

Understanding Anti-Asylum Rhetoric: Restrictive Politics or Racist Publics?

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THIS essay investigates the nature of political debates and public perceptions about asylum. It begins by giving a general overview of the European and British approaches to asylum and examining the nature of the conflicts within domestic national politics. I then discuss the British case, in the light of original empirical research on public debates and public understandings. Findings are presented on the structure of the public discourse on immigration and asylum, showing which type of actors enter the debate and the extent to which they hold either pro- or anti-migrant positions. These findings are interpreted with reference to two main theoretical interpretations of immigration and asylum politics: Freeman's interest group approach, and the 'racist public' thesis which sees restrictive politics as a response to mobilised anti-migrant sentiments.

I then move from the macro, national level to the micro level, exploring the way in which individuals, among their peers, form opinions on these contentious political issues. The central idea of the research was to investigate the values and meanings that people give to asylum and immigration, drawing on their local experiences. We selected one geographical area where people had little objective experience of asylum seekers, and one area where they did, to draw out the way in which opinions varied in relation to local experiences.

A reason for taking this approach was that, although public opinion polls show aggregate opinion in response to specific questions, they tell us little about the values of individuals on which such opinions are based; nor whether their opinions would be strong enough to provoke political action, such as voting or protest. Moreover, as well as knowing that people are 'against immigration', it is important to know what specifically they are against, because views on immigration and asylum can in fact be an outlet for real or perceived grievances about other problems, such as urban decline.

In the conclusion, an attempt is made to draw the strands together, and some speculative remarks are made on how the British government could act differently on asylum in the public domain. The position is advanced that continued anti-asylum rhetoric could store up problems for the future. If recent reforms to liberalise immigration for certain groups of economic migrants produce a new and sizeable 'guest-worker' population, without the same rights as citizens, the guests may, in a period of economic downturn, no longer be considered welcome. They could become the objects of the same ethnic competition arguments, advanced by political issue entrepreneurs,

about scarce social welfare which the government currently legitimates against asylum seekers.

Northern Europe's asylum politics

From the early 1990s the wealthy countries of northern Europe witnessed the development of mass asylum seeking, although it should be said that the size of the inflows (for example, in 2001 an estimated 80,000 to the UK, which has a population of 60 million) do not in fact justify the image of 'alien swamping' often portrayed by the mass media. Official figures indicate that, from the peak of 675,500 applications to the EU in 1992, there are signs of a levelling off in the number of applicants to about half that figure, with a total of 385,000 in 2001. Nevertheless, it is clear that the context of political asylum has changed dramatically over the last decade to the point where claiming asylum has become a major form of primary migration from the world's periphery to the European core.

Traditionally, west European states had small-scale systems for granting asylum on an individual basis to people fleeing persecution. Embodied in the Geneva Convention of 1951, the rationale for such a system was a moral response to the collective failure of countries to provide refuge for Jews fleeing Nazi persecution before and during the Second World War. At the same time it was a convenient way of keeping the door open to political refugees fleeing the Cold War communist states.

The collapse of state communism in 1989, and the associated unleashing of a large number of potential new applicants, served to underline that this approach to asylum had become an historical anachronism. The asylum provisions were not designed to cope with large groups of refugees. Moreover, as European countries had implemented 'zero immigration' policies since the 1970s, asylum seeking had become, in effect, a path for economic migration from developing countries.

Such a situation was not sustainable. There were policy and procedural problems. The administrations of receiving countries were not capable of processing large numbers of applications for political asylum, and overburdened systems soon experienced bureaucratic meltdown. In addition, the suspicion by political elites that claiming asylum had become a form of economic immigration led to a politicisation of the status of asylum seekers, with the result that they have to a large extent become categorised as 'unwanted economic migrants'. In mass media discourses, this has led to the almost automatic stigmatisation of people claiming refugee status as 'bogus' (in the United Kingdom) or *Scheinasylanten* (in Germany), unjustly making demands on the scarce resources of domestic populations.

It is worth looking in more detail at the dynamics within domestic national politics through which asylum has become a contentious political issue, as well at the policy outcomes.

