter (Heritage & Raymond, 2005). Using colloquial familial terms (‘mums, dads, grans, uncles [...] sons and daughters’) works to humanise them through linking them with the positive connotations of family members (Goodman, 2005; Kirkwood, McKinlay, & McVittie, 2013). In this way, the speaker presents an alternative to the categorisation of ‘economic migrant’, a category which suggests one is travelling on one’s own volition and seeking financial gain, and as such is used to discredit one’s need for asylum (Goodman & Speer, 2007), providing an alternative portrayal to those accounts that present refugees as idle, sub-human or economically motivated (Goodman, 2005; Leudar et al., 2008).

The next extract, which constituted the majority of the speaker’s opening statement, provides further discussion of motivations.

Extract 4: Neil Bibby, Scottish Labour – Scottish Parliament

Our response to the current global refugee crisis that we face, both in Parliament and throughout the country, should start from the principle that we should treat our fellow human beings as we would want to be treated in such a crisis. No one sets sail across a sea in an overcrowded rubber dinghy if they are not desperate, nor do they put their families’ lives and their own in the hands of people traffickers if that is not their only hope. No one wants to die crowded in the back of an overheated lorry.

The speaker highlights a commonality between ‘us’ and refugees through the category ‘fellow human beings’. As with the category ‘human beings’, this description is overdetermined (Drew, 1998), and therefore brings attention to the implications of their connectedness with ‘us’. Tileagā (2007) suggested that those who are excluded or dehumanised are morally constituted as being ‘out of place’. In contrast, the present example illustrates how people may be constituted as existing within ‘our’ moral community. These moral implications are made explicit with an ‘ought’ statement: ‘we should treat our fellow human beings as we would want to be treated’. Furthermore, the speaker draws upon the extreme case formulation ‘no one’ to reinforce their ‘desperate’ need
for help. As argued by Pomerantz (1986), such statements project the moral rightness or wrongness of behaviour, in this case suggesting that their actions ‘must’ be in response to severe conditions, as ‘no one’ would do otherwise. The account is bolstered by the description of the desperate means on which they rely, notably ‘an overcrowded rubber dinghy’, ‘people traffickers’ and ‘overheated lorry’, which are hearably poor or untrustworthy means for survival. The account can be seen as doing ‘moral work’ (Drew, 1998), both in terms of prescribing what ‘we’ should do – that is, in terms of treating others as we would like to be treated – and through presenting refugees as belonging to ‘our’ moral community due to acting in morally interpretable ways.

The next extract also addresses refugees’ motivations; this comes after the speaker has talked about the impact of the conflict in Syria and the ‘dangerous’ and ‘desperate’ journeys people are making to find safety.

Extract 5: Hilary Benn, Labour – House of Commons Opposition Debate

Deep down, every single one of us in this Chamber today understands, because it is exactly what we would do if those we loved were confronted by the same horror. Human beings will brave many dangers because the human urge to survive is strong and when we see people in these circumstances, our human urge to help is just as strong.

The speaker’s statement is addressed to the politicians present at the debate and makes a connection with what ‘we’ would do in the same situation as the refugees. Stating they ‘understand’ positions refugees within the same moral community as the politicians; the refugees’ actions are comprehensible, and therefore acceptable, from their worldview. Describing the situation as ‘horror’ emphasises the necessity of fleeing, which renders the refugees as ‘genuine’ and in need of refuge (Kirkwood et al., 2015). The next sentence begins with a general statement on the nature of ‘human beings’; coming after the statements regarding the risks refugees are willing to take, it is hearable as applying to refugees. The sentence includes a parallel statement about ‘we’ and ‘our’, specifically in relation to ‘our human urge to help’. In this way, the category of human beings is applied to both refugees and the politicians. This category is associated with innate characteristics – urges to ‘survive’ and ‘help’ – which suggest that the positions of fleeing danger and helping those fleeing danger constitute a commonality in terms of a collective identity that is immutable. Through these general statements about the nature of ‘human beings’, the speaker is able to present a case that both renders the acts of refugees understandable and the need to help as undeniable.
The final extract highlights how the use of the term ‘human beings’ was not always associated with arguments for extending the scope of the Government’s approach to Syrian refugees; it follows a statement on the severity of the Syrian civil war.

