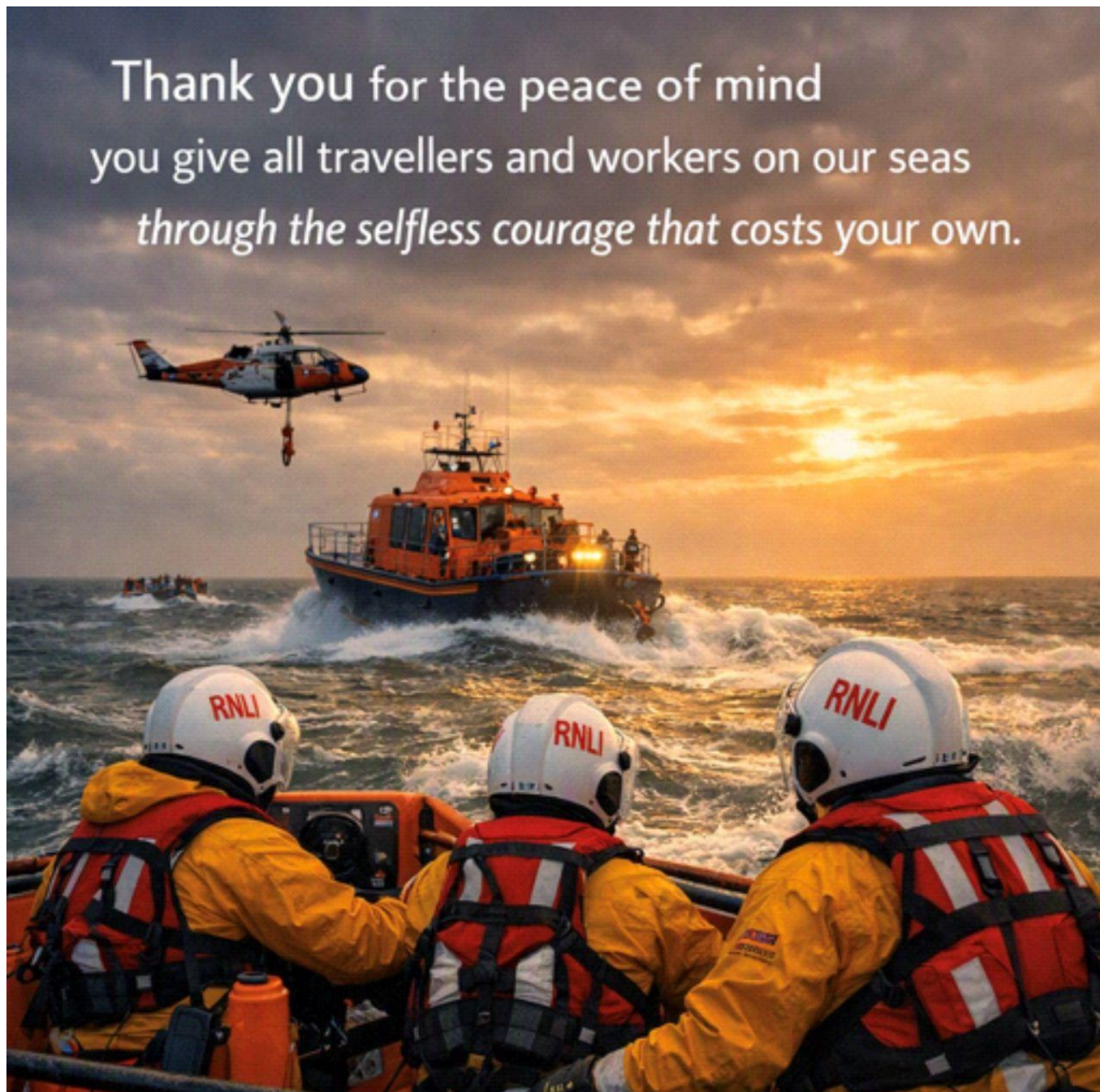


Humanity at Sea

Why Political Failure on Small-Boat Migration is Putting the RNLI at Risk

Adam Tugwell | 11 September 2026



Introduction

For two centuries, the **RNLI** has stood as one of the most extraordinary humanitarian organisations in the world. Its volunteers launch into storms, darkness, and danger to help anyone in distress at sea - without judgement, without hesitation, and without regard for nationality, status, or circumstance.

Their ethos is simple, solemn, and true: Every call for help is met with courage.

Not certainty. Not guarantees. Courage.

Yet today, this remarkable charity finds itself pulled into the centre of a political storm it did not create. The failure of successive governments to resolve the small-boat migration issue in the English Channel has produced a toxic environment in which RNLI volunteers have faced hostility, lifeboat stations have become targets of protest, and the organisation's reputation has been dragged into a culture-war narrative.

