

CARNEGIE COUNCIL *for Ethics in International Affairs*

The Refugee/Migrant Crisis

Public Affairs

Peter Sutherland, David Donoghue, Joanne J. Myers

Transcript

Introduction

JOANNE MYERS: Good morning, everyone. I'm Joanne Myers, director of Public Affairs programs, and on behalf of the Carnegie Council I'd like to thank you all for joining us.

It is a pleasure to welcome Peter Sutherland, sitting on the far left here, and Ambassador David Donoghue to this breakfast program. Together they will be discussing the current [migrant/refugee crisis](#) and its far-reaching implications down the road.

For some time now, we have been hearing about the refugee/migrant crisis in Europe, Africa, Asia, and beyond. When thinking about how best to approach this topic, there was one person who immediately came to mind, and that was Peter Sutherland, who for the past 10 years has held the position of UN special representative of the secretary general for international migration. As a person who has long advocated for the respectful treatment of migrants and refugees, Mr. Sutherland holds the belief that it is not only a moral obligation of states and their citizens to help migrants, but his recognition that migrants can serve as a crucial dynamic for economic growth and add to the vitality of nations, have helped to focus our attention on the positive aspects of migration.

In learning that the Irish ambassador to the UN, David Donoghue, would be joining us this morning, and discovering that not only does he know and admire Mr. Sutherland, but, by coincidence, he was recently appointed by the [president of the General Assembly](#) to be co-facilitator for the September [UN Summit on Global Migration and Refugee Issues](#), I've asked Ambassador Donoghue to introduce our speaker and be our interlocutor, which he has graciously agreed to do. As Mr. Sutherland is on a very tight schedule, our guests will have a conversation for about 25 minutes or so, then take questions from the floor. We will adjourn promptly at 8:45.

Let's get started by asking you all to join me in giving them both a very warm welcome.

DAVID DONOGHUE: Thank you, Joanne. It is my great pleasure to introduce Peter Sutherland to this select audience. Peter is one of Ireland's most distinguished public figures—and, dare I say, benefactors as well—in many unspoken ways. He has had an extremely varied career in politics, in business, and now in the service of the United Nations for the last 10 years or so.

Peter was one of our most distinguished attorney generals in the early 1980s. He then in the mid-1980s became Ireland's member of the European Commission with responsibility for competition policy, in which he had a very significant impact. Indeed, it's fair to say he was talked about for many years as a potential president of the European Commission.

He went on to be the director general of the [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade](#) (GATT) and was the pivotal figure in the [Uruguay Round](#), which in due course led to the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO). He was the first director general of the WTO. I remember that, I think it was

[Mickey Kantor](#) at the time, said that Peter was the "father of globalization" because without Peter there would have been no WTO.

He in the meantime became chairman of Goldman Sachs and chairman of British Petroleum (BP) and had a very varied business career.

In 2006 the then secretary-general of the United Nations, [Kofi Annan](#), appointed Peter as his special representative on international migration, and he has held that post for the last 10 years. In the process, we have known that he has sacrificed a huge amount personally and business-wise in order to carry out that responsibility. He has devoted himself to it with great passion and vigor, and he has become perhaps one of the world's leading spokesmen on behalf of the rights of migrants. We are all hugely in his debt for that reason.

I am particularly glad to have had the opportunity to introduce him. I look forward to our discussion.

Peter, perhaps you'd be good enough to say a few words to begin with.

Remarks

PETER SUTHERLAND: Thank you, David.

I'm sure that [Henry Kissinger](#) has been a regular attendee at this gathering. I always remember a remark which he made, which he may have made here, that he was glad that a similarly effusive introduction finally came to an end because he found it difficult to remain humble-looking for any prolonged period of time. [Laughter]

DAVID DONOGHUE: Try.

PETER SUTHERLAND: I fall into that category, although at the same, as my humility might suggest, I thought it was rather understated. [Laughter] Thank you, David.

