

# A conversation with Howard Adelman on 21 January 2014

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## Participants

- Howard Adelman—Founder of Operation Lifeline, former Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at York University, founder and director of York Centre for Refugee Studies
- Carl Shulman—Research Associate, Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University
- Nick Beckstead—Research Fellow, Future of Humanity Institute at Oxford University; Board of Trustees, Centre for Effective Altruism

## Summary

**Purpose of the call:** We organized this call to learn more about Howard's work aimed at increasing the flow of humanitarian refugees to Canada with private charitable sponsorship. We were interested in this because of the large welfare and economic impacts migration to developed countries can have for refugees from poor countries. Also, it is unusual to find opportunities for private donations to directly enable migration, and we wanted to learn more about the situation in Canada.

**Why this person:** Howard Adelman has done extensive work on refugee issues as an academic and activist, including the formation of Operation Lifeline, in which private charitable efforts enabled tens of thousands of refugees to come to Canada. He is currently involved in revitalizing that system.

**Topics discussed:** We discussed the history and mechanics of Canada's program for private sponsorship of immigrants, current bottlenecks for its humanitarian impacts, recent political developments, and the role of efforts by Howard and colleagues to enable growth in the program. We also discussed Howard's views on room for more funding for refugee and migration related work, and how his career came to have so much impact on refugee issues.

## What is the problem?

Humanitarian refugees would like to be in Canada. Under Canada's unique private sponsorship scheme, some refugees may come provided that private donors provide financing and support for settlement and adjustment costs, on the order of \$9,000 for one refugee, and \$21,000 for a family of four. The government also limits how many refugees can come to Canada each year, in recent years allowing on the order of 5,000-7,500 privately sponsored refugees and a slightly greater number of government sponsored refugees.

Currently, more people apply for private sponsorship than there are spaces. The government has recently cut back on asylum admissions and government-sponsored refugees. Over time the private

sponsorship of refugees has shifted towards family reunification, and away from the traditional humanitarian refugee work.

Together with other academics, former civil servants, and churches engaged in sponsorship, Howard is working with the Canadian government to change the regulations relating to humanitarian refugees. They hope to increase spaces for sponsoring humanitarian refugees. The policy change will not require legislation.

## **What are the possible interventions?**

In order for sponsors of refugee families to get a tax deduction for supporting refugees, money must flow through a registered charity. Usually, this is coordinated through churches. Howard would like to set up a secular charitable vehicle in order to encourage more people to sponsor refugees. Howard hopes this would make more people willing to sponsor refugees, and show the government that there is support from civil society for bringing in more humanitarian refugees. The current government is especially favorable to private and civil society initiatives, so this is especially important. The government would also like to ensure that if it increases approvals, this is visibly and rapidly successful in eliciting the needed private support.

Howard believes that an outside philanthropist could probably not increase the number of refugees coming to Canada simply by committing to pay for private sponsorships because it wouldn't show the same kind of support from Canadian civil society. The bottleneck for more refugees coming in is the limit on number sponsorships the government will allow, rather than available funding. However, the government can adjust caps without passing new legislation each year.

An outside philanthropist could support research and advocacy work on behalf of refugees. Howard and his colleagues are currently focused on technical assistance, coming up with proposals that are consistent with the broader aims of whichever government is in power while improving the humanitarian refugee situation.

In the past, Howard has had success in providing information to inform policy, e.g. at one time the Canadian government was taking refugees from Sri Lanka, approving applicants from the south but not the north since it believed the conflict was localized to the south. Howard traveled to Sri Lanka, and learned that killings were taking place in the north, which soon hit national media, and the Canadian government began accepting refugees from the north within weeks.

Academic research has often been relevant to the details of policies. For example, research on life outcomes for refugees, which found that privately sponsored refugees integrated into the Canadian economy and society more rapidly and easily, has been important for the private sponsorship program. This effect does not seem to be simply a matter of selection: it applied when the Canadian government was allocating refugees from a single source between government and private sponsorship more-or-less randomly. Howard mentioned a recent \$5 MM government grant to study higher education in refugee camps as an example of this work.

## Other

Howard said that to some extent increases in the private sponsorship program were likely to substitute for other migration programs. Most directly, the government is reducing government sponsorship of refugees. It is also attempting to reduce asylum, favoring refugees it selects over those who are able to reach the country. Refugee allowances may also substitute for guest worker programs to some degree.

Howard believes that the per-person humanitarian benefit of a revitalized private sponsorship program would be greater than those of the programs that it might partially substitute for. He also said that over time sponsorship would result in somewhat more person-years in Canada than guest worker programs, as refugees stay longer.

In the past sponsorship efforts have relied on churches to a great degree. Howard thinks that with increasing secularization it is important to find new ways of reaching the population. He suspects that donating to a particular individual in a one-to-one interaction may make this relatively appealing for more secular donors.

In combination with an increase in caps, there would be a shift of people currently undergoing family reunification through the sponsorship program to a separate family reunification track, and bureaucratic measures to ensure the private sponsorship program is dedicated to refugees with high humanitarian need.

## Who else could we talk to?

1. Michelle Millard, coordinator for the Centre for Refugee Studies at York U (largest refugee think tank in Canada)
2. Metropolis Canada: a network of 5 immigration research institutes within Canada, including CERIS at York U
3. Ryerson Centre for Immigration and Settlement
4. Institute for the Study of International Migration at Georgetown
5. Kathleen Noland
6. Oxford Refugee Studies Centre

## Howard's career

Howard doesn't know how much impact his work has had as a philosopher, but suspects his activism has been more impactful. Some of his impactful academic work includes some research on student housing (which affected government policy), settling a contentious debate about the number of homeless people in Lebanon (which was widely used by both governments and humanitarian groups), and interviews with refugees in Sri Lanka (which caused the Canadian government to let more refugees in, as mentioned above). He feels his most impactful academic work was a scholarly study of the Rwandan genocide, which used UN and other documents to make clear how the international community had

failed to respond to evidence of the genocide. Howard has been involved in a number of issues in activism, including nuclear disarmament, co-op housing, refugees and genocide.

He recounts that the formation and growth of Operation Lifeline was serendipitous. At an activist meeting about helping refugees in Indochina, a government official was present and mentioned to the attendees that there was existing private sponsorship legislation that they could use to help. Sponsorships by that group and the idea of "Operation Lifeline" then reached national news media and soon the organization was flooded with interests, rapidly leading to sponsorship of over 34,000 refugees. The government also pledged to match private sponsorships with government sponsorships on 1:1 basis.

Howard began his education as a medical student, but found that he did not have enough time for activism while undertaking medical studies. As a philosophy academic, Howard was able to take 4 hours each morning to do his intellectual work, and then have enough time for extensive activism. His involvement in different social movements varied, and he found they were usually not strongly overlapping in membership. By participating in many, he was able to find and take opportunities for high impact in some. His skills as a 1960s movement organizer have been among the most useful in generalizing across causes.