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Tony Blair's asylum policies:

The narratives and conceptualisations at the heart of
New Labour's restrictionism

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Contents

The narratives and conceptualisations at the heart of New Labour’s restrictionism	1
Introduction	3
1 The political and conceptual dynamics of restrictionism	4
Tony Blair: the embodiment of restrictionism	8
Conclusion	9
2 Tony Blair’s parliamentary asylum rhetoric	10
Tony Blair’s parliamentary statements 1992 – 1997	11
Tony Blair’s parliamentary statements 1997 – 2007	16
Conclusion	21
3 Blair’s reconstruction of asylum narratives: a new ‘us’ and a new ‘them’	22
A new ‘us’	23
A new ‘them’	25
4 Conclusion	27
5 References	30
Primary documents	34

Introduction¹

Over the last twenty years, there has been a radical shift in public perceptions of and political reactions to asylum seekers in democratic states across the world. As numbers of asylum seekers have risen, at times dramatically, governments of all political persuasions have implemented restrictionist policies designed to prevent and deter individuals from seeking asylum. Once welcomed as courageous freedom fighters fleeing totalitarian regimes, asylum seekers are now publically condemned as 'bogus' and deliberately contained within fragile and war-torn countries of origin in order to prevent them accessing the sovereign territory of western states. This political and conceptual transformation has been particularly marked in the United Kingdom. As numbers of asylum seekers grew steadily throughout the 1990s, rising from around 22,000 applicants in 1992 to 84,000 in 2002 (Aspinall and Walters 2010), stories of asylum invasions dominated the tabloids and politicians of the left and right competed to appear most capable of containing this perceived threat. Throughout this period, both Conservative and Labour governments passed legislation which, through carrier's liability, visa restrictions, limits on the rights of appeal or access to welfare, dispersal and detention, sought to minimise the number of asylum seekers and reinforce border control.

In this paper I seek to examine the development of this restrictionist trend by exploring the conceptual foundations of New Labour's asylum policies. I will do this by conducting an analysis of the contributions made by Tony Blair in the House of Commons between 1992 and 2007. Tracing his movement from Shadow Home Secretary to leader of the Labour Party and then Prime Minister, a thorough analysis of these contributions will help us to understand how Blair's attitude towards asylum shifted dramatically as he himself moved from the opposition to the government. Understanding these parliamentary contributions to be an instance of political rhetoric, I will use Finlayson's method of Rhetorical Political Analysis (2007) to identify the narratives Blair employed in order to frame the asylum debate and the conceptualisations underpinning these narratives. I will examine the justifications offered for his increasing restrictionism in order to identify the way in which Blair articulates the tension inherent in all modern liberal democratic states between universal human rights and state sovereignty. I hope to understand how Blair's negotiation of this tension contributed to the development of his party's increasingly exclusionary asylum policies. Finally, I will examine not only Blair's changing discursive and conceptual framework, but also the particular rhetorical techniques he employed in order to establish legitimacy and build consensus in the context of conflicting and contested democratic politics. However, before conducting this analysis it is essential to place Blair's parliamentary contributions in the wider political and conceptual context of British restrictionism.

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1 The political and conceptual dynamics of restrictionism

The number of individuals claiming asylum in western states began to rise throughout the 1980s (Gibney and Hansen 2003) and as the Cold War ended, those numbers jumped dramatically: 438,191 individuals claimed asylum in Germany in 1992 alone (Joppke 1998:90; also Bloch 2002; Layton-Henry 1992; 1994). As the end of the Cold War removed barriers to exit and international travel became increasingly accessible, these ‘jet age’ asylum seekers transformed western states into countries of first asylum, undermining the ability of governments to control access to their borders. Governments that once welcomed asylum seekers began to implement a vast array of restrictive policies in order to firstly prevent individuals from accessing their borders and secondly remove all incentives to do so through the institutionalisation of detention, welfare restrictions and deportation.

This policy shift was in part motivated by the ‘democratisation’ of asylum (Gibney 2003:27). As the end of the Cold War removed foreign policy incentives for accepting refugees, political elites were instead driven by the perception that ‘the conduct of asylum policy risks exacting political costs from them’ (Gibney 2003:29; also Bloch 2000; Statham 2003). As the defeat of Smethwick’s Labour MP in the British general election of 1964 proved (Geddes 2003:34), a failure to frame popular asylum and immigration policies could result in electoral defeat and as such, the ‘incentive structure of electoral politics’ helped to generate this restrictionist trend (Gibney 2003:29). However, this process of democratisation only partially explains the ‘ubiquity’ of restrictionist policies in northern states (Gibney 2003:24) and across the political spectrum (Bloch 2000; Kaye 1999). Although clearly a powerful driver of elite behaviour, democratisation fails to explain the root causes of public hostility to asylum seekers. In order to understand this hostility, it is necessary to explore the conceptual foundations of public responses and elite policies.

At its inception the refugee regime was built on the understanding that refugees were courageous individuals fleeing European totalitarian regimes and as such were deserving of international protection, granted through refugee status and its associated civil, political and economic rights. However, as numbers of asylum seekers began to increase the percentage being granted refugee status steadily declined,² a trend prompted in part by the fact that fewer individuals were able to prove individual persecution and therefore satisfy the strict refugee definition contained in the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees.³ As a result of these declining recognition rates, the asylum debate came to be dominated by the understanding that most asylum seekers were merely ‘disguised economic migrants’ who sought to abuse Britain’s generous welfare system (Bloch 2000:37; Cohen 1994:82; Kaye 1999:27; Schuster 2003b:245; Statham 2003:164).

² After the UK’s Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act of 1993, refugee recognition rates declined from 86% to 28% (Kaye 1999:26).

³ Henceforth referred to as the 1951 Convention.

This conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as ‘bogus,’ prevalent in media coverage throughout this period (Kushner 2003), prompted elite proposals and public support for radical reform of the asylum system in order to exclude unfounded claimants.

Whilst undoubtedly a response to rising numbers, Chimni argues that this conceptual shift was also driven by the ‘myth of difference’ (1998b). As the end of the Cold War removed the geopolitical significance of accepting refugees, northern political elites deliberately reconceptualised them as southern economic migrants who, in their motivations for seeking asylum, were fundamentally different to the traditional political and European refugee (Chimni 1998b:356). Cohen affirms this idea of an elite-led reconceptualisation, arguing that this “construction of a new stigmatised group was necessary to the deconstruction of the morally untouchable category of the ‘deserving political refugee’” (Cohen 1994:82). In order to implement restrictive policies without undermining their moral commitments to refugees, political elites deliberately emphasised one specific conceptualisation of the asylum seeker, enabling them to “deprive” them of their rights (Schuster 2003c:34, also Kushner 2003). However, although elites were undoubtedly responsible for reinforcing this conceptualisation of the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker, they were also acting in response to the media, which was instrumental in “constructing the prevailing images” of asylum seekers (Cohen 1994:89). Reflecting the complexity of the elite-public-media relationship, this conceptual shift was at once driven by public perceptions based on falling rates of refugee recognition, sensationalised by a hostile media and reinforced by a reactive political elite keen to secure electoral victory.

Yet whilst this conceptualisation of the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker has indeed dominated the public debate of asylum in Britain, its emotive force springs from its combination with a subtler conceptualisation: that of the asylum seeker as a threat to the state. In order to understand this conceptualisation it is important to recognise that negative responses to asylum seekers are not just a matter of public xenophobia, opportunistic media coverage or expedient policy. They are also a manifestation of the political philosophy and conflicting normative principles that underpin the modern state system (Parekh in Spencer ed. 1994; Soysal 1996; Statham 2003).

The modern democratic state is built upon the principle of democracy. According to this specific political system, the government is expected to represent and respond to the needs and interests of the *demos*, its citizens. In order to protect its citizens, the modern state exercises territorial sovereignty (Gibney 2004; Layton-Henry 2004; Walzer 1983), controlling access to that territory in order to ensure internal distributive justice (Miller 2007; Schuster 2003b; Walzer 1983). However, asylum seekers represent a threat to this sovereign authority as any individual who manages to reach the border and declare their intention to claim asylum has the right to access that territory (as stated in Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948) (Schuster 2003b:236; 2003c:4). Therefore, asylum seekers undermine the territorial jurisdiction of the state and, by acting as ‘competitors for scarce resources’ (Schuster 2003b:241), the ability of the state to provide for its citizens.