Populist nationalism versus human rights obligations

Asylum is highly prone to becoming an arena of conflict within domestic politics, not least because it is the field for disputing the criteria for entry to and membership rights in (that is, citizenship of) a national community. The issue of asylum opens up a particular contradiction within liberal nation-states: it puts the universal principle that they should respect and protect human rights by offering asylum to aliens fleeing persecution in direct competition with the principle that they should primarily serve the interests of the national community of people from whom sovereignty derives—a group with a self-image of common descent and ethnicity enshrined in a shared nationhood.

Domestic politics in west European countries has come down firmly on the side of legitimating anti-asylum policies, through the logic of defending the national interests of the state's existing citizens. Politicians and groups from the native domestic population mobilise concerns about the legitimacy of asylum seekers, questioning whether they are deserving of humanitarian protection or are really economic migrants, and the level of rights to entry and scarce social resources that should be extended to these 'outsiders'. In this situation, the process of political deliberation about the factual nature of problems, such as the scale of immigration or the efficacy of administrative and judicial procedures, can be transformed through competition among political actors in the public domain into highly normative conflicts about national values.

Publics and politicians who already see national identity and sovereignty under challenge from the combined forces of 'Europeanisation' and globalisation have found a convenient outlet for expressing these grievances in a populist reassertion of the national community, united against these 'bogus' intruders. As a consequence, conflicts over asylum have increasingly come to focus on perceptions of the ethnic differences between the native population and migrants. In many countries, anti-asylum sentiments have become a topic for party competition between mainstream political parties, as well as a source of potential popular support for the radical right.

At times this tendency has led to increasing levels of xenophobic violence directed against asylum seekers. After 11 September 2001, a further twist was added in that the perceived cultural threat from immigration became specifically focused on Muslim migrants, their assumed 'unassimilability' and the 'terrorist risk' they posed to Western democracies. The electoral successes of the Pim Fortuyn List in the Netherlands and of Jean Marie Le Pen in the first round of the French presidential election, the growth of the People's Party in Denmark and even the gains of local seats by the BNP in Britain have been achieved on a platform designed to appeal to the anti-Islamic and anti-immigrant sentiments of the native population. This assault by the radical right on what it sees as the failures of multiculturalism has effectively linked the anti-immigration debate to questions about the loyalty

of groups of migrants who are in many cases already citizens, but ones of Muslim faith.

Although it is tempting to view today's immigrants to Europe as hapless victims of repressive receiving states, the fact that asylum politics is highly contentious across Europe shows also that there are self-limiting factors within the sovereignty and core values of liberal democratic states which provide sustenance, resources and rights to the pro-migrant case. For example, when political conflicts over asylum have entered the legal domain, the courts have sometimes made rulings upholding a nation-state's human rights obligations towards migrants, thus clipping the restrictive measures of government policies. In February 2003, for instance, the UK Court of Appeal upheld a ruling by the High Court that the Labour government's attempt to remove welfare benefits of food and shelter from certain in-country applicants was 'inhumane' and in breach of the European Convention on Human Rights.

The pro-asylum case has thus found some levels of support from national judiciaries keen to uphold human rights principles, as well as from solidarity movements backed by churches and naturalised ethnic minorities. In addition, violence against asylum seekers, for example in Germany, where issues of racial intolerance are always highly sensitive, has mobilised large gatherings of anti-racist protesters. Here it should be noted, however, that the mass candle-lit demonstrations and human chains across West Germany in the early 1990s were in stark contrast to the applause from bystander publics for the burning of asylum hostels in the East.

Overall, immigration policies have for the most part been shaped by domestic politics, and in ways that restrict rights of entry and access to social rights for new migrants. It is also clear that within a domestic politics in which parties compete for the votes of national citizens it is going to be difficult to defend the attribution of rights to a constituency of non-citizens. This is especially the case when debates become framed in a language of national, cultural and ethnic difference. As a consequence, in the majority of leading European countries, national politics has promoted and implemented a series of restrictive policy responses, erecting stronger external borders and more resistant internal rights regimes against potential asylum applicants.

