The list of horrors swells. Last week, 71 migrants were found asphyxiated in an abandoned truck in Austria to add to the tally of hundreds of migrants drowning almost by the day in the Mediterranean. The few in Calais who die trying to get to Britain are but tragic notes in the margin of an unfolding narrative of death. The migrants know the odds; nonetheless, the UN says in the next few months the numbers will grow to 3,000 every day taking the risk and successfully entering Europe alive.

It is not Britain, the alleged “soft touch”, which is the favoured destination for what is emerging as one of the great movements of people in history, fleeing the mayhem of Syria, North Africa, Afghanistan, Eritrea or northern Nigeria aided and abetted by sinister, organised gangs of people traffickers. Instead, they prefer Germany. In the last 12 months alone, it has received some 300,000 asylum claims, 12 times more than Britain, on top of the immigration it receives within the EU under the freedom of movement rules it defends to the last. During 2015, the number of asylum seekers to Germany is set to rise to 800,000. Germany is becoming a country of immigration, the most popular destination for the global dispossessed.

If this happened here, the hysteria would be overwhelming. Ukip would perhaps have more than 100 MPs in the House of Commons. There would be a huge majority in favour of leaving the European Union. The air would be thick with calls for ever-tighter controls of our borders, the creation of mass detention centres and forced expulsion of hundreds of thousands of migrants. British Conservatives and their press allies would be adopting attitudes ominously similar to the darkest periods in European history.

Yet last week, Chancellor Merkel visited a centre for asylum seekers in Heidenau in east Germany where there had been rightwing extremist rioting a few days earlier.

“There can be no tolerance of those who question the dignity of other people,” she said, standing in front of placards accusing her of being the people’s traitor. “There is no tolerance of those who are not ready to help, where, for legal and humanitarian reasons, help is due.”

Confronted by forces that would overwhelm British leaders, the woman the Greek left (and many on the British left who should know better) mistakenly accuse of being the leading advocate of conservative neoliberalism has stood up to be counted. Being the country to which so many want to migrate should be a source of pride, she says. She wants to keep Germany and Europe open, to welcome legitimate asylum seekers in common humanity...
many on the British left who should know better) mistakenly accuse of being the leading advocate of conservative neoliberalism has stood up to be counted. Being the country to which so many want to migrate should be a source of pride, she says. She wants to keep Germany and Europe open, to welcome legitimate asylum seekers in common humanity, while doing her very best to stop abuse and keep the movement to manageable proportions. Which demands a European-wide response. So far, her electorate and her press back her.

She is right and deserving of support from every European. Migration is what we have done since the earliest of times, triggering growth and enlarging our circles of possibility. Whether we’re discussing the Roman or British empires, 15th-century Venice or 20th-century New York or London today, great civilisations and dynamic cities have been defined by being open to immigrants and refugees.

They are, as migration specialist Ian Goldin characterises them, “exceptional people”. Over centuries, as he painstakingly details, it has been immigrants and refugees who have been part of the alchemy of any country’s success: they are driven, hungry and talented and add to the pool of entrepreneurs, innovators and risk-takers. The hundreds of thousands today who have trekked across continents and dangerous seas are by any standards unusually driven. They are also, as Angela Merkel says, fellow human beings. To receive them well is not only in our interests, it is fundamental to an idea of what it means to be human.

But the disruption induced by migration is not all creative: it is disruptive and has downsides. It brings sometimes unwelcome traditions, notably Islamic fundamentalism, although witnesses to the nihilist barbarism of Isis, al-Qaida and the Taliban are least likely to be credulous adherents to global jihad or some mystic caliphate.

Wages are lowered in those low-skill, high-labour turnover occupations that are necessarily migrants’ first port of call; for example, around a fifth of the new jobs in British cafes, restaurants and bars are reckoned now to have been taken by immigrants. Meanwhile, the capacity in schools and hospitals is further stretched. And as immigration sceptic David Goodhart persuasively argues, it makes “host” communities fearful that immigrants are free-riding on social structures built up over decades and for which they have not paid. To ride roughshod over these powerful feelings is to make a cardinal mistake.

Politicians and their electorates now have to make a choice. There is no middle way. The choice is between building walls and electrified fences, creating mass detention centres, organising mass repatriation and conceding to the fear of the other or it is to find a way of sustaining openness while doing the very best that can be done to allay the natural fears and apprehensions of host populations.

Above all, it is to recognise this is a European – even a global – problem. Germany needs Europe to rally to its side. Together with France, Angela Merkel has called for a pan-European response jointly financing appraisal and screening centres in Greece and Italy, co-ordinating reprisals against traffickers and sharing out the numbers of asylum seekers.

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inevitably, the Cameron government has given the initiative the cold shoulder, preoccupied with negotiating a one-sided relationship with the EU in which Britain accepts as few European obligations as possible, but retains all the gains.

If everyone played that game, the whole project would implode. This is a moment for political vision and bravery, not least from the Labour party. Over the years ahead, and in the run-up to the referendum on EU membership, neither Britain or its left can risk having a leader tempted by leaving the EU, the only organisation we have that, however imperfectly, might address this crisis.

Eurosceptic Mr Corbyn, if elected, would have no authority nor place any sustained pressure on the Cameron government to do the right thing at this pivotal moment. He would accelerate our retreat from making common European cause, leaving all the burden to be borne by Germany.

Sustained selfishness in foreign affairs can only work for so long. Britain, within limits, needs to be as open as possible, with a Europe similarly open, and it needs to share the costs. The alternative is too dark to contemplate.