

Football and refugees
Lord Bassam of Brighton

Thank you for the invitation to speak today. I feel very privileged to be here and able to talk with such a well informed audience. And on two subjects close to my heart.

Refugees and football.

Like many in this room I take as a first principle that one of the most important measures of the moral health of a civilised nation is how it treats people who - by virtue of war, natural disasters or man-made catastrophes - are displaced. As we know we are in the middle of one of the biggest migratory crises since the end of the Second World War.

Yet Governments have been either slow to respond, have failed to agree common strategies or worse tried to ignore the problem. In some cases Governments have simply turned on the victims and sought to pick on migrants and fuelled a media-led blame game. The LEAVE Campaign and the rise of Trump have merely acted to make matters worse.

It's my firm belief that the assumptions driving the attacks on migrants - who are the victims of conflict and disaster - need to be challenged continuously and persistently. It is a task not just to be left to politicians but to all of us who seek to live in a more harmonious and unified world.

It is after all what brings us here today to talk about what matters to us and what matters for the refugees our world has created. Governments exist to find collective solutions, they don't exist in isolation they exist together with the institutions we create as part of civic society. So when Government responses are insufficient we must step up and say so and find ways of providing solutions that Governments won't.

It's often said that Chief Whips don't do policy. For the most part it is true. We are there to guide other politicians, to manage the business of politics, to shape its agenda, not determine it. Whips are sometimes seen as threatening or terrifying figures who hide in the parliamentary shadows. I can tell you that the House of Cards has worked wonders for my reputation.

I can also tell you that Whips are also caring and considerate

and kindly folk - who give a damn.

As I have watched this year's events unfold I have become increasingly angry. Angry at the failure of others to act as thousands of desperate people go without help, angry that they are exploited, angry that they are abused. Angry at people's despair. But I don't give up hope and, like you, I try and work together with others to try and change how things are.

So I find it heartening that football - a sport with a chequered history of tackling racial abuse and difference and fear of the other - is taking up part of the refugee challenge. So today I pay tribute to those individuals and organisations, clubs and teams that work to use football as a means of promoting its shared values. In particular, the great work undertaken over more than twenty years by Kick it Out - led by my good friend Herman Ouseley.

The campaign has achieved great things but this year has seen it step up a gear to do more in challenging the hatred stirred up by anti-immigration campaigners. I was particularly heartened to hear of some of the work being undertaken to challenge the abuse of Muslim women involved in women's football.

We should view this inspirational work as something to guide us all in designing programmes to tackle ignorance and prejudice about immigrants and migration. You will hear later from Martin Perry of the practical work being undertaken by AITC tackling these issues. For me given the salience that football has in our lives it is a wonderful vehicle for making a difference. So we should urge and challenge clubs at every level of the game to play their part in making refugees welcome and encouraging participation from visitors and guests who find their way here.

Football clubs have risen to the challenges posed by racism, gender inequality and homophobia - so why not enlist the game to help tackle anti-refugee prejudices. Let's get our football grounds decked out with Refugees Welcome Here banners After all BHAFC put up signs welcoming John Prescott and even sent him a Valentine's card in its long campaign to build this brilliant stadium.

Let's get clubs making the case to help refugees, let's tell fans about brilliant international events like the Refugee World Cup, let's turn the tide of prejudice by showing simply the contribution refugees can and do make to our world. Making it a

better place for us all.

I give one example of what happens when we embrace people needing help.... (Martin will recognise this story because BHAFC plays a part in it). Al Bangura is from Sierra Leone. He left home at the age of 14 and travelled to Guinea where he met a French man who promised to help him fulfil his dream of playing football. They travelled to England. Here he was left in an unfamiliar building and surrounded by men wanting to rape him. He had been trafficked. He escaped, found help and eventually was granted asylum. At 16, he joined Watford and played in the Premier League for them and he also came on loan to Brighton as a midfielder.

Despite his clearance to stay the Home Office appealed on a technicality claiming his status had changed when he became 18 back in 2007. Watford backed him, so did their MP, his manager, FIFPro the worldwide professional footballers' organisation, the ex-Home Secretary David Blunkett, Elton John - but most importantly the Watford fans. At half-time on 15th December 2007 in a game against Plymouth, fans held up posters of Al Bangura under a banner heading which read 'HE'S FAMILY'. 18,000 fans including the away end joined in the protest.

Four days later the Home Office relented while he applied for a work permit and he eventually won his appeal to stay.

Al Bangura said "The support I got from the Watford people is something I will never forget. They did so much for me, they are like family". He said at the time that this was a life-changing moment. It certainly was. Now he has retired as a top player but works for the Premier League raising awareness about human trafficking and highlighting the issues to the growing number of teenage players being tricked into leaving Africa for a football future that may not exist.

Football has enormous capacity to develop young people. It provides structure and, increasingly through academies, an education. BHAFC is a great beacon. Clubs are putting more back into their communities. They are a powerful vehicle for changing attitudes, they generate, in the main, generous role models.

Football in the UK on the pitch has one of the most diverse labour forces in any profession, it lives off and thrives on an open market of employment opportunities, it is what makes our professional leagues so exciting to watch. And more importantly fans know that too.

So my argument is simple let us use the lessons learnt from football's part in countering racism in and outside stadiums and take from those lessons a way of working to challenge anti-refugee and anti-migrant attitudes. We could have education programmes based around football using players in schools and colleges to raise awareness about modern migration and why it exists. We could get players to explain what being a refugee means, schools could raise awareness and funds to help integrate refugees into local communities.

Why don't we draw on what local councils do best in setting up projects in communities that explain different cultures and why people move around our complex world seeking a new life? Let's press Government to release funds to aid integration and charge politicians with a duty to ensure constituents understand refugee issues. Perhaps we should instigate a Refugee Week during the winter months and get each club to host a refugee-focused event.

To those who say 'nothing will change', I say look at our history as a football crazy nation. I can remember the banana throwers at games. Clubs challenged that form of abuse and what came with it. Now clubs ban behaviour of that sort and police ensure prosecution.

Few of you will know but for two years, early in my ministerial career, I was given the title of 'football hooligan minister'. My task was to oversee legislation banning hooligans from foreign travel during club and international match periods. That legislation worked and, together with a raft of measures put in place following a working party report I oversaw, began to change the way clubs approached bad behaviour among fans.

Not everything in the football world has changed but respect between fan groups has improved across most of Europe, at a club level in particular. So it is clear programmes of action tied to standards can and will work. The challenge for us all is to determine football's wider role in helping refugees. Then we need to pull together the civic groups, governing bodies and Government to a common cause. BREXIT and BREXITEERS offer us a challenge because they will seek to put up barriers between people and nations. Our task is to recognise the added difficulty but respond and to be bold to meet that challenge using the positive aspects of football as our guide and our common humanity and shared values as our inspiration.