Yet in order to explain why these states have continued to accept any asylum seekers when it appears against their national interest to do so, we must recognise the second normative principle of the modern liberal democratic state: the universality of rights (Benhabib 2004; Soysal 1996).⁴ Parekh explains this conceptual contradiction by highlighting that while ‘nation’ signifies ‘closure and exclusivity’, ‘state’ stands for ‘openness and equality’ (Parekh in Spencer ed. 1994:100). The co-existence of these two conflicting norms helps to explain the ‘paradoxical affinities’ (Soysal 1996:24) or ‘schizophrenia’ (Chakrabarti 2005:138) of British asylum politics. For example, after passing the 1998 Human Rights Act, which incorporated the European Convention of Human Rights into domestic law, the New Labour government went on to pass the 2002 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act which was found by the courts to contravene Article 5 of the same treaty (Gibney 2003:20). This contradictory behaviour reveals the struggle to “reconcile the tensions generated by the attempt of liberal democratic states to be liberal (responsive to the needs of all) and democratic (responsive to and representative of ‘its’ people in particular)” (Schuster 2003c:23).

As a result of this normative tension, political elites are motivated by the ‘politics of restriction’ whilst constrained by the ‘law of inclusion’ (Gibney 2003). Although prompted to exclude asylum seekers in order to fulfil their duty to citizens (Gibney 2003:41), these exclusionary impulses are restrained by a public commitment to universal human rights. This ‘law of inclusion’, embodied in national constitutions, national laws and international human rights conventions, extends citizens’ rights to qualified groups of non-citizens. In the area of asylum this has led to the development of due process for asylum seekers, the extension of non-refoulement protections and also increased residency rights. These legal developments have been consolidated by the recent ‘judicialisation’ of asylum (Gibney 2003:35, also Kaye 1999; Schuster and Solomos 2004). Asylum politics therefore exemplify the struggle of political elites to negotiate the dual mandate imposed on them by the conceptual construction of the modern state.

This conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as a threat to the state has, more recently, been influenced by a discourse of ‘securitisation’ (Boswell 2007; Chakrabarti 2005; Chimni 1998a; Huysman 2006; Somerville 2007). Conceptualising asylum seekers as suspected terrorists, political elites have at times employed a securitised discourse, evident in metaphors of war (Charteris-Black 2006; Pickering 2001), in order to construct a unified and homogenous ‘us’ in opposition to a threatening ‘other’ (Huysman 2006). Chimni argues that this discourse, which Boswell believes was fleeting in the face of a contradictory reality (2007), has been used to legitimise restrictionist and interventionist responses in order to contain the perceived threat that asylum seekers pose to state sovereignty (Chimni 1998a).

⁴ This is evidenced by the recent proliferation of international human rights instruments: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the European Convention of Human Rights (1950), the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (1951) and the Convention Against Torture (1984).

However, asylum seekers are not only conceptualised as a threat to state sovereignty, but are also seen as a threat to the state as a representative of the national community. According to communitarian theory, the state represents a specific political, historical and cultural community in which people are connected by common values, practices and traditions that make up a particular 'way of life' (Walzer 1983:31). This 'way of life' is valuable because of the way in which it enables members of the community to become fully realised 'moral agents' (Gibney 2004:25) and should therefore be protected by the implementation of restrictive border controls (Carens 1992; Walzer 1983). Although Cohen argues that there is no 'essential' national character and that all identities are constructed (1994:192), restrictionist immigration policies indicate the existence of specific perceptions of national identity, both 'natural' and constructed. Therefore, as Parekh argues, a state's immigration policy acts as an 'expression of identity' (in Spencer ed. 1994:92), informing the onlooker about the way in which the community perceives itself.

The way in which British political elites have linked immigration policies to internal race relations indicates the existence of a specific understanding of national identity (Bloch 2000; Layton-Henry 2004; Saggar 2003; Schuster and Solomos 2004; Spencer 1994). Both Labour and Conservative politicians have consistently argued that strict border controls are necessary for maintaining good race relations. In their policies they have also pursued the 'twin track' of restricting the entry of non-white migrants whilst encouraging the integration of existing minority groups through the implementation of Race Relations Acts (Layton-Henry 1992; Schuster and Solomos 2004; Spencer ed. 1994). These contradictory policies are interesting for what they reveal about perceptions of Britain as a 'community' of citizens. By linking immigration and race relations or by playing the 'race card' (Cohen 1994; Kaye 1999; Saggar 2003), politicians have consistently signalled that cultural or ethnic diversity is a threat to community stability (Shukra in Saggar ed. 1998) and have therefore used asylum seekers to negatively reinforce this national identity by providing a distinct 'other' (Cohen 1994:209).

As we can see, recent restrictionism is far more than mere opportunistic policy or populist politics. An articulation of both universal human rights and democracy, conceptualisations of asylum seekers and the policies they generate reveal the normative tension at the heart of the modern democratic state. Yet despite the recent explosion of literature concerning British asylum and immigration policies, few commentaries have examined through rigorous empirical research the way in which political elites have negotiated this tension as they have struggled to deal with a rapidly changing asylum context. Although scholars have analysed parliamentary debates in order to explore Blair's leadership style (Dyson 2009), the use of metaphors in immigration debates (Charteris-Black 2006) and New Labour's rhetoric (Fairclough 2000), none have done so in order to examine the conceptual foundations of recent restrictionism. This paper places itself in this gap and by so doing hopes to contribute to our understanding of asylum as a political and philosophical issue at the heart of the liberal democratic state.

Tony Blair: the embodiment of restrictionism

This paper seeks to examine the conceptual foundations of New Labour's restrictionism through a detailed analysis of Tony Blair's parliamentary statements concerning asylum. There are three reasons, explained below, why this approach is warranted. However, it is important to point out the following limitation at the outset. Somerville argues that a "single, overweening executive is an outdated starting point for analysis" because it neglects the "plural, fragmented environment" in which policy is formed and implemented (Somerville 2007:117). Others highlight the recent "hollowing out of the state" (Rhodes 1997:53), the process of forming policy through compromise (Finlayson 2007:549), the influence of clients (Freeman 1994; 1995; 2006) and the diminished power of central government to dictate policy in the context of 'network governance' (Bevir 2005; Bevir and Rhodes 2003). This body of literature reveals the extent to which governance has come to mean "the informal authority of networks as constitutive of, supplementing or supplanting the formal authority of government" (Bevir and Rhodes 2003:6). It is therefore recognised that, as a result of the disparate and contested nature of political governance, Blair cannot be understood to represent New Labour or 'government' and consequently, a direct causal relationship between his asylum statements and legislation will not be drawn.

However, this particular focus on Blair and his parliamentary contributions is justifiable for three main reasons. Firstly, many comment on the "pivotal" role Blair played in determining New Labour's asylum policy (Spencer 2007:346). Taking "personal charge" of asylum issues (Somerville 2007:120), Blair responded to an intensely hostile media campaign, the Sangatte "crisis" of 2001 (Schuster 2003a; Seldon and Snowdon 2007) and an ever-increasing backlog of asylum claims by deliberately pushing asylum up the political agenda (Campbell and Stott 2007:519, 638 and 665). Afraid that the government would be perceived as incompetent, Blair not only adopted a "tough" rhetoric, but also pursued institutional and legislative change in order to tackle rising asylum numbers. His establishment of the MISC 20 asylum committee in Number 10 (Somerville 2007:79), announcement on *Newsnight* in February 2003 that asylum numbers would be halved within a year (Spencer 2007:345) and setting of the 'tipping point' agenda in his Labour Party conference speech of 2004 are all evidence of his personal contribution to Labour's asylum policies and his "intense focus on asylum" (Seldon and Snowdon 2007:432). The impact of these interventions was consolidated by Blair's "control freak tendencies" (Riddell in Seldon ed. 2001:24); seen in the institutionalisation of a centralised and "interventionist" office of the Prime Minister. Exercising unprecedented power over Cabinet and governmental departments, Blair was able to influence the form and content of asylum policy throughout his time in government (Kavanagh in Seldon ed. 2001:12), often overriding dissenting Ministers in his demand for departmental results (Spencer 2007:346). Therefore, although Blair cannot be taken to represent a disparate New Labour, he was undoubtedly unique in the extent to which he was able to influence the development of asylum policy between 1997 and 2007. Identifying asylum as an issue of particular importance, he used his Prime Ministerial office to push for increasingly restrictive legislative reform.

Secondly, by focusing my analysis on Tony Blair, a particularly influential member of the political elite, this paper will be able to identify the conceptual framework of one man's developing restrictionism. Although it does not seek to be a 'psycho-biography' (Dyson 2009:27), it does seek to examine in detail the way in which Blair's interaction with the asylum debate and its dominant narratives changed between 1992 and 2007. Throughout the early and mid-1990s, Blair condemned Conservative proposals for systemic reform vocally and persuasively, yet by the beginning of the next decade he was unambiguous in his support for restrictionist policies that actually exceeded Conservative reforms in their impingement upon human rights obligations. My analysis will enable me to examine the content of this change, as evidenced by his use of narrative, and to identify the changing conceptualisations at the root of his developing restrictionism. As an embodiment of the national and indeed global transformation of asylum, Blair and his parliamentary contributions will enable me to trace the conceptual shift that has underpinned the recent trend of restrictionism.