The view from the island: contemporary Britain

The UK's 2002 asylum legislation, the fourth new measure in nine years, specified so-called 'white lists' of states from which all applications would be rejected as 'clearly unfounded', and the withdrawal of the right to state provision of food, accommodation and clothing from some applicants. When the bill was published, the Labour Home Secretary, David Blunkett, wrote in *The Times* that 'We can only defeat the right if we tackle issues of public concern.' Since then, in the light of public fears that asylum may be a route for terrorists to enter the country, the Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has stated that

Britain might have to re-examine its commitment to the European Convention on Human Rights (which prevents the UK returning asylum seekers to countries where they could face torture). Around the same time, a British National Party candidate won a council seat in Halifax, having focused his campaign on asylum seekers.

In the British case, this sounds like a victory for the values of national popular sovereignty over human rights protection for asylum seekers. A media-conscious Labour government has pre-empted the policies of the right and introduced a set of draconian measures which appear to want to deter claims of asylum by making the lives of the applicants so nearly unbearable that only the most desperate and reckless would apply. Providing legalised sanctuary from persecution appears no longer to be the rationale of British policies. Conservatives would go even further, however, and lock up all asylum seekers on ships, requiring their security screening before admission.

Against this backcloth, there have been racial attacks on, even murders of, asylum seekers in Southampton, Norwich, Sighthill (near Glasgow) and Sunderland, and mobilisations of local people against plans to build asylum centres on rural sites in villages such as Throckmorton in Worcestershire. A few years ago this type of event was largely confined to metropolitan London and the port towns of Dover and Folkestone; but the dispersal policies for asylum seekers have distributed not only the local burden of paying for the support of asylum seekers but also the experience of living with asylum seekers to a greater number of localities across the kingdom.

Politicians in Britain appear to believe in the 'racist public thesis', namely, that there are untapped resources of public grievances against asylum seekers, verging in many cases on racism or outright xenophobia, and that their policy proposals must compete for this political territory. In order to address the actual nature of public discourses and perceptions of asylum and immigration, I briefly review some research findings in the light of relevant theories in the academic literature.¹ I look first at the macro, national level of British public discourse and the positions of the political parties, and then at the private understandings of the public on asylum, before drawing some overall conclusions.

Public debates: some empirical evidence

In the literature on whether immigration politics is liberal or restrictive, an important explanatory factor is whether policies are seen as the outcome of political elite decisions or, alternatively, as an outcome of populist politics.

One position on the role of public debates is presented by those authors who argue that immigration politics is conducted by political elites and organised interest groups in the policy domain, who work discreetly in institutional arenas away from the noise and distortions of public discourse.² Here the leading argument is that, in spite of facing an apparently universal anti-migrant and xenophobic national public opinion, political elites and

organised pro-migrant lobbies have been surprisingly successful in continuing to uphold the liberal principles of 'open' immigration regimes.

According to the 'client politics' thesis of American academic Gary Freeman, the primary defenders of migrants' rights within national domestic politics are employers seeking cheap labour, and strong ethnic groups standing up for their kith and kin. These groups, who are the main beneficiaries of immigration, are seen as a concentrated constituency who are resource-rich and well able to defend their interests. In contrast, the diffuse and disadvantaged groups from the native population, who have to compete with migrants for jobs and houses, are the cost bearers of immigration, but these are much less well organised as a public constituency. As a consequence the pro-immigration interest lobby is far more capable of mobilising political resources than its anti-immigration opponent, with the outcome that political power is exerted over the executive to keep the approach to immigration 'liberal'.

In this view, the anti-populism of elites means that whatever noise may be made about the issue of migration during elections, the real business of migration policy takes place behind closed doors in the arena of organised politics. Politics thus keeps the door open for migrants regardless of how unpopular their presence may be with the native public. Obviously, it needs stating here that Freeman's interest group 'client politics' approach has principally economic migrants in mind, not people seeking asylum. Nonetheless, it provides insight on how sensitive political issues can be managed by political elites away from the public domain, by building up a strong civil society of interest groups—in the asylum politics field, for example, churches, trade unions and organisations that distribute welfare services to asylum seekers. Their interest-based involvement would present a buffer in civil society against their xenophobic competitors who would possess resources only to the extent that they could mobilise anti-asylum sentiments in the public domain.

