# We deride them as ‘migrants’. Why not call them people? By [David Marsh](http://www.theguardian.com/profile/davidmarsh) 31 Aug 2015

*‘They are people – men, women and children, fathers and mothers, teachers and engineers, just like us – except they come from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and elsewhere.’*

What do the following people have in common: Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England; the former England cricketer Kevin Pietersen; Nigel Farage’s wife, Kirsten; Chelsea’s new striker, Pedro; and Sir Bradley Wiggins?

Yes, they are all migrants – or, if you prefer, immigrants. Having moved to the UK to further their careers, some of them might perhaps be described as “economic migrants”. Except that this term is reserved exclusively by politicians and the media to describe people who – unlike bankers or sports stars – they don’t like: people who, in the words of our [foreign secretary, are “marauding” across Europe](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/aug/09/african-migrants-threaten-eu-standard-living-philip-hammond).

People from the UK moving abroad to pursue their career or financial interests, meanwhile, are “expats”, never emigrants or migrants.

The language we hear in what passes for a national conversation on migration has become as debased as most of the arguments, until the very word “migrants” is toxic, used to frighten us by conjuring up [images of a “swarm”](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/jul/30/david-cameron-migrant-swarm-language-condemned) (as David Cameron put it) massing at our borders, threatening our way of life.

As Prof Alexander Betts, director of the refugee studies centre at Oxford University, says: “Words that convey an exaggerated sense of threat can fuel anti-immigration sentiment and a climate of intolerance and xenophobia.”

There’s nothing new in this. Fifteen years ago the Conservatives were getting worked up about “bogus asylum seekers”. This was nonsense: you are either an asylum seeker or you aren’t. But that wasn’t the point – which was, rather than to demonstrate the traditional British values of compassion and fairness to those seeking refuge here, to denigrate them for crude political purposes.

This is the background against which Al Jazeera English has announced [it will no longer use the word “migrants”](http://www.aljazeera.com/blogs/editors-blog/2015/08/al-jazeera-mediterranean-migrants-150820082226309.html) but “refugees”, in the context of desperate people trying to enter Europe by the Mediterranean.

The broadcaster’s online editor, Barry Malone, says: “It is not hundreds of people who drown when a boat goes down in the Mediterranean, nor even hundreds of refugees. It is hundreds of migrants. The umbrella term migrant is no longer fit for purpose when it comes to describing the horror unfolding in the Mediterranean … Migrant is a word that strips suffering people of voice.”

[Newspapers](http://www.theguardian.com/media/newspapers) such as the Guardian have been using “migrant” in recent years in part because something similar happened to the word “immigrant”, when it became increasingly used by racists to mean something like “a black person in Britain who should go back home”. In fact “immigrate” simply means to arrive in a country, as “emigrate” means to leave one. But it’s hard to use the former in a neutral context because it has become so loaded, along with phrases such as “second-generation immigrant”, an offensive way to refer to their children.

Journalists, like politicians, prefer to keep a story simple, assuming readers and voters have a short attention span. Labels such as “migrants”, however, deny people their humanity, and somewhere in this sorry saga we are losing sight of the fact they are people. So when the Express used the headline “[Eight million migrants live in UK](http://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/600739/Britain-migrants-eight-million)” this week I’m not absolutely sure who they were referring to, or whether the figure is accurate, and I don’t think they are either. But it doesn’t really matter because the idea is to alarm, not inform, the public and propagate an agenda that says: migrants = bad; (and then to blame the European Union).

I’ve been canvassing opinion among Guardian colleagues to assess the language we use when writing about this international crisis. One colleague who has been reporting extensively on the situation in Calais says: “The conclusion I came to was, wherever possible, to describe those in the camp as ‘people’ initially, with an extended phrase along the lines of ‘more than 3,000 people who have fled war, poverty or persecution beyond Europe’s borders …’.”

‘The United Nations high commissioner for refugees considers people at Calais at the very least ‘people of concern’. Photograph: Regis Duvignau/Reuters

Another journalist says: “They are people – men, women and children, fathers and mothers, teachers and engineers, just like us – except they come from Syria, Eritrea, Afghanistan and elsewhere. Why not just call them ‘people’, then list any other information we know that is relevant?”

We deserve better from our politicians and press than scare stories about hordes of migrants laying siege to the UK. Such language not only plays to people’s fears, it is far from accurate. The vast majority come into the country legally. The United Nations high commissioner for refugees considers people at Calais at the very least “people of concern” – vulnerable individuals likely to have a claim for asylum. Globally [nearly 60 million people have been forcibly displaced](http://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2015/jun/18/59m-people-displaced-war-violence-persecution-says-un). It’s fair to say that most of them are not in it to take advantage of the British benefits system.

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You will still see the word “migrants” or “migration” in the Guardian as a general expression to cover people who for whatever reason have moved, or are moving, from the country of which they are nationals to another. But “refugees”, “displaced people” and “asylum seekers”, all of which have clear definitions, are more useful and accurate terms than a catch-all label like “migrants”, and we should use them wherever possible.

Politically charged expressions such as “economic migrants”, “genuine refugees” or “illegal asylum seekers” should have no part in our coverage. This is a story about humanity. Reporting it should be humane as well as accurate. Sadly, most of what we hear and read about “migrants” is neither. <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/aug/28/migrants-people-refugees-humanity?CMP=fb_gu>