Thirdly, although relying on public sources will undoubtedly limit my ability to understand Blair's personal opinions about asylum issues, it will enable me to examine the way in which he employed rhetoric to communicate certain concepts and narratives to the public. Understanding the way in which 'powerful' elites shape public opinion by providing hegemonic discursive frameworks (Chimni 1998a; Fairclough 2000; 2001; Finlayson 2003; van Dijk 1993), I hope to examine the way in which Blair's rhetoric helped to delineate asylum's discursive framework. Although recognising the complex and symbiotic nature of the elite-public relationship, I seek to explore the way in which Blair affirmed, reinforced and developed common narratives and conceptualisations in order to legitimise and win support for his increasingly restrictionist policies.

Conclusion

In response to rising numbers of asylum seekers and the changing nature of migratory flows, British elites have implemented increasingly restrictive asylum policies. This restrictionist response springs from a specific conceptual framework that affirms, firstly, the territorial sovereignty of the state, secondly, the duty of the democratic state to protect its citizens and thirdly, the threat that asylum seekers pose to state sovereignty and the internal community. It is this conceptual framework that generates public hostility to asylum seekers and, as a result of the democratisation of asylum, drives restrictionist policies. Public hostility is affirmed and articulated by elites as they employ specific discursive narratives to frame the public debate. My analysis of Tony Blair's parliamentary contributions will seek to identify the dominant asylum narratives employed by political elites between 1992 and 2007. It will explore Blair's interaction with these narratives and the way in which his attitude towards asylum changed throughout this period. Through this analysis, I hope to identify the conceptualisations that drove this attitudinal change and provided the justificatory framework for his exclusionary policies.

2 Tony Blair's parliamentary asylum rhetoric

My analysis of Tony Blair's parliamentary statements has been informed by Finlayson's method of Rhetorical Political Analysis (RPA) (2007). Understanding rhetoric to be "persuasive communications made in contingent and conflictual civic contexts" (Finlayson 2007:545), RPA seeks to analyse the argumentation contained within 'communicative instances' (van Dijk 1993:250). Informed by Bevir and Rhodes' 'interpretivism' (2003), Finlayson rejects the rational choice theory (Bevir 2005:15; McLean 2001:204) and instead seeks to "investigate dynamic processes of preference formation derived from multiple forms of rationality" (Finlayson 2007:546). He argues that the actions of political actors can only be understood by identifying the 'webs of belief' upon which they are constructed and the extent to which these beliefs have been informed by historical traditions and narratives (Bevir 2005:14; Bevir and Rhodes 2003:3; Finlayson 2007:560). RPA places these narratives and traditions within their 'argumentative context' and seeks to understand how arguments themselves constitute actions, helping to shape and reshape narratives (Finlayson 2007:560; Finlayson and Martin 2008:453).

Finlayson's method of RPA recognises that democratic politics inevitably involves conflict between competing narratives and that 'political struggles have always been partly struggles over the dominant language' (Fairclough 2000:3, also 2001; Chimni 1998a). The 'social power' of political elites is measured by the extent to which they are able to influence discourse (van Dijk 1993:254), delineate the 'issue dimensions' of public debate (McLean 2001:231) and legitimise specific conceptual frameworks (Fairclough 1992:124). My analysis will therefore treat Blair's parliamentary contributions as a form of persuasive rhetoric and will attempt to identify the implicit beliefs and traditions that shape his use of narrative. It will explore the way in which these 'argumentative' narratives are formed in response to specific 'dilemmas' (Bevir and Rhodes 2003:124) and the way in which he, as a member of the 'power elite,' helps to consolidate and recreate dominant asylum discourses.

My analysis will separate Blair's parliamentary comments into two separate time periods, 1992-1997 and 1997-2007, reflecting his move from opposition to government. It will then establish the 'rhetorical situation' of his comments by 'setting the identity' and relational context of the participants and examining the discursive 'rules of engagement' (Finlayson 2007:554; Finlayson and Martin 2008:454). It will then identify the central narratives of his argumentation. Actors employ narratives to explain the world around them, imposing a certain view of events and ascribing blame by establishing a 'simplifying' sequence of cause and effect (Finlayson 2007:557). Narratives help to establish a dominant discourse through their problem specification, creative redefinition of language and the setting of discursive boundaries (ibid:556).

These narratives are communicated through the use of particular rhetorical genres: forensic, which focuses on the past and aims to secure and defend justice; epideictic,

which involves the ritualistic and objective praise or condemnation of something or someone, often establishing ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomies; or deliberative, which aims to exhort to or deter the audience from a course of action (ibid:556). They are also communicated through the use of commonplaces: common-sense values and maxims that are used to establish the persuasive ‘appeal’ of an argument (ibid:558). Employing metaphors, figures and other stylistic techniques, actors employ three types of commonplace: logos, the construction of quasi-logical justifications; ethos, establishing the moral authority of the speaker; and pathos, attempting to persuade the audience through emotional appeals and ‘image management.’

Finally, I will examine how Blair establishes connections to particular and universal policy domains (ibid:555-560). References to particular policy domains take up a specific relationship to that domain’s history, contextualising the communicative instance by referencing specific clients and narratives. Connections to universal domains, forged by references to deep-rooted political ideologies and ontologies, help to legitimise argumentation and build consensus in the context of complex and conflicting policy networks.

Tony Blair’s parliamentary statements 1992 – 1997

Parliamentary debates are governed by very specific procedural rules that dictate the form and structure of participation. The MP leading a debate must ask permission from the Speaker of the House to do so, whilst MPs wishing to comment must request that their “honourable friend” “give way.” These highly ritualised procedural rules establish strictly defined power relations as, despite questions asked and interruptions shouted, the MP leading the debate is able to control and define the issue dimension. However, it is important to remember that although these ‘rules of engagement’ delineate very formal addresser-addressee relations, the fact that parliamentary debates are broadcast nationally expands the audience beyond those present and therefore introduces a degree of ambiguity into this relationship (Finlayson 2007:554). References to ‘us’ or ‘we’ can therefore not be taken to refer to a particular party, but might refer to specific networks or even the general public.

Between 1992 and 1997, Blair held the office of Shadow Home Secretary and Labour Party leader. His asylum statements are primarily found in debates concerning the following issues: the Asylum and Immigration Appeals Bill (HC Deb 2 November 1992), Yugoslav visas (HC Deb 05 November 1992), Bosnian refugees (HC Deb 17 November 1992), deportation and appeals (HC Deb 11 January 1993) and the Maastricht Treaty (HC Debate 27 January 1993). Throughout this period Blair was in opposition and therefore his comments are, unsurprisingly, characterised by his criticism of John Major’s Conservative government. Although he abides by the formal rules of engagement, referring to Ken Clarke as the “the right Honourable and learned gentleman” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c35), he adopts an aggressive tone, constantly seeking to undermine the credibility of the government by claiming authority of the discursive space: “[l]et me put this point to the Secretary of State; then I shall give way to him, if he is prepared to deny it” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c40). Although Blair adopts a more measured

tone in the discussion he leads regarding the Maastricht Treaty, other debates are dominated by specific rhetorical techniques that aim to rebalance the power relationship by establishing his personal authority over the narrative dimension.

In my analysis of these statements, I found that Blair, alongside other political elites, employed three specific asylum narratives. I have named these narratives 'bogus' asylum seekers, state sovereignty and race relations in order to convey both their conceptual foundations and argumentative content. The 'bogus' asylum seeker narrative frames the conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as a disguised economic migrant who seeks to take advantage of Britain's welfare system. The sovereignty narrative affirms territorial sovereignty, the partial responsibility of the state to its citizens and the importance of border control. The race relations narrative is premised upon the argument that strict border controls are necessary for maintaining stable race relations. I found that between 1992 and 1997, the 'bogus' asylum seeker narrative dominated Blair's parliamentary contributions, a fact reflected in the order of the narrative sections below. In the section that follows I will explore in detail Blair's argumentative interaction with each narrative.

'Bogus' asylum seeker narrative

Pre-1997, Blair's interaction with the 'bogus' asylum seeker narrative dominates his parliamentary statements. He reaffirms this narrative by explicitly repeating common maxims: "no-one on the Opposition Benches condones bogus applications for asylum: everyone condemns them" (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c35); "we oppose bogus applications and fraud and we recognise the need for immigration controls" (HC Deb 15 November 1995, vol. 267 c17). This historical narrative, developed throughout the 1980s in response to the dilemma of rising numbers of asylum seekers, has become so dominant that Blair is forced to reaffirm it in order to establish his legitimacy as a political elite. He also affirms narratives of causation:

"I submit that there have been two striking changes in the European asylum situation in the past 20 years. The first is a huge rise in the number of asylum applications ... the second is the dramatic fall in the proportion of asylum seekers being granted asylum. Virtually all were granted refuge in 1972 whereas today the figure is only about 20 per cent" (HC Deb 27 January 1993, vol. 217 c1098).