I don't really know what I am going to say by way of introducing this, but I am going to make a couple of very general comments to put myself in context, I suppose, in a way.

I believe that in the post-[World War II](#) world that there were a number of things that happened which were the direct result of the appalling events which had preceded that time in the late 1940s. They were attempts which have defined in many ways, I would like to think, my own life. They were based upon a belief in the integration of people and regions. Therefore, I believe, for an example, that the European integration process, which is challenged by the [migration issue](#), as we all know, and which was created by a small group of men after the Second World War, was based upon a concept which a [British politician](#) described as "the taming of nationalism." I believe in the taming of nationalism. I've seen too much of it in my own country and I've seen it elsewhere.

At the same time, a number of other steps were taken, one of which was the [Refugee Convention in 1951](#), which was a direct result of the enormity of the horrible events of World War II. Everybody knows the famous story of the [St. Louis](#), the ship that left Hamburg carrying Jewish refugees, which was turned away in many places and ended up bringing, unfortunately, some back, who perished.

Refugees became then a moral cause. They should have been a moral cause earlier, but they weren't. Refugees are a key element—but not the only element—in the mobility of people which is challenged and which is now the subject matter of so much political debate and concern.

I am going to focus more on Europe than anywhere else, but the same arguments could be advanced with respect of the Andaman Sea; they could be advanced with respect of, for an example, Myanmar

and those who have fled from Myanmar; and in many other places. The Pacific Ocean and the Americas have their own challenges, including the United States of America—which, incidentally, looking at the number of refugees per capita taken in the United States, I think it's pathetic. So the United States doesn't have a particularly high place at the moment in the number of countries which have taken large numbers of refugees in this situation.

As we know, there have been over a half-million dead in Syria. There are currently 60 million people in the world displaced. There are 20 million refugees, and of the refugees 60 percent of them are in 10 countries.

Proximity seems to define responsibility. If you are unlucky enough to live in Lebanon or in Jordan or in Turkey, you take far more refugees than anybody else per capita. In the European Union the Greeks take by far the most. As we collectively and rapidly develop razor-wire fences right up through the Balkans, and as our borders following the collapse in 1989 of the Iron Curtain are re-erected, not merely in Central and Eastern Europe but right across Europe; with the possible collapse of Schengen, one of the great achievements of the European Union; we create a situation where rapidly Greece will become a vast internment camp for refugees. Lesbos at the moment is taking in 4,000 a day.

These people are traveling across the Mediterranean in rickety boats, at enormous cost and threat to their own lives. We have seen the thousands who have drowned. We have seen the awful pictures of children lying on beaches.

The Greeks are left with the situation, and Europe is left with the situation, and the world is left with the situation, that as these thousands arrive from Turkey, generally, because that's the route that they take from Syria, we say, "We've had enough." All over Europe people are saying, "We've had enough." Xenophobia is on the rise. People like Trump are making similar arguments about migrants more generally in the United States. "This is our land" is the refrain.

In the Greek situation, just to take it as an example, what are the alternatives open in regard to the refugees? Send them back out to sea so they drown? Leave them on the beaches or in the freezing rivers of the Balkans? Intern them in a huge camp, which is gradually—and not too gradually at that—taking place? Or do we welcome them?

We have 540 million people in the richest part of the world. We're talking about a million people a year. You can work out the percentages yourselves that this would require.

Of course, they all want to go to some countries rather than others. They'd all like to go to Germany, because Germany's GDP and its unemployment rate, and indeed its demographic profile, show that there is an open opportunity. Many of them want to go to Britain, not merely because Britain has had a fairly buoyant economy, but I think, having visited Calais, which is one of the more notorious camps, and spoken to many of them, largely because, in the case of England, they speak English. None of them speak German, even less of them speak Finnish, and they are not going to aim for the Arctic Circle rather than an English-speaking place. I'm trying to inflame the Finnish ambassador, who I happen to know is here. [Laughter] But in any event, one can see the problem.

