



b:RAP briefing

no. 5

‘MYTH AND MAXIM’: Myth Busting Report on Asylum Seekers and Refugees

December 2004

Introducing b:RAP briefings

This is the 5th in a continuing series of **b:RAP briefings**. The purpose of these briefings is to examine key issues in public policy *from a clear and practical race equality perspective*.

While some briefings will cover topics that have a very clear and evident relationship to race equality others will take less obvious issues and examine them afresh, teasing out the race equality dimension.

Each briefing will identify the key issues involved, highlight current trends in thinking and recommend practical action and solutions.

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December 2004

b:RAP Briefings

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April 2004

Introduction

The issue of asylum now stands at the centre of political discussion and social conflict. Barely a week passes by without some form of media coverage 'exposing' the 'problems' with the asylum system. At a political level, both opposition and government continue to debate and amend a raft of policies to deal with an issue that for many is an important electoral concern. Unfortunately, two parallel developments have shaped recent debates focusing on asylum:

- 1) The suggestive influence of anecdotal narrativism and emotive language have come to define the way in which the media report on asylum, unburdened by the rigours of objectivity and factual information the reporting has given way to a second more worrying consequence:
- 2) The resurgence of extreme right-wing reactionary parties that seek to gain electoral success by 'acting' on the general fears and misconceptions held by the public.

Amidst this backdrop of anti-asylum sentiment, political configurations have been 'recast'. New Labour continues to move towards its right on asylum and more controversially one can observe a bipartisan approach to asylum that is shared by both New Labour, the Conservatives and a number of right to extreme right-wing parties (this will be discussed further on). A cross party convergence on asylum policy is a response to the exponential rise in anti-asylum discourse that may play itself out in the next general election. Consequently, a distorted view on asylum may remain prevalent in mainstream society, which has been legitimised by sections of the media, the rise in extreme right-wing activity in large urban areas and the government's draconian measures in order to be seen as 'tough' on asylum as their right-wing counterparts.

The diffusion of asylum rhetoric is multi-dimensional and covers a number of variables ranging from issues of resource competition to crime and from terrorism to a cultural invasion. Thus it is essential to rebut factual inaccuracies and provide a detailed and robust report that provides a more realistic account of the experiences of asylum seekers and refugees in the UK.

Report objectives

- Highlight popular myths within the context of asylum and refugee discourse
- Contextualise the problem of anti-asylum/refugee sentiment by focusing on how organisations such as the BNP have capitalised on popular myths that have not only been legitimised by the media but also by the government
- Provide counter-arguments that dispel myths surrounding asylum seekers and refugees

Locating hostility within a milieu of cyclical discrimination

The ongoing vilification of asylum seekers and refugees has reached a stage where those committed to combating racial discrimination and promoting social cohesion need to examine the strengthening of a new anti-asylum configuration that is comprised of: sections of the media, extreme right-wing reactionary parties and elected governments. Such a movement threatens to further exacerbate racial hostility. At a European wide level the rise of far right parties has been matched by media hostility towards newly arrived persons. The consolidation of this new anti-asylum configuration has gained

momentum amongst the general public (Drakakis 2004). The governments of Europe have also jumped on the 'bandwagon' in order to secure votes in upcoming elections. The wider reaching implications are that governments, and the UK government being no exception, have reached an impasse on asylum/refugee policy.

Policy is prejudicial towards asylum seekers and is often a reactionary outcome to media hype portraying asylum seekers as 'welfare scroungers', 'third world terrorists' and 'organised criminals'. As such, the anti-asylum configuration has led to a path dependency approach with regards to asylum seekers and refugees; room for manoeuvrability in policy and certainly for change towards the construct of an ameliorative strategy is limited as charges against this much-maligned group become un-retractable and firmly entrenched in the minds of the public (see ECRE report 2002).