Even though the phrase 'I submit' implies a certain reluctance, Blair is forced to recognise the hegemonic narrative of rising numbers and its foundational belief that falling recognition rates prove that most asylum seekers are in fact economic migrants.

However, having established his legitimacy by locating his rhetoric within this hegemonic political tradition, Blair is then able to challenge that tradition. He does so by claiming that falling recognition rates are caused, not by 'manifestly bogus claims' (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c38) or 'bad faith' (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c641), but by the 'changing nature of refugees away from those subject to individual persecution ... towards the position today when most refugees are fleeing from ethnic conflict or civil war' (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c1098). Although recognising that many do not fit the specific definition of a refugee found in the 1951 Convention, he reminds the

audience that these individuals, such as those fleeing the conflicts in Yugoslavia or Bosnia, are still ‘in a desperate situation’:

“Many people flee the troubled parts of this world not because they face persecution individually but because it would be unsafe to return them due to war, civil unrest or disorder. The threat to life or freedom is as real, but the cause may not be directed against them personally” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c42).

Stating that the destruction of documentation is “not necessarily evidence of fraud,” he argues that ‘not everybody who is in detention is a bogus applicant. That is absurd’ (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c40). Reflecting upon the role of the media in reinforcing this dominant narrative he says in the Maastricht Treaty debate that “contrary to some of the more lurid headlines, the vast majority of refugees did not want to leave their homeland and are desperately keen to return” (HC Deb 27 January 1993, vol. 217 c1099). In order to challenge the ‘bogus’ narrative, Blair therefore engages in a battle to redefine the term, revealing the inaccurate beliefs upon which it has been constructed and replacing the image of the economic migrant deliberately abusing the British asylum system with a more sympathetic image of a desperate victim of war.

Blair attempts to consolidate this lexical redefinition in two ways. Firstly, Blair utilises his legal training and the forensic rhetorical genre to engage in a complex technical discussion of the finer details of the proposed bill:

“I do not mind that the Home Secretary has not read the Maastricht Treaty, but it is a bit much that he has not read his Bill ... The Home Secretary is referring to claims without foundation, which come under a different part of the Bill —schedule 2, paragraph 4. As he has constantly misrepresented the position, if he is to challenge it any further I would be obliged if he would show how he can make his case from the Bill and the rules” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c29).

Secondly, Blair reinforces this argument by establishing connections to both universal and particular policy domains. In response to the Asylum Bill, Blair forges connections to universal domains by claiming that his opposition ‘is about fairness and whether our procedures conform to the rules of natural justice’ (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c35). Similarly, he opposes the Deportation Bill because it “will not apply in the way that it should the rules of natural justice” (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c642). Seeking to establish his own moral authority, he legitimises his argument by connecting it to a widely-accepted political ontology of ‘natural justice.’ This association is then consolidated by repeated references to the 1951 Convention and the UNHCR (HC Deb 2 November 1992, 5 November 1992, 27 January 1993), which are similarly founded upon liberal principles of individual rights, dignity and equality. Claiming these principles as his own, Blair then seeks to establish consensus among the asylum network by referencing the particular policy domain:

“It is not only the Opposition who are claiming that the procedures are unfair, a whole range of organisations are doing so ... the Law Society ... the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants, the National Association of Citizens Advice Bureaux and Amnesty International. The very breadth of opposition to elements of the proposals should give any sensible Government pause for thought if their motives are genuine” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c37).

Going on to quote directly from an Amnesty International report, Blair deliberately references this network in order to lend authority to his redefinition of the term ‘bogus.’ Placing himself alongside these interest groups, he is claiming to represent those individuals who, although they fall outside the specific Convention definition of the term refugee, are bearers of human rights and deserving of protection.

State sovereignty narrative

Sovereignty is an important narrative in these debates. Yet whilst discussions of state sovereignty often focus on the reinforcement of border control, Blair’s contributions seek to highlight the conflict between state power and individual rights. In the discussion of the 1992 Asylum Bill, Blair states that “the concern is that the existence of the power to curtail leave may inhibit people from making genuine asylum claims” because “when a right of appeal is removed, what is removed is a valuable and necessary constraint on those who exercise original jurisdiction” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c43). Employing the deliberative rhetorical genre, Blair is not only claiming implicitly to represent all those concerned with arbitrary and unchecked state authority, but also warning the audience that the proposed legislation will threaten individual human rights. He argues that the scrutinised immigration officer whose decision is open to appeal will inevitably be more “circumspect, careful and even-handed” than the officer who knows his power is “absolute” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c43). Exhorting the audience to abandon the proposed course of action, he warns that the proposal is “unfair and arbitrary, and is likely to be administratively incompetent” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c45).

Blair continues this rights discourse in the debate he leads about the Maastricht Treaty in 1993. Although he states his support for European co-ordination, he argues that the visa policy developed “should not be a regime of the lowest common denominator but one that attempts to guard the civil liberties of those seeking asylum” (HC Deb 27 January 1993, vol. 217 c1089). The fact that Blair uses the phrase “civil liberties,” as opposed to “human rights,” locates the asylum seeker within the British political community, emphasising that state sovereignty does not necessarily involve exclusion of non-citizens.

This debate is dominated by MPs expressing fears that European co-ordination will inevitably undermine the ability of the British government to control its borders. Although this hegemonic discourse forces Blair to state that the Treaty does not imply a “wholesale destruction of sovereignty,” he also seeks to remind the audience of the dangers of unconstrained power. Asylum seekers are presented as potential “arbitrary casualties” of this power and in the case of Yugoslavia, Blair warns that “literally hundreds of thousands of people may die unless we find a proper concerted solution to the problem” (HC Deb 5 November 1992, vol. 213 c426). Instead of affirming that the only solutions are closed borders and exclusion, Blair argues that:

“Countries acting on their own, merely pulling up their drawbridges as fast as they can, is not the answer to the problem. It requires to be managed on the basis of shared goals and responsibilities” (HC Deb 27 January 1993, vol. 217 c1099).

Invoking, in a somewhat pejorative manner, the commonplace metaphor of the state as a castle under attack, Blair hopes to undermine the power of this hegemonic discourse by reminding his parliamentary audience of the responsibility of the modern liberal state to respect human rights and protect those in need. Although he affirms that asylum is a “problem,” Blair qualifies the historical tradition of sovereignty by referencing the liberal universal domain of human rights and conceptualising the asylum seeker as a rights bearer that deserves state protection.

Race relations narrative

The race relations narrative first appears in Blair’s parliamentary contributions in 1992 as he discusses the Conservative proposal to remove the right of appeal from students and visitors (HC Deb 2 November 1992). Yet whilst Blair references this narrative, he refuses to engage with its foundational argument that strict border controls are necessary for maintaining good race relations. In the course of the Asylum Bill debate, Blair states that Howard:

“...has claimed—he repeated the claim today—that good race relations are important. By implication, therefore, he acknowledges that measures such as the Bill can affect those relations” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c35).

Blair challenges this narrative, which has been a feature of British political life since the Second World War, by arguing that “good race relations cannot be other than harmed when we pass legislation which in the main will adversely affect one part of our community only” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c35). He then goes on to argue that the Bill will cause “injustices” to mount up and will inevitably provoke “deep and lasting offence within the Asian and other ethnic minority communities” (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c732).

In order to reinforce this point Blair employs the epideictic rhetorical genre to reconstruct the traditional ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy, reminding the audience that “the vast majority” of those affected by the Bill “will be relatives of people in Britain who deeply resent such treatment of their relations” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c44). He then goes on to ask Kenneth Clarke, “[h]ow would he feel if a relative of his ... were refused entry to attend a wedding, a funeral or just to visit?” (HC Deb 2 November 1992, vol. 213 c44). Establishing a familial relationship between the addressee and the victims of the proposed legislation, Blair uses the rhetorical technique of posing a question to undermine the legitimacy of his opponent, reinforcing the impression that the Conservatives, ‘them,’ are unconcerned about protecting ‘us,’ a category that has come to include Britain’s ethnic minorities, the general public, their relatives abroad and the Labour Party.

Blair develops this argument by reinforcing the emotional connection between the audience and “those most vulnerable to racial sentiment”:

“We take exception to the assumption that those from Pakistan or India who wish to visit their relatives will not feel the same sense of injustice and outrage as we would were we to be denied the right to visit our relatives in another country” (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c732).

Utilising a rights discourse once again, Blair combines the forensic rhetorical genre with a pathos commonplace appeal to convince his addressees that “outrage” would be the natural response to this policy. As a matter of “injustice,” ‘we’ would respond with a similar outrage were we denied this “right.” Here then, Blair is appealing to his audience’s belief in “natural justice,” a universally accepted moral domain, to force them to identify emotionally with the potential victims of the policy.