As Mrs. Merkel has said, this is beginning to pose an existential issue for the European Union, which I believe to be the most noble political movement in the history of Europe for a thousand years, because it is about taming nationalism and because it's about sharing sovereignty.

Of course, at the same time we have the aggravating factors, such as Brexit, the debate of Britain leaving the European Union; we have the borders that are being recreated around Europe; we have the austerity, which some blame on Europe, in terms of economic policy and so on. But I won't go into all of that.

I trotted out a few figures last night. Between January and November, 2015, Sweden took—I'm just talking about refugees—14,328; Ireland took 637; the United Kingdom took 531; and the United States took 379. This is a pretty horrific indictment and an expression of the differences between different countries and their responses to this.

To my mind, Mrs. Merkel has been a hero. I was standing beside her in Malta when we had a conference with Africa not too long ago. I whispered in her ear, "You're a hero."

She said, "Why?"

I said, "You're a hero because you have expressed a moral vision at your own political cost."

She said—I can't remember; I should have written down the words—but she, in effect, said, "What can Europe do in this situation but open?" She's right, and she is suffering.

It's not just, of course, a matter of taking people in, resettling, relocating. Norway donates—you might say well it might, with its enormous oil wealth, but it is still a fact—\$240 per person to refugees; Germany \$32; United Kingdom \$26; and others falling off at lower figures in the main.

In 2016 we've already had 70,000 coming across the Mediterranean. It's not going to go away. It's going to get worse. Anybody who lives in the illusion that we are suddenly—well, I don't know; I'm no expert on the [peace negotiations](#) that are taking place—but if history is anything to go by, we can't take for granted that this problem in any way is going to significantly abate in the immediate future.

So we have a huge moral issue and we have a defining issue for our generation, in my view. And, as proximity should not define responsibility, it's a global responsibility. Why should the United States be less responsible for the migrants and refugees than Greece? Why should Lebanon have a quarter of its population refugees? Or why should Jordan have 635,000, or why should Turkey have 2.6 million, as we sit and pontificate in other parts of the world?

At the same time, we have the dilemma and the promise of our democratic ideas and our peoples are saying, "No more." How does one equate this demographic belief, and the obligation of politicians obviously to respond to democracy, with the moral responsibility that rests upon us in regard to refugees?

Well, to my mind—and it may be a simplistic answer—one answer to that is that if you have politicians who won't lead, then you can expect xenophobia. If you have politicians who will not confront racism and xenophobia, then you will get more of it. If you have nobody who is prepared to stand up and say that the objective evidence is that migrants add to growth, which is there, clear and unambiguous—that they accept and take less by way of benefits than they contribute by way of tax, that they have lower unemployment rates all over the world—if you are not prepared to say that, then you reap what you sow: of course xenophobia will develop; of course the inherent racism that we all suffer from, including the new countries which are themselves created out of an immigrant community.

[George Orwell](#), I think, made the comment once about racism and about nationalism that "nationalism in the end of the day is thinking you're better than somebody else." In a strange sort of way, scratch the surface and we all think it, to a greater or lesser extent. Logically we may reject it, morally we may reject it, but when Ireland hopefully trounces England tomorrow in [Twickenham](#), I can tell you I will not be cheering for England. [Laughter]

So there is no easy way out of this. But rational argument, rational debate, and the expression of opinion by those who in the European context—I know it's a different word here—aspire to a liberal society, that's what I aspire to. That's what I believe the [Charter of the United Nations](#) aspires to. That's

what the treaties of the European Union aspire to.

So either we are doing to duck down and accept the outrageous statements made by some prime ministers in Europe—for an example, "Yes we'll take refugees as long as they're Christians." In god's name, what century are we living in? What do we say to those who say now that they are going to confront the European Court of Justice by having a referendum to reject a European law? [Walter Hallstein](#), the first great president of the European Commission, said that Europe is founded on law and respect for the law and the rights of man. If the respect for the law goes—unlike the time of [Hitler](#) or [Napoleon](#), we don't rely upon divisions; we rely on principles and we rely on law.