A second strand in the literature places much more emphasis on the public participatory and cultural dimension of politics as the explanatory factor for what the authors see as the continuing shift towards restrictive immigration politics.³ In contrast to Freeman's 'client politics', we may label this the 'racist public thesis'. These authors emphasise the importance of the social construction of immigration as a problem in public discourse, arguing that this cultural framing and politicisation of the issue shapes and influences the decisions taken by the executive in policy arenas. Thomas Faist calls immigration 'symbolic politics', by which he means that it is a form of political expression that is devoid of substantive meaning, but operates as a cultural symbol in the public discourse. In this view, political entrepreneurs are able, cynically, to bring immigration politics into the public domain. They do this to trigger hot public debates about the cultural basis of membership and belonging, which lead to a reassertion of the ethnocultural nation against the 'cultural threat' of foreign aliens. In this view, it is national political discourse

that makes immigration and immigrants the scapegoats for social problems such as unemployment and the crisis of the welfare state.

It is not possible to test these theses fully here. However, a first empirical look at the structure of the political discourse on immigration and asylum in Britain can yield some instructive insights.⁴

Table 1 shows data gathered on political demands that were made by collective actors in the field of immigration and asylum politics in Britain. The data-set is derived from a content analysis of instances of ‘political claims-making’ from 1990 to 1999 which were reported in the national media.⁵ Acts of political claims-making may range from demonstrations and protest actions to speech acts and conventional forms of public statements and political decisions.

For each intervention by a collective actor into the public discourse up to five political demands were coded in detail for each act. This gives an overall sample of 1,291 political demands relating to immigration and asylum politics that were made in 714 coded claims-making acts (on average 1.8 demands were raised per act). In addition, each political demand was coded with a valence score of -1 if it was anti-migrant, 0 if it was neutral or technocratic and +1 if it was pro-migrant. This average valence position gives a first indicator for the ideological position of an actor, ranging on a scale of -1 anti-migrant/immigration to +1 pro-migrant/migration.

By looking at the visible patterns of a contentious issue-field, it is possible to gain a first overview of where different types of institutional and civil society actors position themselves, through their political demands—in this case, within the conflict lines of the public debate on immigration and asylum politics. In Table 1, the first column of figures shows the share of political demands voiced by each of seven different types of collective actors. The

Table 1: Share and position of political demands by collective actors in the immigration and asylum issue-field in Britain (sample 1990–1999)

Type of collective actor	Share of political demands (%)	Average valence of political demands
Nation-state actors	57.9	-0.07
Supranational and foreign state actors	5.1	+0.38
Other civil society actors	8.0	+0.30
British ethnic minorities	3.1	+0.75
Human rights and welfare NGOs	4.7	+0.90
Specific pro-migrant NGOs	16.7	+0.97
Migrants, refugees and asylum seekers	4.5	+0.90
All demands	100.0	+0.27
No. and (%) of all demands	1,291	(100)

Average valence position: from +1 pro-migrant/immigration to -1 anti-migrant/immigration.

second column shows the average valence position of these actors relative to each other in immigration politics.

A first observation to make is that the public debate is strongly dominated by the national state and executive actors, who account for about six-tenths of demands (57.9 per cent) and hold a position that is strongly defined against the interests of migrants (-0.07 valence compared to the overall $+0.27$). This demonstrates that the British government and state actors have a strong role in shaping the public debate about immigration and asylum, and do so in a way that promotes an anti-migrant/anti-immigration position. This finding contradicts Freeman's 'client politics' thesis, which sees immigration politics as tightly controlled by political elites and interest groups that favour migration, away from public debates.

Another finding that goes against the 'client politics' thesis is that there were very few interventions by 'other civil society actors', such as trade unions (1.1 per cent), churches (1.6 per cent) and employers' associations (1.8 per cent). The 'client politics' thesis would predict a prominent role for employers' associations (with their vested interests in cheap labour) on one side, and for British minorities (3.1 per cent), defending the interests of their foreign national kin, on the other. Of course, the 'client politics' position might claim that such deals occur outside of the visible public domain, as insider deals between elites and interest groups. But it is hard to see how, if this were the definitive feature of immigration politics, it could be rendered invisible from the public domain. Instead, it is more likely to be the case that British immigration politics does not fit Freeman's American interest group model, and instead remains largely in the control of strong executive decision-making with a restrictionist orientation.