Blair also accuses the Conservatives of deliberately playing the “race card” (HC Deb 15 November 1995, vol. 267 c17) in order to “arouse the most virulent type of nationalism” within the general public (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c732). Blair passionately expresses his opposition to the Appeals Bill, accusing the Tories of deliberately engaging in a “distasteful exercise...to stir up passions and prejudices that were best left dormant.” Using adjectives such as “calculated,” “nasty,” “pathetic,” “tawdry,” “low-life” and “hysterical” to describe the Conservatives (HC Deb 11 January 1993), Blair employs extremely aggressive and emotive language to consolidate his condemnation of their bill. Using personal pronouns and a language of faith Blair goes on to declare “I do not believe that that can possibly help good race relations in this country” (HC Deb 11 January 1993, vol. 216 c732). In the 1995 Asylum Bill debate, Blair reinforces this distinction between himself and the Conservative party:

“The Prime Minister denies that that issue is being used to play the race card in any sense. Let the new Bill go to a Standing Committee of the House, so that evidence may be taken and considered, and let it be a genuine consensual exercise in getting at the truth” (HC Deb 15 November 1995, vol. 267 c17).

Appealing to a particular policy domain, the scrutiny domain central to democratic governance, Blair hopes to build consensus amongst political elites against the Conservatives. Unlike them, he is not attempting to deceive or manipulate party politics in order to secure votes, but is genuinely seeking to uncover the “truth.”

Tony Blair’s parliamentary statements 1997 – 2007

The rhetorical situation of Blair’s parliamentary contributions changes dramatically following his election as Prime Minister in 1997. The majority of his asylum statements occur in the context of debates about his European negotiations and therefore begin with statements such as, “with permission, Madam Speaker, I shall make a statement about the European Council in Amsterdam” (HC Deb 18 June 1997, vol. 296 c313) before going on to inform parliament about international developments. The power balance has inevitably shifted and Blair’s rhetoric assumes a new authority to reflect his changed relationship to parliament: “the House will also be interested to know ...” (HC Deb 18 June 1997, vol. 296 c315). However, Blair is also forced to defend both the actions he has taken on behalf of the state in the international arena and the perceived failures of his government. In order to affirm his authority in the context of such conflict, he at times adopts a patronising tone; “the hon. Gentleman should be congratulated on realising that the problem has been going on for a long time” (HC Deb 29 July 1998, vol. 317 c364). Although Blair attempts to dominate the issue dimension in this way, he is forced to respond to comments, criticisms and shouted interruptions made by his addressees.

These contributions mean that at times, the dialogical style of parliamentary debates becomes more combative:

“The right hon. Gentleman is wrong on the facts, I am afraid ... (Interruption.) If he and his colleagues will stop shouting from a sedentary position for a moment, I will explain to them exactly what we got on asylum and immigration ... (Interruption.) They have started again. They are unbelievable; they will not listen” (HC Deb 24 June 2002, vol. 387 c624).

This environment means that Blair must fight to maintain his authority, employing rhetorical techniques to ensure that the narratives he presents are accepted not only by the politicians present, but also the wider public.

In my analysis of Blair’s parliamentary contributions as Prime Minister, I found that the three dominant narratives of the pre-1997 period continued to feature heavily post-1997. Yet despite this continuity, three narrative changes are evident in the post-1997 period. Firstly, Blair’s emphasis changed dramatically. In the previous section we saw that the ‘bogus’ narrative dominated Blair’s contributions, yet post-1997, sovereignty is undoubtedly the dominant narrative, a change reflected in the order of the narrative sections below. Secondly, the argumentative content of Blair’s ‘bogus’ and sovereignty narratives changed substantively. Thirdly, Blair introduced two new narratives, identified as economic migration and welfare reform. These three changes are discussed in detail in the following section.

State sovereignty narrative

As Prime Minister, Blair has shifted his position radically within this newly dominant narrative. Instead of emphasising state responsibilities to respect individual rights, Blair’s priority is now to reassure MPs and the wider public that European negotiations will not compromise British sovereignty:

“We are trying to achieve proper standards, but it is important for countries to protect their own boundaries, and to protect themselves against illegal immigration—and, indeed, unlawful asylum ... as a result of what we negotiated at Amsterdam, we retain integrity over our own borders” (HC Deb 19 October 1999, vol. 336 c264).

Although he states his aim to implement “proper” asylum policies, the ‘but’ that follows reveals that his efforts to do so are now subsumed by his apparent desire to enforce border control. By generalising beyond the British state, the aim to control borders is presented as a legitimate goal of all “countries,” whilst in comparison the legitimacy of the asylum system is placed under suspicion by the phrase “unlawful asylum.” Although he later claims that a “balance” between sovereignty and rights is necessary, this quote reveals his changed relationship to this sovereignty narrative, as he now affirms rather than challenges the belief that state authority rests upon absolute territorial jurisdiction. As Prime Minister he is responsible for maintaining that authority and he is therefore forced to reassure his audience that “European competence over asylum and immigration does not mean we lose national control” (HC Deb 19 December 2003, vol. 416 c57W). This reassurance is designed to counter the “less pleasant myths in some of the propaganda put out...that somehow Europe decides our asylum and immigration laws. It does not; we decide them” (HC Deb 21 June 2004, vol. 422 c1084).

In order to prove himself capable of maintaining British sovereignty and therefore protecting British citizens, Blair consistently employs a narrative of being “tough.” When challenged about his government’s national policies, his overwhelming concern is to “deal with the right honourable Gentleman’s allegation that we are a soft touch for asylum seekers” (HC Deb 31 January 2001, vol. 362 c299). In order to counter this allegation, Blair repeatedly lists the policy changes made to ensure “our rules are tougher,” including the withdrawal of cash benefits, reinforcement of carrier’s liability and detention. In response to repeated comments about his government’s “failure to get a grip on their asylum chaos” (Michael Howard, HC Deb 26 November 2003, vol. 415 c30), he does not seek to challenge this narrative of state sovereignty, but instead redoubles his efforts to claim the narrative as his own. He does this by introducing the ID cards debate (HC Deb 24 June 2002) and emphasising that “as a result of our [deportation] measures, approximately three times as many asylum seekers are being removed now as five years ago” (HC Deb 14 February 2001, vol. 363 c311). When challenged about plans to build a detention centre, Blair employs the ethos appeal to claim that the moral authority of this restrictionism rests upon its existence as an expression of the public will: “people have asked us to take action on the issue of asylum, and we have done so” (HC Deb 4 February 2004, vol. 417 c752).

Indeed, Blair is so concerned to be seen as “tough” that in 1997, immediately following his election as Prime Minister, he states that “thanks to the amendments we secured, the European Courts will have no authority to decide cases brought in United Kingdom courts” (HC Deb 18 June 1997, vol. 296 c313). Completing his volte-face within this sovereignty narrative, he states in 2003 that if Labour’s asylum reforms fail “we are prepared to go further, including fundamentally looking at our obligations under the European Convention on Human Rights” (HC Deb 29 January 2003, vol. 398 c875; a claim repeated in HC Deb 7 May 2003). The fact that Blair is willing to question not only the authority of courts but also Britain’s international human rights obligations reveals the extent to which he has embraced this narrative of sovereignty.

‘Bogus’ asylum seeker narrative

As before, Blair consistently repeats commonly accepted maxims that affirm his commitment to the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker narrative: “many bogus claims are being made” (HC Deb 16 June 1999, vol. 333 c383); “we can distinguish better between the bogus and the non-bogus cases” (HC Deb 02 February 2000, vol. 343 c1034); “those measures will help us separate bogus asylum seekers from genuine asylum seekers” (HC Deb 01 March 2000, vol. 345 c415); “there are abuses of the asylum system and we are dealing with those abuses” (HC Deb 19 April 2000, vol. 348 c973). Yet instead of then going on to challenge the definition of ‘bogus’ as he did before, Blair now accepts the common definition of the term as any individual refused refugee status and proposes procedural changes to exclude all such individuals. However, Blair also stresses that whilst these “domestic measures” seek to “deal robustly with abusive claims” they are also intended to “provide protection to those who need it” (HC Deb 7 May 2003, vol. 404 c729). Blair argues therefore that

“genuine” asylum seekers would be better protected by a system that was effective in screening out all ‘bogus’ claims.

After 9/11, there was a securitisation of this narrative as the “people who abuse our laws and hospitality” (HC Deb 14 November 2001, vol. 374 c878) were no longer understood to be just disguised economic migrants, but also “those whom we suspect of terrorism” (HC Deb 4 October 2001, vol. 372 c671). Although Blair recognises that “the vast majority of people who claim asylum, for example, are not terrorists or even suspected terrorists” (HC Deb 29 January 2003, vol. 398 c870), by making this statement and others like it (HC Deb 17 December 2001 and 15 January 2003), he is confirming that the asylum route has been compromised and is now a threat to the physical safety of the British state. In order to counter this terrorist threat, Blair seeks a:

“...carefully appraised set of measures—tough, but balanced and proportionate to the risk that we face ... It will increase our ability to exclude and remove those whom we suspect of terrorism and who are seeking to abuse our asylum procedures ... [giving us] the means to protect our citizens’ liberty and our national security” (HC Deb 4 October 2001, vol. 372 c671).