So, to my mind, the challenge that we face is the supreme challenge of our time and we Europeans particularly, are not rising to it. All over Europe politicians are ducking under the eiderdown. They're kowtowing to a type of articulation that is a rejection of the very principles that the post-World War II era that I started with should have created.

I think we have to do something about it. That's why I'm here.

DAVID DONOGHUE: Thank you very, very much, Peter. A somber assessment, but it is one that we all have to make at the present time.

You mentioned the UN Charter. This is a year in which there are a couple of UN events, as you know, which will focus either directly or indirectly on the challenges that you have mentioned. One is the [World Humanitarian Summit](#), which will come up in May. Another is the [summit on the 19th of September](#), which will for the first time look at the global migration and refugee crises together holistically.

What role do you see for the United Nations in attempting to reach the new attitudes that you have been pleading for?

PETER SUTHERLAND: Well, the series of conferences that you are talking about included [one](#) that has already taken place very successfully, hosted by the United Kingdom, "Syria Four," where \$10 billion was raised. The British government, in common with the Norwegians and the Germans and Turks, put this together. This was a good sign of some degree of commitment.

The 30th of March we have a pledging conference where we will see the whites of the eyes of those who attend, because they will be asked to pledge places for resettlement or relocation. The two words are used, incidentally, for different purposes. Relocation is moving people from within the European Union and sharing it, as the European Commission has proposed, on the basis of objective criteria amongst the Member States, so that the Greeks don't carry everybody. That's relocation. Resettlement is taking them from outside the European Union—like Turkey or Lebanon or wherever—and resettling them all over the world. That 30th of March conference is important.

Then we have a humanitarian conference, and then we have a big conference, in which David is going to play a key role incidentally, as a facilitator, which is a UN conference, which [Obama](#) is also on the same day holding here in New York. So it will be a two-pronged attack on the issue.

To my mind, all of these conferences will prove the utility—or otherwise—of the entire international system. We have had plenty of words on this subject, plenty of platitudes, plenty of high moral statements. Now is the time for delivery. I think delivery is what is demanded; and delivery means accepting responsibilities, financial and in terms of placement.

Of course, this is happening every day in Europe because there seems to be a constant debate in the European Council on precisely the same issue. But it's a global issue, as I said at the outset, not just a

European issue. So everybody has to play their part.

Questions

QUESTION: Susan Gitelson.

Thank you for this very clear exposition. But there is a whole other side, which is the origins of this problem, beginning in the Middle East. It's necessary at the same time for the negotiations about Syria and so forth to move forward, and also for the long run for the Middle Eastern countries to train their people, to have jobs, and create opportunities for them. So the United Nations and everybody else—it's a global issue—should be urging and helping this kind of solution.

PETER SUTHERLAND: I absolutely agree. That's all I can say in answer to that. I completely agree with you.

QUESTION: Good morning. Thank you very much for your presentation. Kai Sauer. I'm the Finnish permanent representative to the United Nations, as mentioned by our guest.

My question is related to those actors who have not been that visible in contributing to the solution, but perhaps more in creating it. We are receiving a lot of refugees in Finland as well, believe it or not. Three thousand was the number which we take under normal circumstances. Last year we took 30,000. So that's a tenfold increase.

Now we have an increasing influx from the east, through Russia, which is becoming more and more a transit country. Knowing our geographic location—we are in the cul-de-sac—those who come are likely to stay.

What is your view on Russia's role in this game? Thank you.

PETER SUTHERLAND: I'm sort of reluctant to—I, hopefully, don't duck questions. But I'm sort of reluctant, as UN special representative for migration, to get into the causative factors of Russia's involvement—the [bombing in Syria](#), the arguments now articulated in some of the media that actually Russia has as part of its engagement in Syria an ulterior motive in regard to destabilizing Europe, and so on and so forth. I'm reluctant to get into that because I don't have the authority to talk on the subject. So I'm afraid I have to duck the question.