A second point to make, however, is that our findings also seem to contradict those authors who see anti-migrant, organised publics expressing xenophobic sentiments as the driving force behind political elites taking restrictive stances on immigration. Counter to the 'racist public' thesis, our findings show that, to the extent that they do get involved in these debates, civil society actors do so with a pro-migrant stance. The main challenge to the British state's anti-migrant stance comes from the pro-migrant NGOs (16.7 per cent; $+0.97$) and human rights and welfare NGOs (4.7 per cent; $+0.90$). Taken together, these NGOs account for six-tenths of all civil society demands (57.9 per cent) and have a strongly pro-migrant position.

Of course, our data exist only at an empirical level descriptive of reality, and are not able to indicate to what extent the elite's perception of 'public racism' is a motivation for anti-migrant/immigration positions. Nonetheless, there are clearly limits on the extent to which anti-migrant sentiments are expressed in the British public domain by civil society actors. Even if one limiting factor may be that they are unnecessary because of the strong anti-migrant/immigration position of the state, it does not seem plausible from our findings to see the state's anti-immigration politics as a direct result of mobilised public pressure. At the national level, there is even very little

mobilisation in civil society by the extreme right and anti-migrant groups (0.3 per cent). On the contrary, it appears that nation-state actors definitively shape the public discourse on immigration and asylum; and that actors in civil society, to the extent that they mobilise at all, mobilise against this expressed position. In this view, restrictionist public debates come top-down and from governments.

A last observation to add is that it is possible from our data to aggregate the positions of actors on the basis of their party political identities. In the period of our sample, Labour had a much more pro-migrant stance in opposition (January 1990–May 1997: 32.1 per cent share of political party claims; +0.80 valence) than in government (May 1997–December 1999: 80 per cent share; valence –0.02). This provides evidence of a clear shift towards a restrictionist stance since entering government.

Public understandings

After looking at the contested field of immigration and asylum politics in the public domain, we now turn to the localised level of peer group discourses in private. Here we review some findings on how ordinary groups of people from the 'native' population form political understandings of immigration and asylum issues.⁶ Much literature on political socialisation has emphasised the importance of peer group interaction as the environment in which political norms are internalised.⁷ Given that official mediated political discourse is filtered through an interpretative screen of personal and cultural experiences, it is important to look at the private discourses through which people understand issues of immigration and asylum. In order to analyse public perceptions, we used an original experimental method for peer group discussions that was inspired largely by the classical tradition for the focused interview and subsequent advances.⁸ Here I present an account of initial findings that are relevant to the current discussion.⁹

As we have seen, the dispersal of asylum seekers around Britain has led to hostile reactions in several localities. At the same time, public opinion surveys regularly tell us that Britons are against asylum seekers. Thus we have considerable scientific knowledge about the 'end product' of British public opinion, namely its aggregate anti-asylum stance; but we have far less knowledge of what these issues mean to people and the values on which their understandings are based. Public opinion is significant not only quantitatively, in an aggregate sense, but also qualitatively, in the range of opinions that are available for interpreting specific problems. We aimed, first, to examine the normative limits of expressed opinions about refugees and asylum seekers in peer group settings, by comparing them to those about British ethnic minorities. Second, we wanted to understand the values that were underpinning this expressed stance, namely, the basis of the groups' concerns about asylum seekers.

Our first finding was that the position of our 'white' groups on asylum

seekers used significantly more motivated arguments, and was significantly more anti-migrant, than their stance on British ethnic minorities. Asylum seekers were depicted as 'outsiders' to the British community, who saw 'England' as an easy country to come to, and became a burden on limited social resources. In some cases, highly stigmatising language was used. At first glance this appears to be grist to the mill of the 'racist public' thesis. However, when discussions among peers were allowed to proceed further, other features emerged about the basis of this anti-asylum stance.

Three of our peer group discussions were conducted in Catford, in south-east London, and three in Bradford, a northern town, working on the general assumption that people from the metropolitan London locality would have been more likely to have personal experience of coming into contact with asylum seekers. In the Bradford groups, people's ability to talk about personal experiences of contact with asylum seekers was indeed much lower than in the London groups. After their initial hostile reaction, when they were asked to talk in detail about asylum seekers the Bradfordians in fact started talking about how *Asians* had taken over their town, the ways in which the town had changed since their youth, and how Asians were treated better than white people.