These “measures” included the Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act of 2001, in which the government claimed the right to detain suspected terrorists without trial, something they were only able to do through a “specific derogation from the European Convention on Human Rights” (ECHR) (HC Deb 15 January 2003, vol. 397 c674). It also included the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act of 2002, which enabled the government to “prevent suspected terrorists from entering the country at all” (HC Deb 15 January 2003, vol. 397 c674). When asked by Iain Duncan-Smith “will the Prime Minister now ensure that we make our borders secure and stop terrorists abusing the asylum system?” Blair responds: “Of course. That is why we introduced the legislation that we did” (HC Deb 15 January 2003, vol. 397 c674).

Blair justifies these restrictive measures and the derogation from the ECHR by rhetorically constructing a new ‘us’ and ‘them’ dichotomy. Instead of presenting ‘them’ as people fleeing a ‘desperate situation’ as he did before, asylum seekers have become suspected terrorists who wish to destroy the freedoms and “way of life” of the British people (Iain Duncan Smith HC Deb 22 January 2003, vol. 398 c295). In contrast to this alien and threatening group, Blair emphasises that “this is a tolerant country, we are proud that it is a tolerant country” (HC Deb 29 February 2003, vol. 398 c870). Blair affirms the dominant communitarian tradition that “every country should have the right to determine whether certain people can live within its borders,” expressed by Iain Duncan Smith (HC Deb 22 January 2003, vol. 398 c294), by stating in response: “Britain can and should.” ‘Bogus’ asylum seekers have therefore become not only a threat to Britain’s functional capacity, but also a threat to the British community. Although Blair does not present a hyper-securitised view of asylum seekers, he does subtly reaffirm the link between asylum seekers and terrorists. He does this not only through the legislative changes he supports, but through his use of the epideictic rhetorical genre to create a new distinction between ‘us,’ seen as rights-bearing citizens, and ‘them,’ an intolerant and

threatening group that needs to be excluded in order to protect the particular values and traditions of the British community.

Race relations narrative

The narrative of race relations is not a dominant feature of Blair's asylum comments after 1997, despite the fact that race continued to feature in the general issue dimension of parliament, especially in the passing of the Race Relations Amendment Act in 2001. This absence could suggest that Blair was reluctant to maintain the conceptual linkage between immigration controls and race relations. Indeed, two of the three references to race found in this period state firstly, that the Treaty of Amsterdam "creates power to act against discrimination on grounds of...race" (HC Deb 18 June 1997, vol. 296 c314) and secondly, that the European Constitution would involve a "commitment by all EU member states to treat third-country nationals who are legally resident in their countries fairly and without discrimination" (HC Deb 19 October 1999, vol. 336 c259).

However, Blair is forced to engage with the race relations narrative on one particular occasion. Deliberately referencing the "Government's welcome commitment to anti-racism" the Liberal Democrat MP Simon Hughes nonetheless refers Blair to a *Daily Telegraph* editorial which accuses the Home Secretary Jack Straw of "fanning resentment against... immigrants" (HC Deb 22 March 2000, vol. 346 c979).⁵ Simon Hughes then asks the Prime Minister if he can guarantee that his Ministers will not "speak or act in a way which encourages some of the press to pander to the twin evils of racism and prejudice" (HC Deb 22 March 2000, vol. 346 c979). Blair responds:

"Of course we will not pander to that. However, there is a genuine problem with asylum in this country. Unless reasonable and tolerant people deal with what are plain abuses of the system, unreasonable and intolerant people are encouraged. The proper way forward is to do what we are doing: introducing tough new asylum measures that will allow genuine asylum seekers through, but will halt those bogus asylum seekers ... I reject entirely the argument that those measures are in any shape or form whipping up prejudice. They are, in fact, the best way of preventing it" (HC Deb 22 March 2000, vol. 346 c979/980).

Here Blair deliberately avoids articulating the link between race relations and immigration, arguing that the "problem" with the asylum system is not the ethnic origin of the asylum seekers, but rather the existence of 'bogus' asylum seekers. However, by stating that "prejudice" is only contained by "tough new asylum measures" he affirms the belief that the public must be protected from excessive immigration or they will look to right-wing parties, "unreasonable and intolerant people," to do so. In order to gain support for these restrictions he employs the deliberative rhetorical genre by warning the audience of the risk of failure: we must "take the initiative on illegal migration; otherwise, we vacate the field and leave it to extremists who adopt a hard ultra right-wing agenda that is against any form of immigration" (HC Deb 24 June 2002, vol. 387 c620).

⁵ In the summer of 2000, Jack Straw called for a redrafting of the "out of date" 1951 Convention (Lee 2000).

New narratives

As well as the three dominant narratives of sovereignty, 'bogus' asylum seekers and race relations, Blair introduces two subtler narratives post-1997. In the first of these, he is keen to emphasise the benefits of managed migration, insisting that:

“Legal migration can and does bring real and substantial benefits to countries, including Britain. Our aim is not to prevent legal migration; on the contrary, subject to proper rules, we welcome it” (HC Deb 24 June 2002, vol. 387 c612).

Here Blair seeks to convince both MPs and the wider public that migration, if controlled properly, can bring economic benefits. Again in 2004 he affirms, “it benefits this country to have people coming here to study, for example, or on work permits” (HC Deb 23 June 2004, vol. 422 c1330). However, by setting up a clear dichotomy between well-managed and economically beneficial legal migration and the asylum system, Blair confirms the belief that the asylum system is not only out of control, but also compromised by illegality and harmful to the British state.

Secondly, Blair introduces a narrative of welfare reform: “of course, the problem is the asylum system ... that is why we are introducing a new system from April this year in which cash payments are limited simply to £10 a week” (HC Deb 01 March 2000, vol. 345 c415). This narrative is developed in response to Conservative accusations that the asylum “crisis” has been caused by an “unfailingly weak” government that has allowed Britain to become a “soft touch” (William Hague HC Deb 15 March 2000, vol. 346 c292). These accusations prompt Blair to emphasise his aim to introduce a “tougher, tighter system” (HC Deb 15 March 2000, vol. 346 c293). Restricting access to benefits is therefore part of Blair’s strategy to create an impression of authority and control.

Conclusion

By conducting a detailed analysis of Blair’s parliamentary contributions, it has been possible to identify the dominant asylum narratives of this period as ‘bogus’ asylum seeker, state sovereignty and race relations. It has also been possible to explore Blair’s interaction with these three narratives and identify two key changes in that interaction. Firstly, my analysis reveals the changing emphasis of Blair’s contributions. Interacting primarily with the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker narrative between 1992 and 1997, his main concern as Prime Minister was to affirm the sovereignty narrative. Secondly, my analysis shows that whilst the content of Blair’s race relations narrative remains largely constant, the content of Blair’s ‘bogus’ and sovereignty narratives changes substantially. Pre-1997, Blair’s interactions with the ‘bogus’ asylum seeker narrative are dominated by his “forensic” efforts to critique and deconstruct its foundational conceptualisation of the disguised economic migrant. However, after 1997 Blair not only repeatedly affirms commonplace maxims concerning ‘bogus’ applicants, but he also advocates reform in order to protect the asylum system from abusive claims. Blair’s interaction with the sovereignty narrative also changes dramatically. Whilst in opposition, Blair frequently utilises a rights discourse to remind the audience of the “civil liberties” of asylum seekers and state responsibilities to protect. However, as Prime Minister, he continually

emphasises the need to reinforce state sovereignty and prevent “unlawful asylum” through the implementation of “tough” asylum measures.

This stark contrast in emphasis and argumentation between the pre- and post-1997 period reveals Blair’s reorientation to the conflicting norms of the democratic state: universal human rights and sovereignty. Downplaying the norm of universal rights, Prime Minister Blair emphasises the norm of sovereignty, a discursive and normative response to the specific functions and duties of his new office. These argumentative changes reveal firstly, that Blair’s shift towards restrictionism correlates with his move from opposition into power and secondly, that this move prompted a discursive renegotiation of the tension between the conflicting norms of universality and sovereignty.

However, my analysis shows that Blair not only interacted with these dominant narratives, but went on to significantly redefine them. In order to understand these redefinitions, it is necessary to place the above conclusions in the context of Blair’s wider political agenda. An examination of his ‘Third Way’ agenda, the civic contract it contained and the conceptual foundation it was based upon will help to reveal the way in which Blair deconstructed traditional asylum narratives in order to reconstruct new narratives and a new conceptual basis for exclusion.