Extract 6: Andy Allen, Ulster Unionist Party – Northern Ireland Assembly

*I do, however, draw a distinction between genuine refugees, who are fleeing persecution and violence, and who have made their way to Europe in search of a place of safety, and economic migrants, who are simply seeking access to Europe in a search for a better life. [...] Our natural sympathy and desire to help fellow human beings in their desperate plight need to be matched by an appreciation of the practicalities of the situation.*

This extract has some commonalities with extract 2, in that it makes a distinction between ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’. Whereas extract 2 made that distinction to then use the conjunction ‘but’ to mark out a statement about the superordinate category of ‘human beings’, here the adverb ‘however’ marks the distinction between ‘genuine refugees’ and ‘economic migrants’ as being the primary distinction. The category ‘fellow human beings’ is used in a way similar to extract 4, highlighting commonality and connection, particularly in terms of it being appropriate to provide help. However, the latter part of the sentence, which suggests this ‘sympathy and desire [...] need to be matched by an appreciation of the practicalities of the situation’ works in an alternative line of argument that pushes against the emphasis on helping. As stated by Billig (1996), all arguments are open to opposing positions, and further that liberal discourse entails ideological dilemmas (Billig, Condor, Edwards, & Gane, 1988), in this case where appeals to provide for some are matched with claims about the practical realities. Arguments regarding the need to be ‘practical’ can be mobilised against efforts to assist those who are disadvantaged, positioning this as a ‘balanced’ response that is both ‘humane’ and ‘reasonable’ (Every, 2008; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). In this extract, the categorisation of refugees as ‘human beings’ is not directly challenged – indeed it is reinforced – which manages the speaker’s position as being humane, and yet an emphasis is placed on other concerns that are used to detract from policy options that would provide greater support for those in search of refuge. Here the use of the term ‘human beings’ emphasises ‘our’ positive moral qualities, whereas ‘economic migrants’ are implied to take advantage of such generosity of spirit (see Every & Augoustinos, 2008).

**Discussion and conclusions**
This analysis illustrates how refugees may be humanised in parliamentary talk so as to justify providing them with support. As shown, speakers could assert that asylum seekers and refugees are ‘human beings’, and connect this with ‘our’ humanity, with implied or explicit connections to obligations to help. While the humanity of refugees could be discussed or asserted, it was ‘our’ humanity that was often presented as being at stake, with the implication that if we did not respond appropriately then we were not fulfilling our own obligations or meeting these virtues that were treated as being essential. This supports Reicher et al.’s (2008) argument that the definition of ‘us’ is at least as important as the definition of ‘them’ for understanding intergroup relations.

The analysis showed how the category ‘human beings’ has a self-sufficient quality (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) – in terms of being difficult to refute – while also being overdetermined (Drew, 1998), and thereby brings attention to moral attributes. More specifically, when applied to others the term implied a need for care, respect and assistance, and when applied to ‘us’ it was treated as implying a ‘moral duty’, obligation or responsibility to help others. The accounts could be seen as doing ‘moral work’ (Drew, 1998), both in terms of presenting refugees as acting in ways that are morally understandable, and as positioning the UK government as blameworthy if it did not meet these ideals. As argued by Tileagă (2007), dehumanisation involves presenting people as being outside ‘our’ moral community. Conversely, in the present analysis we can see how refugees are presented as being within ‘our’ moral community, as acting in ways that ‘we’ can understand, and belonging to a common group referred to a ‘fellow human beings’, thus justifying their support.

To what extent do these constructions necessarily overcome ‘us and them’ (Lynn & Lea, 2003) divisions? Even those extracts that applied the term ‘human beings’ to refugees in an inclusive manner tended to include reference to ‘we’ and ‘they’. In particular, the emphasis was on ‘their’ human nature and / or vulnerability in ways that deserve support and protection, and ‘our’ human nature that consists of helping others and / or being able to sympathise. In this way, at least some forms of ‘humanisation’ appear to reinforce paternalistic relations between those who need and those who provide asylum.