The scope of the problem has intensified as right-wing parties such as the People's Party in Denmark, the Alleanza Nazionale and Bossi's Lega Nord in Italy, Le Pen's National Front in France and the BNP have achieved varying levels of electoral success on the back of anti-asylum/migration rhetoric. As mentioned above, the outcome of such electoral success is that the government has reached a stage of political inertia; rather than introduce a progressive asylum bill which provides essential provision and rights for those fleeing persecution, the government has passed a number of bills which are often introduced to appease a misinformed hostile public. Perhaps unwittingly, the government has not only entered into an anti-asylum configuration (as mentioned earlier) but has also reached a consensus with a number of right-wing political parties on how best to deal with the 'problem' of asylum.

Under the inclusion of Section 55 in the 2002 Asylum and Immigration Bill, the government sought to withdraw state provision to asylum seekers that did not claim asylum in the first 10 days of arrival, this was met with wide scale criticism from the Institute for Race Relations as evidence suggested that many were still denied basic provisions after claiming asylum at the point of entry (see www.irr.org.uk). However, the amendment continued to remain in existence until it was repealed. Nonetheless, the amendment was used as part of a huge publicity drive by the government to appear tough on the 'influx' of 'bogus' asylum seekers. Following Section 55, the Home Secretary introduced Clause 10 of the Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants) Bill 2003. The bill actively sought to remove decisions on asylum applications from the scrutiny of the courts. As such, individuals would no longer be permitted to appeal against a decision and instead would only have their appeal heard in front of a tribunal, if, however, the decision were found to be wrong there would be no avenue open to seek an overruling. Most alarming still is that many decisions on 'bogus' and bona fide asylum claimants are based on the government white list. The white list is drawn up by the Home Office; it details which countries are in violation of human rights and which are deemed as 'safe'. However, many of the countries identified as 'safe' are clearly in violation of human rights. For example, all 10 accession countries joining the EU are now deemed as safe, consequently, people seeking asylum from these countries are presumed to be making a manifestly unfounded claim. Yet, if one were to take two countries from the list: Czech Republic and the Slovak Republic, there is evidence that in both countries groups such as the Roma have faced systematic abuse and persecution from the authorities. According to research from the Centre for Reproductive Rights (www.reproductive.org) Romani women are subject to forced sterilisation in Slovakia and the Black Women's Rape Action Project (www.bwrap.dircon.co.uk) report

incidents of Romani women being subject to rape and torture in the aforementioned countries. Other countries on the white list such as Albania, Bulgaria, Macedonia and Serbia have all been found to be in violation of human rights against the Roma (www.asylumaid.org.uk). However, the Roma have been met with hostility and suspicion in the UK and the white list has given credence to such unwarranted reactions.

The government approach to asylum also reflects the more far-right stance taken by parties such as UKIP and similar language is used by both Labour and parties such as BNP, both of which talk about a 'flood' of bogus asylum seekers and both of which talk about getting rid of large numbers of asylum seekers (in the case of David Blunkett 'blitz society of asylum cheats'). One must then question why, in the face of overwhelming evidence that asylum procedures have no bearing on reality (for example the white list), does the anti-asylum configuration continue to flourish?

The hostility towards asylum seekers and refugees is systemic of cyclical discrimination experienced by minority groups in the UK at different intervals. The rhetoric is the same as that experienced by the first wave of immigrants from the Commonwealth (see Hall, 1997). This has by and large been perpetuated by the ideological perspectives that underpinned the rise of colonialism and the empire (for a fuller account see Said 1994). As a consequence, fear of minority groups swamping a 'superior' culture has created an environment of inbred discrimination. It is within this context that sections of the media (an influential cohort in the anti-asylum configuration) have vilified asylum seekers. A second dimension to this inaccurate reporting is that well-balanced factual reporting does not sell as well as catchy headlines that feed into a new climate of fear that is suspicious of foreign nationals after September 11