But I pay tribute to the Finnish uptake that you mentioned in terms of refugees.

I'm sorry. I just don't think I should say it.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. I'm [Matthew Rycroft](#), the British ambassador to the United Nations. In the interest of taming nationalism, I won't mention rugby or Brexit. [Laughter]

But I did want to draw attention to the words behind you, in which under Carnegie Council it says, "The Voice for Ethics in International Affairs." I think that you have made a very clear, cogent, and compelling voice for ethics in this particular very difficult debate.

I'm wondering if, in order to change the dynamic that you have criticized in the decision-making of many prime ministers and presidents, if there is a way of redefining ambition and generosity in this area, so it isn't just about resettlement and relocation, but the other contributions towards resolving either the issue or the underlying causes of the issue, including the Syrian conflict and [others](#) in the Middle East and North Africa—if that kind of counts as a valuable contribution to the debate, and if you could then try to create some competition between countries to be doing the right thing, but give them a relatively broad definition of what the right thing is, that they all have to do more on resettlement?

PETER SUTHERLAND: Well, I can't deny that. Nor can I deny the fact that the United Kingdom has made a very substantial contribution in terms of the financial support and the thinking on some of the points that have been made earlier about trade—for an example, trade zones in Jordan or wherever, where refugees can be employed, and so on—and also direct financial contribution. Of course, everything you say is absolutely accurate.

But I do think that there is a real problem here. If you look at a country which has been extremely generous—two of them, the two most generous, Sweden number one and Germany number two—if Germany is taking in 800,000 to a million a year, and if you hear, as I have heard, in public discourse in Germany somebody standing up in the audience and saying, "Why are we the ones who are taking X whereas country Y is taking a fraction?", then, inevitably, the result of that comparison is a politically toxic mix for Mrs. Merkel or for Sweden.

So I don't think that there is any way of ducking the issue of taking numbers, which are on a broadly equivalent basis there. Otherwise we end up, as we are seeing in Sweden, with the [Sweden Democrats](#), an extremist party, coming up—and it is happening all over Europe.

At least the politicians who are taking more have some chance of winning the battle if they can say, "Europe, we believe in solidarity, we believe in sharing, and we're all playing by the same rules." At the moment we are not.

QUESTION: Ron Berenbeim.

Can you draw a political or legal distinction between refugees and migrants and how this discussion should be conducted separately as between them?

PETER SUTHERLAND: That's a vital question. I didn't mention it because it opens something up which is absolutely vital. I'm glad, in fact, that you asked it.

Refugees are people who are basically escaping from persecution.

Now, there is another huge category of migrants, vulnerable migrants, whose lives can be at risk for a whole series of reasons which are not related to persecution, or even war—it could be ecological; it could be environmental damage; it could be famine; it could be anything—and they are just as much at risk as those who are escaping from Syria.

So how do we work out a regime for that? That is something that in the conference which will be taking place on the 19th of September we are going to have to look at. We can't ignore it.

I think that the way to deal with it is: first of all, to maintain sacrosanct the convention, build a fence around that. Now, the Danish [prime minister](#) wants to open that. To my mind that is utterly unacceptable, because if that definition of persecuted people is being opened, you can be damn sure it's not being opened to expand it. So we stay away from that and nobody should touch it.

On the others, I think we have to work out a regime which allows for various different solutions—for an example, humanitarian visas closely associated with humanitarian disasters, temporary visas; family reunion issues. We have to work out a global regime that actually works in some way.

What we can't profess, whatever our beliefs may be, is we cannot profess a belief in open borders that will be politically acceptable. It won't be. So many economic migrants will have no rights to stay. They should be respected, they should be dealt with with respect, and their human rights should be supported. But the open border idea of simply letting everybody move, however much some of us may argue along those lines, is not an attainable situation.