Moderator: 'What about the position of refugees, do you have any kind of sympathy with them?'

'You can have sympathy with their position but you wonder why they come five or six thousand miles for refuge when there are other countries all around them.'

'I think a lot of the problem is contraception as well. If an Asian chap is out of work it doesn't stop him having kids, does it? Not many English families have more than three or four children yet Asians just seem to breed. It's the same as these African countries, they have all these kids and then as soon as things start getting tough they come over to Britain.'

Moderator: 'So you think it's a burden on the taxpayer?'

'I think so, yes. The trouble is, there's no one to say no, you can't do that, whereas in Australia it's not like that.'

'Everybody in this room must have heard somebody say that they went down to the Post Office last week and there were two Asians stood in front of them and they come out of there with £300 or £400.'

White male group, Bradford, age 25–45

As this extract shows, the Bradford groups' discussion of asylum soon shifted to stigmatising British Asians. When talking about Asians in relation to immigration issues, they felt able to use much more openly racist language than they did when talking about Asians in relation to race relations issues, earlier in the session. This indicates that people learn the normative limits of what it is acceptable to say within an issue-related context. Race relations politics makes it difficult to criticise local Asians, but government-sanctioned

anti-immigration norms make this a possibility when discussing asylum. Such a finding indicates that official policy positions are important in shaping the limits of how people talk about these issues, and suggests that they take their lessons on political issues from cues set by political elites and embedded in politics.

In contrast to their London counterparts, however, who were able to recount their personal experiences of what they saw as the negative aspects of asylum seekers, such as begging on the streets and wastefulness of resources, the Bradford group were using the asylum-seekers as a vehicle for complaints about something else. What this implies is that, for people who live remote from the actual consequences of having asylum seekers on their doorstep, the asylum issue is really being used to express values that are related to other perceived grievances. Our Bradford groups were talking about urban decline and the loss of local prestige, which they attributed to the presence of British Asians.

It is still a problematic finding for race relations that in areas where people are distant from the intensity of problems associated with hosting asylum seekers, asylum becomes a language for airing grievances against British minorities. What it does show, however, is the importance of local conditions in shaping people's understanding of asylum and immigration issues. Thus there is not a uniform, unidimensional opposition to asylum seekers across the British nation. The values behind anti-immigration sentiments are different, relating to personal experiences in different localities. From this, we can expect that, in the few localities that bear the social costs of hosting asylum seekers, such as ports and the towns targeted for dispersal, there will be articulated political grievances against asylum policies. In many other cases, however, opposition to asylum seekers is not formulated into a political stance about asylum, but serves as a way to express grievances and disillusion about other social issues. Accordingly, one would predict that xenophobic politics may gain some support within localities where there are problems associated with hosting asylum seekers, but that it would be unlikely to be successful at galvanising political support at the national level.

A final point about public perceptions of asylum refers precisely to those localities where the public has become politicised about asylum issues because of the local presence of an asylum centre. It is not a foregone conclusion that British public values will swing in the direction of ever more anti-asylum positions. When we interviewed a campaigner from a protest against a detention centre in Oxfordshire, the Campaign to Free Campsfield, and asked where their public constituencies of support came from, the response indicated that the values of popular sovereignty, British-style, do not necessarily translate automatically into ever more anti-asylum positions:

People who would have been very doubtful about Britain accepting immigrants and very . . . quite racist basically . . . have been transformed by the idea that people lose their liberty on the basis of nothing; and particularly it's extraordinary in Oxford to

meet lots of . . . how do I put this lightly . . . little old ladies who are completely radicalised by the experience of visiting detainees . . . they come out much more political and active about the whole issue.

Here it seems that, when faced by real dilemmas rather than ticking boxes on opinion surveys, the British public can after all in some cases see the detention of non-criminals as against the national values of upholding human rights. This suggests that the outcomes of debates about asylum are not necessarily restrictionist. Instead, political arguments that address objective problems in a non-stigmatising and technocratic way, or even those that make defending human rights protection a national cause, may have the potential for gaining pro-asylum support from public constituencies.