3 Blair’s reconstruction of asylum narratives: a new ‘us’ and a new ‘them’

As Finlayson’s method of Rhetorical Political Analysis makes clear, argumentative rhetoric can itself constitute an action that shapes and reshapes narrative (Finlayson 2007:560). In this way, Blair’s parliamentary contributions constitute a significant reshaping of Britain’s asylum debate and its conceptual foundations. In order to understand Blair’s narrative redefinitions, it is necessary to place his parliamentary contributions in the context of his wider political agenda. Elected leader of the Labour Party in 1994, Blair’s stated objectives were to modernise the Labour Party and rejuvenate Britain’s civic society (Blair 1996; Mandelson and Liddle 1996). In order to modernise the party, he rewrote the outdated Clause IV and in order to overcome Britain’s social and economic struggles, he introduced his new ‘Third Way’ agenda (Blair 1996; Driver and Martell 2002). This ‘Third Way’ was intended to transcend the traditional left-right dichotomy of British politics, combining elements of both political wings in order to undertake the “task of national renewal” (Blair 1996:23). The objective of Blair’s national renewal was “the creation of a true community of citizens” built upon a new civic contract of “rights and responsibilities” (Blair 1996:viii).

This civic contract is central to Blair’s narrative redefinitions. In the first instance this contract redefined Britain’s traditional race relations narrative by deconstructing its

foundational idea of an ethnically homogenous Britain and reconstructing a new ‘us’: a “new Britain” (Blair 1996) defined not by its racial homogeneity but by its shared traits and values. Secondly, Blair’s civic contract redefined the sovereignty narrative by rejecting traditional *jus sanguinis* or *jus soli* membership and instead granting the state the authority to distribute citizenship rights based upon the individual’s social and economic contribution. These two narrative redefinitions introduce a new dichotomy of contributor and non-contributor into Blair’s rhetoric. Existing alongside the traditional genuine-bogus dichotomy, this new dichotomy provides a new conceptual basis for exclusion. Associating asylum seekers rhetorically with the category of non-contributor, Blair not only redefines the ‘bogus’ narrative, but also argues that the exclusion of these non-contributors is ‘fair’ as only those who contribute to society should be rewarded with citizenship rights. This concept of ‘fairness’ and the conceptualisation it generates, that of the asylum seeker as the violator of ‘fairness,’ enable Blair to justify increasingly restrictive asylum policies which seek to exclude the “taking foreigner” (Honig 2001:8).

Blair outlines the content of this civic contract in his political manifestos, public speeches and speeches to Labour Party conferences. Addressing the public more directly in these ‘communicative instances’ (Finlayson 2007), Blair employs an emotional and persuasive rhetorical style to communicate his vision for Britain’s new civic community. Therefore, in order to explore Blair’s narrative redefinitions in detail it is necessary to complement my detailed analysis of his parliamentary contributions with this wider pool of primary material⁶. In the section that follows I will firstly explain how Blair deconstructs traditional narratives in order to create a new ‘us’ before going on to show how this new ‘us’ inevitably creates a new ‘them’ and therefore a new conceptual basis for the exclusion of asylum seekers.

A new ‘us’

This process of constructing a new ‘us’ occurs in three stages: firstly, Blair deconstructs traditional concepts of British society, secondly, he constructs his own concept of British society and thirdly, he establishes a mechanism for consolidating this new concept by granting the state the authority to distribute citizenship rights. As the race relations narrative reveals, restrictive asylum policies have reflected specific understandings of British society as an ethnically homogenous community protected by national borders (Parekh in Spencer ed. 2004). By arguing that strict border controls are necessary for maintaining good race relations, political elites have not only “actively regulated and racialised immigration” (Schuster and Solomos 2004:268), but have also constructed the asylum seeker as a threat to Britain’s racial identity. This narrative therefore rests upon a racially defined ‘us.’ However, as we can see from his parliamentary contributions, Blair refuses to engage with this narrative, avoiding the border control-race relations discursive link both pre- and post-1997. Condemning the Conservatives for playing the ‘race card’ in order to secure electoral gains, Blair argues that racial discrimination at the border will only serve to exacerbate internal racial tensions.

⁶ A full list of the sources referenced is found in the Primary Documents section in the references list.

However, Blair not only avoids this race relations narrative, he also attempts to challenge the belief upon which it is based, that of a 'white' Britain:

"We celebrate the diversity in our country, get strength from the cultures and races that go to make up Britain today; and racist abuse and racist attacks have no place in the Britain we believe in" (Blair 2001).

After deconstructing traditional concepts of British society rhetorically by emphasising the reality of a "diverse Britain" (Blair 2004b), Blair goes on to argue that the British character is composed of several "essential" traits (Blair 2005b). According to Blair, these traits constitute the British people as "creative" (Blair 1997), "compassionate" (Blair 1997), "confident" (Blair 1997), "bold" (Blair 2002), "hardworking" (Blair 2004), possessing both "common sense" (Blair 2002) and "generosity" (Blair 2004b; 2005b). Blair then argues that these shared character traits unite the British people in common "values":

"We believe in social justice ... we believe in tolerance and respect, in strong communities standing by and standing up for the weak, the sick, the helpless... In our values, we are united. And the British people share these values" (Blair 2005a).

Blair also emphasises these shared values in parliament, "this is a tolerant country" (HC Deb 29 February 2003, vol. 398 c870), and an election campaign speech, "we are a tolerant, decent nation" (2005b). Blair rejects the ethnically constructed 'us' of the race relations narrative and replaces it with a vision of a multicultural Britain united by common traits and values. Blair's 'Third Way' agenda therefore involves an act of 'social constructivism': an attempt to impose 'unity and coherence' upon a disparate British culture (Benhabib 2002:5).

Having rhetorically constructed his new 'us,' Blair uses his civic contract to establish a mechanism for consolidating this new identity. Blair's civic contract aimed to construct a new state-citizen relationship, built upon a recognition of mutual "rights and responsibilities" (Blair 1996:viii; 2002; 2004b). As a result of this new civic contract Blair argues that whilst citizens have the "right" to expect the government to provide equal opportunities, they also have a "responsibility" to build "a better future through the hard work and creative power of the free citizen" (Blair 2001). Similarly, whilst the government has a "responsibility" to "stamp out prejudice and discrimination" (Blair 2005a) it also has the "right" to distribute citizenship and its associated rights. Blair's civic contract rests upon:

"An explicit expectation that rights must be balanced by responsibilities ... that there are clear obligations that go alongside British residency and ultimately citizenship ... [to] make a positive contribution to UK society" (Blair 2004b).

Therefore, according to Blair, an individual's entry into the civic contract is earned by their "positive contribution," measured economically through "hard work" and socially through an acceptance and exhibition of the values outlined above. By giving the state the authority to measure that contribution and subsequently distribute citizenship rights, Blair's contract establishes a mechanism for consolidating his new 'us.'

Blair's civic contract is conceptually significant for three reasons. In the first instance it redefines the state sovereignty narrative. Whilst affirming the narrative's foundational principles of territorial jurisdiction and partiality, Blair's civic contract redefines the state-citizen relationship by establishing a new basis for citizenship. Unlike traditional concepts of political membership based upon familial heritage, *jus sanguinis*, or place of birth, *jus soli*, Blair's contract grants the state the authority to distribute citizenship rights based upon the individual's personal contribution to society. Secondly, this civic contract establishes a certain "conditionality" of rights (Morris 2007:54). No longer is the individual conceptualised as a bearer of inalienable rights, he must now earn those rights through his positive contribution to society. Thirdly, it creates a new 'us' and 'them' dichotomy. By establishing contribution as the basis for inclusion, Blair indicates who will be excluded from his civic contract and therefore constructs a new 'them.'

A new 'them'

Blair's civic contract constructs 'us' as the "decent hardworking people of this country" (Blair 2004) who contribute to society. Therefore, through a process of negative identification (Cohen 1994), the 'other' is identified as a non-contributor. This rhetorical dichotomy establishes a new basis for exclusion from the civic contract and its associated rights—the failure to contribute results. Blair argues that this exclusion is 'fair':

"Fairness is about people getting what they deserve – hardworking citizens being supported, whilst those abusing the system being excluded. Fairness is therefore about the government exercising strict controls to make sure that those who seek to abuse the system are excluded"
(Blair 2003).

According to Blair therefore, 'fairness' is about ensuring that contributors are rewarded and non-contributors are excluded, ensuring that only those who accept their "responsibilities" are rewarded with "rights."

This definition of "fairness" is significant because of the way in which it influences Blair's conceptualisation of asylum. Asylum seekers are perceived to violate this concept of 'fairness' by trying to access what they do not deserve and benefit from what they have not contributed to. Arriving at the border without permission and relying upon benefits throughout the refugee determination procedure,⁷ asylum seekers are perceived to demand rights and resources that belong rightfully to citizens. It is this normative violation, rather than the ethnic identity of asylum seekers, that sparks resentment and a "genuine sense of unfairness" (Blair 2001b) in British citizens, as they "feel it's unfair if they have to work hard, but see others getting benefits or help they're not entitled to" (Blair 2005b). This understanding of "fairness" therefore generates the conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as the violator of "fairness." This conceptualisation shapes Blair's rhetoric:

⁷ The Asylum and Immigration Act of 1996 removed the right of asylum seekers to work whilst their status is being determined.

