

Interview with Professor Hawke EU Centre Visiting Thinker in Residence, Professor Alison Phipps (University of Glasgow)

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Twenty-sixteen was an eventful year in both Australian and international politics.

The Brexit vote has left the future of the United Kingdom and the European Union uncertain and last months US election has left many wary of what is next.

Professor Alison Phipps is the 2016 European Thinker in Residence at the Hawke EU Centre for Mobilities, Migrations and Cultural Transformations, and given the current political landscape her visit was auspiciously timed.

Phipps is a Professor of Languages and Intercultural Studies at the University of Glasgow and in 2012 she received an OBE for Services to Education and Intercultural and Interreligious Relations in the Queen's Birthday Honours.

The position of Thinker in Residence has been framed by world events and has included a variety of lectures and workshops, bringing together elements of different disciplines.

This is indicative of much of Professor Phipps' work that has taken her around the world to Palestine, Sudan, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Germany, France, USA, Portugal and Ghana.

She says interdisciplinary research has been something that she's always enjoyed and most recently has included working with law and health sciences.

"It's kind of a way of life, rather than a method or a procedure."

"It's really a little bit magpie like. You're drawing on lots of different themes and strands and you're giving yourself time to sit and listen and wait for the things that can inform your own work to come up, but also the things that you might be able to offer to other disciplines and other spaces," she says.

Although she has always been interested in social justice and refugee issues, Professor Phipps says she became more involved over a decade ago when she heard that linguists were needed to work with people in immigration detention.

“For me, one thing just lead to another and I became more and more heavily involved until in many ways I see myself as having so completely thrown in my lot with the lives of refugees that I find it hard to think through anything without the framing.”

“I feel a really strong pull on my life that I need to be doing this work right now and that it’s work for me to do,” she says.

Another component of Professor Phipps’ time as the Thinker in Residence has included exploring the nexus between refugees, migration and the arts.

This work draws on her experience as a poet, performer and dramaturge.

“The arts can be a way of making sense of the world. They’re a break from having to tell your story.”

“Artists exaggerate, they also diminish, they change size and scope and scale and volume and they will provoke, they will show up and say here I am, deal with it,” she says.

Five months on from the Brexit vote, Professor Phipps brought a Scottish perspective to the conversation at the summit.

Unlike in England, Scotland voted 62% to remain in the EU and the country does not share the same kind of rhetoric around immigration.

Scotland is in an interesting position because it does not have complete control over immigration, and therefore policy decisions are concerned predominantly with the care of refugees.

Professor Phipps presented a public lecture entitled ***Witnessing what happens when lessons are not learned: Calais, Lesbos, and Families held apart*** in which she highlight some key aspects that set Scotland apart.

This primarily includes Scotland’s strong leadership and the use of language.

Scotland has chosen to call migrants, refugees and asylum seekers ‘New Scots’ in policy terms, in an effort to be more inclusive of newcomers.

“I am a New Scot just as much somebody from Eritrea, Afghanistan or Syria is a New Scot,” she says.

Professor Phipps arrival to Australia coincided with the Government’s announcement of plans to permanently close the country’s doors to any person who arrived by boat after 2013.

She says she can’t see how Australia’s migration policy does not put them in breach of its international obligations.

“If it is in breach of its international obligations then there ought to be a call for international sanctions.”

“I think a call for sanctions would be a legitimate advocacy and activist step, be they economic sanctions or other forms of boycott or divestment,” she says.

Despite the doom and gloom of the current political setting, Professor Phipps remains hopeful for the future.

“While we can imagine and be creative enough to think of a different way of living with all of this, we’ve always got hope. When we give up imagining, we give up hope,” she says.