

The RNLI: people of courage and commitment to their nei...

Published: September 18, 2026, 6:56 am

The Guardian [reported yesterday](#) that:

A lifeboat station on the south coast of England near the spot where far-right activists tried to stop asylum seekers landing has been forced to temporarily close, it has emerged.

The station in Portsmouth shut after it and other sites run by the RNLI were targeted by people objecting to the lifeboat charity going to the aid of people trying to get to the UK on small boats.

They added:

Jacqui Irons, the head of the south-east region of the RNL, said: "Portsmouth lifeboat station has been temporarily off-service since 7 September. We have a duty of care to our people. We therefore took the decision to pause activity at the station to review crew safety and wellbeing, and to support those involved in the incident on 6 September."

I am deeply angered and saddened by this.

I should start with a declaration of interest. I have been a Governor of the RNLI for decades, which is not nearly as grand a title as it sounds. It just means I have made a financial commitment to it, so I am one of the organisation's voting members. Most of its members are not.

So, why make that commitment? First of all, both my grandfathers were in the professional Navy, and that, I think, through my father, left a lasting interest in all issues to do with the sea.

Then, as a consequence, I think I was taken to a lot of lifeboat stations as a child. That has left me with a long-term respect for what so many people have done for 200 years now by taking risks to save others who, to use the traditional form of words, are in peril at sea.

I do not think that anyone joins the RNLI as a crew member or station volunteer for a moment of glory. I strongly suspect that if they did, they would not last for long, because that is not how crews work.

The reality is that right around the country people volunteer their time, often with the active cooperation and consent of their employers, to crew lifeboats and provide the onshore support that is necessary for them to launch, for the reason that they care about the well-being of other people, whoever they might be, and wish to help them if they are at risk. That is a simply stated objective, but it takes courage, skill, and most of all commitment to deliver, because without regular practice, training, and support, the task would not be possible.

If my part is to chip in a bit of money, I hope it helps. I hope others might do the same. It is the least I can do when others do so much more.

In addition, as I learned to do from my father, I also visit stations whenever I can and offer my thanks. The most recent new station for me, at which I did that, was North Berwick in East Lothian, near Edinburgh, when I visited there in March. I added its station polo shirt to my collection during the visit, and I've been wearing it proudly ever since. I am pleased to show my association with the RNLI, which represents some modest but real commitment on my behalf.

I am now shocked, appalled, and upset that racist thugs in this country are targeting RNLI lifeboat stations, other installations, but most especially crew members and other volunteers because they put themselves at risk to save the lives of those refugees who are forced, as a result of hopelessly inappropriate UK government policy, to take to small boats to cross the English Channel to exercise their right, established in international law, with the support of this country, to claim asylum in their country of choice.

Saying that, I stress, the RNLI goes out to anyone at risk. It does not fill in a profiling questionnaire before the boat is launched. It rarely asks a question about the weather or the challenges that the crew will face. It simply does what is necessary to offer assistance when required, and save a life when necessary.

In doing so, it embodies the maxim that I still think is one of the best to adopt for a life well lived, which is love your neighbour as yourself. Indifference as to who the neighbour might be is a critical part of this instruction, as those on the laughably described Christian far right should note from the parable of the Good Samaritan, which I presume they have never read.

What we also learned this week was that the people of the village of Piddington in Oxfordshire, to whom the media has given a great deal of attention for their racism, as described by a brave member of their own community in media interviews, hosted a visit from the leader of those who organised recent protests in Dover and Portsmouth,

where men in black with balaclava helmets marched through streets and then, in the second case, threatened RNLI crews and those they had rescued from the sea.

Is this how far we have descended? Do the people of that village really think that their actions are appropriate? Do they really believe that their interests are aligned with vigilantes who threaten through the use of violence, who undermine the rule of law and who challenge the work of those who will care for others, whoever they might be?

To what depth of depravity, and I use the word advisedly, have we descended as a result? Have we really reached the point where, as happened in so many communities in fascist-ruled Nazi Europe, people willingly betray their neighbours because of their ethnicity, beliefs, or other characteristics, knowing how hideous their fate might be?

It would appear possible that we have. But do we hear the government describing the situation in this way? Unfortunately, not.

And why is it that the BBC put so much time and effort into promoting the idea of this village declaring itself independent from the UK to promote the cause of racism when it is apparently utterly indifferent to the genuine political independence cause supported by millions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?

Most of the rest of the media is, of course, more than happy to follow suit.

And what does this say? Are they now suggesting it is fair game to attack the RNLI and its crew members? Are they saying we should be indifferent to saving lives at sea if it so happens that those at risk are fleeing in fear as refugees and seek asylum in this country, as it turns out that most of those in the small boats in the English Channel really are?

But most of all, what does this say about the corruption of values in this country? After 45 years of neoliberalism, where, as a consequence, most people have apparently lost the idea that the neighbour is anyone we might meet, wherever they come from, whoever they might be, whatever their colour, whatever their race, whatever their ethnicity, whatever their gender, whatever their sexual orientation or whether we like them or not, it is now apparently possible to deny that, and that fact alone is truly frightening. In contrast, believe that anyone who wants to consider themselves an ethical member of a community that inevitably spreads around the whole world has a duty to love their neighbour as themselves, especially when they are in peril.

I am aware that the RNLI has advised people that they should not wear RNLI-labelled clothing at present if they feel at risk.

I will wear an RNLI polo shirt today.

I will do so with pride.

I will do so because I believe in this organisation to which I contribute, however modestly, and the work that it does.

I will do so as an act of defiance.

I will do so because I will stand up for what is right, just as the RNLI has, with its courage and commitment.

And I want to stress that those last two characteristics are now essential. If we are to love our neighbour as ourselves - and I think we should, whatever our beliefs, and even if we have none of a religious nature - courage and commitment are what we now need to face the challenges that the corrosive politics of neoliberalism and the far right have created in this country.

Usually, I would now be facing a day of writing, content creation, and more. I am not sure about that now. Maybe I need a long walk to reflect on this. Perhaps I should call in on a lifeboat station as well. Solidarity matters.