(interesting work by Beck and Lash encapsulate the culture of fear thesis). The remaining two elements that form the anti-asylum configuration are based on a reactionary principle. Far-right reactionary parties feed on a climate of general mistrust towards asylum seekers because of the extreme views they have on all foreigners (King 1999). For the government, the reactionary principle is based on a pragmatic approach. The government understands the benefits of an anti-asylum election platform, it is all too aware of the hostile perceptions that have surfaced in the UK (for a full account of such widespread negative perceptions see Valentine and McDonald 2004), however, it also knows that most of the perceptions are incorrect, for example, when making a statement to the Commons about perceived costs of the asylum system, the Prime Minister stated:

'Let me give the House the facts. The total cost of asylum is less than one fifth of 1% of government spending'

Nevertheless, the government has adopted a pragmatic approach, which is to react to an asylum 'problem' as it discourages disillusioned voters to vote for parties such as the BNP.

What one can observe is that the anti-asylum configuration continues to thrive. The basis for its existence is underpinned by a number of inaccurate myths that will need to be challenged in order to promote a better understanding of the plight of asylum seekers and refugees.

Dispelling popular myths about asylum seekers and refugees

Myth: The UK is host to an influx of asylum seekers.

In 2003, Asia received the largest number of asylum seekers (4.2 million), followed by Africa (3.5 million) and then Europe (2.5 million). Within the European bloc, Austria, Sweden, Norway and Luxembourg received the highest number of asylum seekers (3-4 asylum applicants per 1000

inhabitants). The UK received only 1 applicant for every 1000 inhabitants (source www.irr.org.uk/statistics/refugees.html)

Myth: Most asylum seekers are economic migrants/welfare scroungers. Asylum seekers are not allowed to claim mainstream welfare benefits. Those who are destitute can apply to the National Asylum Support Service (NASS) for basic food and shelter. A single adult is eligible for £38.96 a week, equivalent to 70% of basic income support (source www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths/myth001.htm).

Myth: asylum seekers are taking our jobs.

Asylum seekers are not allowed to work whilst their applications are processed. Once an asylum seeker receives refugee status, many find it impossible to find work because previous qualifications are not recognised by the various employing bodies. Further to this, researchers at the Cass Business School in London have found that it is in the UK's interest to allow asylum seekers to work. The research highlights the need for foreign labour in order to resolve the pension crisis, whereby this untapped resource could provide billions of pounds of revenue in taxes which could help keep the pension system afloat (source www.guardian.co.uk/migration04.html).

Myth: Asylum seekers receive preferential treatment with regards to housing.

A study published by Shelter found that the vast majority of asylum seekers are subjected to appalling living conditions, which include living in dangerous conditions and where dampness, overcrowding, poor sanitation, unhygienic cooking facilities and fire hazards are rife (source 'Far from Home report', published by Shelter 2001).

Myth: Asylum seekers are more likely to commit crime.

There is no evidence to suggest asylum seekers are more likely to commit crime. Recent research suggests that rather than commit crime asylum seekers are more likely to be the victims of crime especially in relation to hate crimes, burglary and muggings (source New Cross Roads report 'Asylum Myths' 2004).

Myth: Terrorists are likely to enter the UK under the guise of being asylum seekers.

Of the 88 million people who pass through UK border every year, only 71,025 are asylum seekers. This small percentage of foreigners are assigned case numbers and closely watched by the immigration authorities, many of whom are located to an asylum-processing centre. Such conditions are hardly conducive for the planning of terrorist activity (source www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/news/myths/myht001.htm).

To briefly conclude, the key findings highlighted in a recent report by Oxfam and the Refugee Council on organisations dealing with asylum seekers, encapsulates perfectly the wide scale disadvantages and discrimination directed towards this vulnerable group, it found:

- 85% of organisations reported that their clients experience hunger.
- 95% of organisations reported that their clients cannot afford to buy clothes or shoes.
- 80% of organisations reported that their clients are not able to maintain good health

(source: Poverty and Asylum in the UK – a report by Oxfam and the Refugee Council, 2004).

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