Concluding remarks

Our findings show that British governments dominate and shape public discourse on asylum. This supports the view that the nature of the asylum debate—at present restrictive and stigmatising—to a large extent comes politically from the top down, rather than in response to mobilised public pressure. In addition, our focus group research on public perceptions seems to indicate that the perceived government policy position sets the normative limits of public understandings of asylum and immigration issues. If this assumption is correct then a Labour government, with a massive electoral majority, which decided to take a more pro-migrant position and emphasised Britain's international obligations to asylum seekers, would not automatically lose public support to the sponsors of anti-asylum sentiments in the public domain. On the contrary, it is possible that, if it gave more official legitimacy to pro-asylum norms, for example by supporting subsistence-level social welfare for asylum seekers, it would become harder for the public to oppose such a position.

This argument is not just a moral plea, but is based on an understanding of the workings of organisations within civil society. Even a limited pro-asylum public policy stance from the government would have an effect on civil society. Where the stance taken by the government offers material resources of grants, for example, for supplying welfare services, and symbolic resources of legitimacy, that would stimulate pro-asylum civil society organisations and bring other organisations, such as churches and trade unions, into active and compliant positions. Receiving legitimacy and support from government, organised pro-asylum actors would be able to occupy the political space in civil society on asylum, thus creating a buffer zone against any potential xenophobic political entrepreneurs. In a sense, the pro-migrant interest-group-based politics envisaged by Freeman could work—albeit to a more limited extent—for the asylum issue too.

To achieve such a situation, the government could remain publicly quieter on asylum, and try to clear up and manage the objective problems associated

with it away from the public domain. Over time it could even be that a more pro-asylum government stance would bring a recoupling of asylum seeker rights within notions of national popular sovereignty. And then, echoing our 'old ladies' from Campsfield, it would become patriotic to treat asylum seekers with civility. At present, when the government prefers to shrink welfare rights and stigmatise asylum seekers, this seems no more than a pipe dream.

Turning to our focus group research, our preliminary findings suggest that public opinion on immigration is not uniform, nor are British values necessarily uni-dimensional in their opposition to asylum. Asylum and immigration politics stand for different things for publics in different localities, depending on their personal experiences of the objective problems relating to the issue. Anti-asylum politics is therefore unlikely to be much of a vote winner at the national level, although there may be some electoral gains in specific localities which bear the disproportionate social costs of hosting asylum seekers. The policy answer here, though, is to spread the—actually small—social costs of asylum more evenly, through sensible policies, and not to become publicly hostile to asylum seekers in the hope of pre-empting a perceived—and actually weak—political opposition.

Government public hostility to asylum seekers simply legitimates xenophobic sentiments. It encourages anti-asylum mobilisation and provides the public with cues for seeing problems in a distorted and exaggerated way. Such entrenched political pathologies become difficult to reverse, with the result that it becomes hard for governments to legitimate even subsistence levels of welfare rights for asylum seekers; that decision in turn leads to more asylum seekers begging or looking dishevelled on street corners, further aggrieving local populations. In the final analysis, much depends on the political will of the elite. In Britain governments have sufficient executive power to exercise such will on asylum, if they so desire.

A last point to make is that, at present, the government seems happy to ply its anti-asylum rhetoric while opening up the path, albeit on a limited scale, to economic immigration—a topic on which it remains largely silent, as if this debate occupied a separate discursive universe from asylum. However, bringing in 'desirable' economic migrants, for instance from eastern Europe, while simultaneously promoting a political discourse of anti-asylum-seeker sentiments is a risky strategy. First, the new immigrants are likely to be indistinguishable in the public mind on streets and in supermarkets from their 'welfare scrounging' asylum-seeking counterparts, and are likely to face hostile receptions from landlords and in public places. They are also likely to populate the same metropolitan sink estates where grievances already run high. Second, over the long term, establishing a political discourse that is hostile to the social costs of asylum-seekers may provide legitimacy to anti-immigrant political entrepreneurs.