This is not only unjust - it is dangerous.

Because if public anger continues to be misdirected at the RNLI, the consequences will reach far beyond the migrant debate. They will touch every fisherman, sailor, holidaymaker, offshore worker, and coastal community across the UK and Ireland.

The RNLI is not simply a charity. It is critical national safety infrastructure, sustained by volunteers, donors, local communities, and public trust. Political failure now threatens that infrastructure.

1. A Tradition of Unconditional Rescue

The RNLI's duty is not political. It is humanitarian.

Maritime tradition, international law, and the organisation's founding principles all demand the same thing: **anyone in distress at sea must be responded to.**

But response is not the same as rescue. The sea offers no promises. RNLI crews know this every time they launch.

This truth is embodied in [the story of the *Solomon Browne*, the Penlee lifeboat lost with all hands in 1981.](#)

In hurricane-force winds, the crew launched to save the people aboard the MV *Union Star*. They knew the risks. They went anyway. Their sacrifice remains a defining example of the RNLI's moral clarity - a clarity that has guided generations of coastal volunteers.

The RNLI's humanity lies not in guaranteeing outcomes, but in answering danger with courage.

2. Why Small-Boat Migration Happens - and Why Public Perception Struggles with It

Small-boat migration is often framed as a simple choice between "desperation" and "economic migration." In reality, it is the end-point of a long, complex chain of forces that most people never see - and that governments rarely explain.

This lack of clarity fuels public anger, fear, and mistrust, shaping the political pressure that ultimately threatens the RNLI.

People see the impact, not the causation

People see:

- pressure on housing
- hotels taken over
- visible signs of government failure
- communities stretched
- a sense of lost control

They see these things in their own towns. They feel ignored, dismissed, and patronised by political messaging that insists the reality is very different to what people across the UK are experiencing every day.

However, what those same people *don't* see is the role Western governments - including the UK - have played in shaping the conditions that displace migrants from their own countries and make them mobile.

This does not mean ordinary British people have responsibility for those arriving this way. It means they have not yet been shown the full picture.

The system behind the crisis

For decades, Western governments have:

- supported regimes for strategic gain
- intervened in conflicts that destabilised regions
- backed coups that served geopolitical interests
- enabled economic extraction through global finance
- shaped trade policies that hollowed out local economies
- fuelled conflicts indirectly through arms, alliances, or resource competition

Whether through military interventions, alliances, economic policies, or support for strategically important regimes, Western governments have often been significant actors in regions that later experienced large-scale displacement. These actions have contributed to insecurity, economic collapse, political repression, trafficking networks, and mass mobility.

But the public rarely sees this chain of causation. They see only the final link: arrival.

Fear at home is real

When people see rapid change in their communities without explanation, they feel threatened. When government messaging is inconsistent, they feel deceived. When the system hides its own role, people fill the gaps with whatever narrative is available.

This fear is not ignorance. It is a rational response to poor governance.

Better governance is the only long-term solution

When a system has played a role in creating the conditions that drive displacement, it should not surprise us that it struggles to address the consequences.

A better model of governance - one that puts human beings first - is needed.

A model that:

- recognises the complexity of global displacement
- supports migrants appropriately without overwhelming our communities
- protects local environments and economies
- addresses root causes rather than symptoms
- communicates honestly with the public
- treats migration as a human challenge, not a political weapon

This does not mean surrendering to anyone who arrives. It means responding with humanity, clarity, and responsibility.

Supporting the RNLI is the smallest - and most essential - act of humanity

In a world shaped by a system that has failed so many people - abroad and at home - supporting the RNLI is a profoundly simple moral act.

The RNLI does not solve the crisis. It does not adjudicate claims. It does not shape policy.

It responds to danger because that is what a civilised society should ask of those entrusted with saving life at sea.

Supporting the RNLI is not political. It is human.

3. Government Failure and the Creation of Avoidable Danger

The small-boat issue is not new, and it is not simple. But one fact is clear: **the UK government has not used all available levers - direct or indirect - to reduce dangerous crossings.**

Direct measures could include expanded safe routes, rapid asylum processing, bilateral agreements, or targeted disruption of smuggling networks.

Indirect measures could reduce incentives for irregular arrival by tightening support for those without legitimate claims or speeding up removals.

Some steps have been taken. Many have not. And the result is a Channel where:

- boats launch in increasingly unsafe conditions
- smugglers take greater risks
- vessels are more overcrowded
- distress becomes more frequent and more lethal

This is not an accident. It is the predictable outcome of political inaction.