This is not a comprehensive study of the different forms of humanisation, even as it applies to refugees in these parliamentary debates, but is rather an examination of one explicit form of humanisation: referring to refugees as ‘human beings’. The impact of the circulation of Alan Kurdi’s photograph illustrates how one individual can come to represent large scale human suffering in a way that elicits sympathy and support, albeit in a circumscribed and possibly short-lived way (ComRes, 2016; Vis & Goriunova, 2015). Further research on humanisation should explore the various implicit and explicit forms of this process, including political discourse, social and news media, ‘everyday’ interaction, art and literature.
As illustrated in the extracts, the debate involved repeated reference to ‘we’ and ‘our’. As argued by Billig (1995), this illustrates ‘banal nationalism’, as this can be taken as a reference to Britain, Scotland or the UK. As explained by Reicher and Hopkins (2001), the nation is a powerful notion in contemporary political discourse, and politicians will often refer to the interests of the nation to justify their policies. While the responsibilities of the British governments to the people of the UK is taken for granted, more work is apparent in order to justify their responsibility to those beyond the national borders, as shown through the reference to a greater identity of ‘human beings’.

However, simply because refugees have been portrayed as ‘fellow human beings’ does not mean that the government will definitely support them. All categorisations are subject to alternative categorisations or particularisations (Billig, 1996). For instance, whereas extracts 2 and 3 used the category ‘human beings’ to rework the use of the category ‘economic migrants’, extract 6 showed how the distinction between ‘economic migrants’ and ‘genuine refugees’ can be reinstated even when drawing on the category ‘fellow human beings’, through arguments that favour ‘practical’ considerations over ‘emotional’ ones (see Every, 2008). Moreover, general agreement about the moral duty to support refugees could be subject to ontological gerrymandering (Woolgar & Pawluch, 1985) in terms of defining who exactly ought to be assisted and in what form. This was a specific response to the situation of Syrian refugees, and although some speakers made reference to refugees from other countries, it should not be assumed that the generally positive response applied to non-Syrians. Vis and Goriunova’s (2015) detailed analysis of the spread and influence of Alan Kurdi’s photo found that the online use of the word ‘refugee’ increased relative to the word ‘migrant’ immediately following its dissemination, suggesting people were recognising the extent to which people were forced to flee and were in need of help. However, El-Enany (2016) suggests that images of the bodies of black African men who had died trying to cross the Mediterranean did not create a positive response from Europe because they were responded to with fear, whereas the image of Alan Kurdi was responded to with sympathy, sorrow and concern, as illustrated by the hashtag #CouldBeMyChild that was widely used on social media.

This analysis shows the value in approaching the processes of dehumanisation and humanisation from a discursive perspective (Tileagă, 2007) to understand how they function in terms of intergroup relations and political responses. It supports Reicher et al.’s (2008) argument that the identity of ‘us’ is at least as important as the identity of ‘them’ when considering dehumanisation, and therefore that we should treat the topic as dialogical (Power, 2011), exploring the relationship between ‘self’ and ‘other’. Further work could make greater use of Membership Categorization Analysis – particularly in terms of analysing turn-by-turn interaction (Stokoe, 2012) –
to understand the process of humanisation. Future research could also explore how humanisation occurs, who it is applied to, how it spreads (such as on social media) and how it is translated into political action. Understanding how and why people accept others into their moral community, and take responsibility for saving their lives in the face of danger, is a core concern for social psychology that deserves constant attention.
References


Appendix A: Sources for parliamentary debates

House of Commons: Emergency debate: The refugee crisis in Europe (8 September 2015, 3 hours)

House of Commons: Opposition debate on the humanitarian crisis in the Mediterranean and Europe (9 September 2015, 6 hours)

Scottish Parliament: Debate on responding to the global refugee crisis (15 September 2015, 2 hours)

Northern Ireland Assembly: Debate on the ongoing international humanitarian crisis in Syria (22 September 2015, 90 minutes) https://www.theyworkforyou.com/ni/?id=2015-09-22.3.4