“Concern over asylum and immigration is not about racism. It is about fairness. People want to know that the rules and systems we have in place are fair; fair to hard working taxpayers who deserve to know that others are playing by the rules; fair to those who genuinely need asylum and who use the correct channels; fair to those legitimate migrants who make such a major contribution to our economy” (Blair 2005b).

It also shapes his policy agenda: “it is the Labour party ... that is trying to bring about a fairer, faster and more effective system of immigration and asylum” (HC Deb 20 January 1999, vol. 323 c906); “the new system will be fairer and faster” (HC Deb 16 June 1999, vol. 333 c383).

The exclusionary implications of Blair’s ‘fairness’ are evident in two specific policy areas: welfare and economic migration. As Prime Minister, Blair seeks a “fundamental reform of our welfare state” (Blair 1997). Seeking to create a system effective in “getting people off welfare and into work” (HC Deb 18 June 1997, vol. 296 c315), Blair’s neo-liberal welfare reforms reinforce this distinction between those who contribute and those that do not. Blair’s reformed welfare state rewarded only “hard-working taxpayers” (Blair 2005b) and refused “to pay benefits to those who refuse to work” (Blair 2001). Similar “judgements of worth” (Morris 2007:45) are evident in the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act, which reduced asylum seeker benefits to 70% of the total income support for citizens and section 55 of the 2002 Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act which removed all benefit entitlements from in-country applicants. These welfare restrictions were deemed ‘fair’ because, as non-contributors, asylum seekers were “not legitimate members of the community” and therefore not “legitimate receivers of welfare state benefits” (Geddes 2003:40, also Bloch 2000).

Blair’s idea of ‘fairness’ is also evident in his support for the liberalisation of economic migration, shown in various parliamentary debates (HC Deb 18 June 1997, 24 June 2002, 23 June 2004) and here in his speech to the Confederation of British Industry:

“The UK will continue to welcome migrants who come and contribute the skills we need for a successful economy. But migration is a two-way deal: there are responsibilities as well as rights” (2004b).

Economic migrants are therefore welcomed as long as they accept their moral, social and economic responsibilities by recognising their “obligation to respect our laws ... to reject extremism and intolerance ... to pay taxes and pay your way ... (and) to learn something about the country and culture and language that you are now part of” (Blair 2004b).

Although undoubtedly influenced by powerful and articulate client groups (Freeman 1994; 1995; 2006; Layton-Henry 2004), Blair’s liberalisation of managed migration was also premised upon the recognition that economic migrants could support and uphold, rather than threaten, his vision of civic communitarianism. Whilst his liberal migration policy appears to be an “illogical contradiction” of his restrictive asylum policies, “the opening to skilled migrants is precisely conditioned on the parallel attempt to eliminate uninvited and irregular entries” (Freeman in Cornelius ed. 2004:337). By continually emphasising their contribution to society, Blair establishes the dichotomy of the economically and socially ‘responsible’ migrant and the non-contributing asylum seeker.

It is important to recognise the co-existence of two dichotomies in Blair's rhetoric. Whilst continuing to affirm the dichotomy of genuine and 'bogus' asylum seekers in his parliamentary contributions, this is overshadowed by the dichotomy of contributors and non-contributors that dominates other speeches delivered by Blair. These two dichotomies are based upon differing values of worth and generate different means of distinguishing between those deserving or undeserving of inclusion. Yet in principle these two dichotomies need not be in competition with each other. A fully rational treatment of Blair's rhetoric could relate the two dichotomies, establishing four separate categories: contributing genuine asylum seeker, non-contributing genuine asylum seeker, contributing bogus asylum seeker (in other circumstances considered a desirable economic migrant) and non-contributing bogus asylum seeker. These four categories would create a new basis for inclusion, mitigating the exclusion of genuine asylum seekers as a result of their inability to contribute.

However, this interaction does not take place in Blair's rhetoric and the two dichotomies continue to co-exist. Foregrounding the dichotomy of contributor and non-contributor, the conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as a violator of 'fairness' dominates.⁸ The exclusionary implications of this conceptualisation are clear in New Labour's asylum policies, as they restricted the access and rights of all asylum seekers even before the genuine or 'bogus' nature of their claim had been determined. The dichotomy of contributor and non-contributor inevitably creates an asylum system premised upon exclusion and an assumption of guilt, a system justified by Blair's civic contract and its concept of conditional rights earned through an acceptance of economic and social responsibility.

4 Conclusion

The British asylum debate of the last two decades has been dominated by three conceptualisations of the asylum seeker: the 'bogus' asylum seeker, the asylum seeker as a threat to state sovereignty and the asylum seeker as a threat to race relations. These conceptualisations have helped to generate the three narratives which have framed elite discussions of asylum, identified and labelled in the course of my analysis as 'bogus' asylum seekers, state sovereignty and race relations. The rhetorical analysis conducted of Blair's parliamentary contributions found that the emphasis and content of his narrative interactions changed substantively following his election as Prime Minister in 1997. Pre-1997 Blair focused on deconstructing the 'bogus' narrative whilst post-1997 his primary concern was to affirm the sovereignty narrative. This narrative shift reveals that his

⁸ It could be argued that this new dichotomy is merely a reinvention of the race relations narrative, couched in more acceptable language. However, the fact that this dichotomy provides the foundation for Blair's wider political agenda, including his domestic welfare reforms, would appear to negate this argument.

election prompted a discursive renegotiation of the normative tension at the heart of the liberal democratic state: a downplaying of the norm of universal rights and an emphasis of the norm of state sovereignty.

Yet whilst Blair interacted with the three dominant asylum narratives, he also went on to significantly redefine them. These narrative redefinitions can however only be understood in the context of Blair's wider political agenda: his 'Third Way' and the civic contract of 'rights and responsibilities' upon which it was based. In the first instance, this civic contract prompted Blair to redefine the race relations narrative. Deconstructing the racial categories upon which this narrative rests, Blair went on to construct rhetorically a new 'us': a multicultural Britain identified by its shared traits and values. Secondly, this civic contract prompted Blair to redefine the state sovereignty narrative, granting the state the authority to distribute citizenship rights based not upon heritage or place of birth, but upon the individual's social and economic contribution.

These two narrative redefinitions constructed a new rhetorical dichotomy of contributor and non-contributor and therefore established a new conceptual basis for exclusion. Blair argued that it is 'fair' that non-contributors are excluded from his civic contract, as only those that recognise their civic responsibilities should be granted their civic rights. This concept of 'fairness' is significant because of the way in which it influenced Blair's conceptualisation of asylum: asylum seekers were seen to violate 'fairness' by trying to access and benefit from what they, as non-contributors, did not deserve. It was this perceived normative violation that justified the exclusion of asylum seekers and provided the impetus for New Labour's restrictionist policies.

The exclusionary implications of Blair's new conceptual framework were clearly evident in both his welfare reforms and economic migration policies. Blair's understanding of 'fairness' enabled him to not only reform the domestic welfare system, but to also justify restricting asylum seeker access to welfare support. Although Blair welcomed economic migrants, the fact that he did so on the basis of their economic contribution merely served to consolidate the dichotomy between contributors and non-contributors, between contributing economic migrants and non-contributing asylum seekers.

An interaction between the traditional genuine-bogus dichotomy, which continued to exist in Blair's rhetoric, and the new contributor–non-contributor dichotomy might have helped to mitigate this restrictionist impulse. Creating space for the genuine yet non-contributing asylum seeker, this interaction would have allowed Blair to develop a more nuanced rhetorical framework. However, the fact that Blair allowed these two dichotomies to co-exist independently sustained the conceptualisation of the asylum seeker as the violator of 'fairness' and consolidated the justificatory framework of New Labour's exclusionary policies.

In the course of this paper we have seen the way in which elite conceptualisations and narratives influence the content of asylum policies. Blair successfully deconstructed and reconstructed traditional asylum narratives in order to justify restrictionist policies whilst

avoiding a racial discourse. If future governments want to justify less restrictionist policies or contemplate more radical reform of the British asylum system, they will need to redefine the narratives once again. This paper could provide a launching-off point for such work, revealing the way in which current narratives have been constructed and how they might thus be deconstructed. Certainly the contributor—non-contributor dichotomy will need to be replaced or at least refined in order to recognise that the contribution of asylum seekers may lie only in the future. If this conceptual shift proves too much to ask of British elites, then at the very least a discursive rebalancing of the norms of universal rights and state sovereignty will be necessary in order to challenge the foundations of current British restrictionism.

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