4. The RNLI Cannot Distinguish “Legitimate” Distress from “Manufactured” Distress – and MUST NOT be expected to

At sea, there is no such thing as “illegitimate distress.” A vessel is either seaworthy or not. A person is either safe or not. A situation is either survivable or not.

The RNLI cannot:

- assess asylum eligibility
- determine legal status
- evaluate motives
- decide whether someone “should” be rescued

Its duty is triggered by danger, not politics.

When the government allows conditions that produce avoidable danger, the RNLI must respond - even though it did not create the circumstances.

And when they respond, they do so knowing the outcome is uncertain.

That is the courage at the heart of their work.

5. Public Anger Is Understandable - But Misdirected

Many people are rightly frustrated by the government’s failure to control small-boat arrivals. But some have turned that frustration toward the RNLI, accusing it of aiding illegal migration or acting as a “taxi service.”

This anger is profoundly misdirected.

The RNLI is not responsible for migration policy. It is not responsible for border enforcement. It is not responsible for the political choices that allow dangerous crossings to continue.

It is responsible only for answering danger with courage.

When volunteers are shouted at, threatened, or protested against, it is not just morally wrong - it is operationally dangerous.

The RNLI depends on volunteers, goodwill, and donations. Its 2025 figures show more than 9,000 lifeboat launches, more than 8,000 people aided by lifeboat crews, and over 36,000 people aided by lifeguards. If public support weakens, the entire maritime safety system weakens with it.

6. The National Consequences of RNLI Erosion

The erosion of the RNLI - whether through declining donations, damaged public trust, or volunteer attrition - would carry consequences far beyond the politics of small-boat migration.

It would represent a direct threat to the safety of **every person who goes to sea around the UK and Ireland**, and to the resilience of coastal communities whose lives and livelihoods depend on rapid, reliable maritime rescue.

A critical national safety net at risk

The RNLI provides a capability that the government would struggle to replicate even with billions of pounds of investment.

If the RNLI weakens, the UK and Ireland lose:

- **238 lifeboat stations**
- **thousands of trained volunteers**
- **modern rescue vessels**
- **lifeguard services**
- **a maritime culture of duty and courage**

Its erosion would leave gaps that no other organisation is prepared to fill. The RNLI's own 2025 data records 238 lifeboat stations, more than 9,000 lifeboat launches, and over 56,000 lifeboat crew hours at sea.

Direct danger to coastal communities

If the RNLI's capacity declines, the consequences will be felt immediately:

- **fishermen lose their primary rescue service**

- merchant vessels face longer response times
- leisure sailors and kayakers become more vulnerable
- surfers and swimmers lose lifeguard protection
- tourism-dependent towns face increased risk

The RNLI's erosion would not be symbolic - it would be lethal.

Increased fatalities and slower rescue times

Every minute matters at sea.

A weakened RNLI means:

- fewer available crew
- slower launch times
- reduced coverage
- overstretched stations

This translates directly into **higher fatality rates**.

Loss of a unique humanitarian ethos

The RNLI's unconditional response - answering danger even when the outcome is uncertain - is one of the last remaining expressions of universal humanitarian duty in British public life. Its erosion would diminish that identity.

Economic consequences

The RNLI quietly underpins a wide range of coastal and maritime activity. Its value is not only humanitarian; it is practical, economic, and national.

Its absence would affect:

- fishing industries
- tourism
- commercial shipping
- local coastal economies

A national vulnerability created by political failure

Political failure on small-boat migration is creating conditions that threaten the RNLI - and therefore threaten the safety of the entire coastline.

If hostility grows, if donations fall, if volunteers walk away, the RNLI's ability to protect the nation will weaken. And the consequences will be felt not by migrants alone, but by **every person who steps into the sea.**

Conclusion: A Call to Protect the RNLI

The RNLI has saved hundreds of thousands of lives over two centuries. It has launched in storms, in darkness, in danger, and in grief. It has never asked who you are, where you came from, or whether you “deserve” rescue.

It has simply met every call for help with courage.

Today, that tradition is at risk - not because of migrants, but because of political failure and misdirected anger.

If you value the RNLI, if you value the safety of our coasts, if you value the courage of volunteers who launch into the unknown, then please continue to support the charity.

Drop coins and notes into the collection tins. Support your local station. Some donors may wish their contributions to support particular stations or local rescue activity.

Whatever form that support takes, the greater danger is not disagreement over policy, but the loss of support for lifesaving services altogether.

Every station matters. Every crew matters. Every launch matters.

The RNLI belongs to all of us. And all of us may one day depend on it.

Further Information

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