It is not beyond the bounds of plausibility that, in an economic downturn, political entrepreneurs would point out that the new 'guest workers' and their

families also compete with natives for jobs, welfare and housing. History tells us that guest workers and their dependants tend to stay. If immigration to Britain of this type continues on a significant scale, there will be a category of people, as yet unlabelled in the public discourse, with a status of rights between citizens and asylum seekers. Current government aspirations to deepen the notion of British citizenship, with citizenship classes and ceremonies, will not make the path to naturalisation easier. If the government faces a challenge from political opponents to its new labour migrants it will be much harder for it to defend the legitimacy of this group as a benefit to the national community when at the same time it stigmatises another group, asylum seekers, in a way that goes beyond the objective condition of their actual social costs.

Notes

- 1 The research findings are to be found in 'The Contentious Politics of Asylum in Britain and Europe', funded by the British Economic and Social Research Council R000239221; for details see <http://www.leeds.ac.uk/ics/euro.htm>.
- 2 See esp. Gary Freeman, 'Modes of Immigration Politics in Liberal Democratic States', *International Migration Review*, vol. 29, no. 122, Winter 1995, pp. 881–902, and 'The Decline of Sovereignty? Politics and Immigration Restriction in Liberal States', in C. Joppke, ed., *Challenge to the Nation-State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998.
- 3 Here see Thomas Faist, 'How to Define a Foreigner? The Symbolic Politics of Immigration in German Partisan Discourse', *Western European Politics*, vol. 17, no. 2, 1994, pp. 50–71; Dietrich Thränhardt, 'The Political Uses of Xenophobia in England, France and Germany', *Party Politics*, 1995, pp. 325–45.
- 4 A more detailed presentation of these research findings is given in Paul Statham, 'The Role of Public Debates and the extent of "Europeanisation" within British Immigration and Asylum Politics: Some Empirical Findings', paper presented at the 1st Pan-European Conference on European Union Politics, held by the Standing Group of the European Consortium for Political Research, 2002. This is available in pdf format at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/ECPR/standinggroups/eu/index.htm>.
- 5 The newsprint mass media are taken as the main source for the public sphere, as the events and outcomes within many semi-public and non-public spheres are also reported here. It should be noted for purposes of interpretation that this method brackets out journalistic opinion on events, and, following the protest event analysis method from social movement research, collates a record of public events where political demands are raised by collective actors within a specific issue-field. The present data are based on every second issue (Monday, Wednesday, Friday) of the *Guardian* for Britain from 1990 to 1999. The reliability and validity of these sources were checked and confirmed by comparisons with several other national newspapers. For further details on method, see Ruud Koopmans and Paul Statham, 'Political Claims Analysis: Integration Protest Event and Political Discourse Approaches', *Mobilization: The International Journal of Research and Theory about Social Movements, Protest and Collective Behavior*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1999, pp. 203–22.
- 6 These findings appear in a more detailed form in Paul Statham, 'State Policies,

Political Discourse and “White” Public Opinion on Ethnic Relations and Immigration in Britain: Pushing the Borders of “Extremity”, paper presented to the joint sessions of workshops at the European Consortium for Political Research, 2001, available in pdf format at <http://www.essex.ac.uk/ECPR/events/jointsessions/paperarchive/grenoble.asp?section=14>.

- 7 See e.g. Richard E. Dawson and Kenneth Prewitt, *Political Socialization*, Boston, Little, Brown, 1969.
- 8 See the classic approach by Robert Merton and Patricia Kendall, ‘The Focussed Interview’, *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 51, 1946, pp. 541–57, which has been advanced by David E. Morrison, *The Search for a Method: Focus Groups and the Development of Mass Communication Research*, Luton, John Libbey Media, 1998. Also relevant is the social movement approach by William A. Gamson; see his *Talking Politics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.
- 9 The findings here are based on six focus groups, which were professionally randomly recruited, according to the following characteristics of ethnicity, gender, age and location: 6 white, 3 male, 3 female; 2 of each age cohort 16–24, 24–45, 45+ years; 3 Bradford, 3 Catford (SE London). There were between 8 and 11 participants in each group. For further details on method see Statham, ‘State Policies, Political Discourse and “White” Public Opinion on Ethnic Relations and Immigration in Britain’. This research continues.