QUESTION: Thank you very much. [Ib Petersen](#), the permanent representative to the United Nations from Denmark.

You allegedly quoted my prime minister. What he has said also is that there is a lot of misunderstanding of what is going on in Denmark. One fact is that, for instance, we took in 20,000 refugees last year. If the United States, relatively speaking, had taken in the same amount, it would be around 1 million, compared to the population and so on.

I want to underline that what my prime minister has said is he can understand if people are talking about the conventions, which are 60 years old or more—and, given the crisis we have, apparently it is not really working—there could be a reason for looking into that. But he is not going to propose that. He has underlined that. He has underlined that Denmark will live up to our obligations to the convention. We live up to our international responsibility. Denmark pledged \$100 million this year for Syrian refugees at the conference in London.

The question I really had was already responded to in a way, the link or the migration issue, because it is indeed a summit about migration and refugees. We have had previous summits about migration, and you have been special representative on migration for the past 10 years, but somehow we never really started to grapple with that really. It is in a way sometimes very diffusive, the discussion, because at the moment otherwise we only talk about the refugees. The migration issue is actually the long-term issue about how many refugees we will have in the future.

PETER SUTHERLAND: First of all, let me be fair to Denmark. The actual numbers taken by Denmark, as the ambassador has cited, are admirable. They have been amongst the highest, and on occasion the highest, in the European Union. That's true.

I still disagree with raising the issue of redefining at all. I think it inevitably raises issues which we should not address.

With regard to what may be expressed as a criticism of the international system, not to have organized systemically a response to this type of situation, a structure for migrants in crisis—which is an initiative currently being led by the United States and the Philippines, which is a very important thing which I haven't the time to go into.

The reality is when I was appointed, I remember meeting Ambassador [Bolton](#). It wasn't a pleasant meeting. He said to me, "What are you talking about migration in the United Nations for? You have no right to talk about it. We're not going to participate in"—what was then a high-level dialogue before the General Assembly, which I was meant to be orchestrating in some way—"we're not going to even join up. As far as we're concerned, this is a question of national sovereignty." I'm paraphrasing him. "We've got our [Constitution](#), we've got our laws, we've got our rights. We don't need lectures from you or from anyone else."

Well, I told him what I thought of him too. [Laughter] It was a rather unpleasant meeting.

But it was indicative of an approach which you will find in many places. That's why there isn't an international regime for migrants—migrants in crisis, vulnerable migrants, migrant refugees.

We have very little law—the Refugee Convention is one of the exceptions—because many countries say: "Hands off. This is national sovereignty. We'll organize what we are going to do in the United States."

One of the reasons why I think this year is the moment of multilateral response to last year's and this year's crisis is that we have an administration which will engage with the issue, as long as President

Obama is where he is. There are moments of time when things can happen. This is the moment of time when it will either happen or it will not.

If we have a new administration next year—how many years did it take for it to get its act together, even if it isn't automatically anti-migrant?—we can imagine the crisis just going on without any multilateral response.

So this is the moment. We have a fantastic leader of the International Organization for Migration (IOM), an American, [Bill Swing](#), a great guy, plays tennis every morning at the age of 81, a fantastic character. And we have a great [leader](#), a new leader, of United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). We have a [secretary-general](#) who is interested and committed, and a deputy secretary-general, [Eliasson](#), who is equally committed. So we will try.

JOANNE MYERS: I want to thank you for ending on such a positive note. Thank you very, very much.

Audio

The migrant/refugee crisis is a defining moral issue for our generation, declares Peter Sutherland, UN special representative on international migration. And proximity should not define responsibility. It's a global responsibility.

Video Clips

The migrant/refugee crisis is a defining moral issue for our generation, declares Peter Sutherland, UN special representative on international migration. And proximity should not define responsibility. It's a global responsibility.

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