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## ‘Economic migrants’, ‘criminal smugglers’ and ‘a burden’: How people seeking asylum were portrayed in political and media discourse during pivotal moments in UK asylum policy and law 1999-2022

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### Abstract

This project is an innovative piece of research which uses a timeline approach to analyse UK asylum policy from 1999-2022. The overall aim of the project is to understand how people seeking asylum have been represented throughout the development of UK asylum policy during this period. The enactment of the Nationality and Borders Act in 2022 inspired this project as it is momentous and has sparked outrage whilst questioning the UK's commitment to international law. Initially, wider attitudes towards migration and debates in the discourse around refugee protection were also alluded to, in order to provide some context and understanding to increasingly restrictive asylum policy in the UK. Also, to understand the development of UK asylum policy and law from 1999-2022, chapter 1 identifies five pivotal moments throughout this time period. The surrounding political and media discourse during these pivotal moments is then analysed to understand how people seeking asylum have been portrayed. Eleven codes were identified and split into three frameworks, people seeking asylum as: unacceptable, acceptable, and a political matter. Critical discourse analysis is then applied to gain a deeper understanding of each code and the language used. It is concluded that UK asylum policy and law has taken a ‘drip-drip’ approach to reduce the rights of people seeking asylum, with the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act laying the foundations. The portrayal of people seeking asylum in political and media discourse during these pivotal moments mirrors the wider arguments surrounding refugee protection today, with the themes of threat and binaries remaining at the forefront.

**Keywords** UK, asylum policy, critical discourse, media, politics

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## 1. Introduction

This paper will explore how people seeking asylum have been portrayed in political and media discourse throughout pivotal moments of UK asylum policy from 1999-2022. Before beginning to describe the research and its wider context, a note on definitions; throughout this project, people will be referred to using the definitions below:

**Person(s) seeking asylum** *'referring to a person who has applied for Refugee Status or a complementary international protection status and has not yet received a final decision on their claim.'*<sup>1</sup>

**Person(s) with Refugee Status according to the 1951 Convention** *'someone who is unable or unwilling to return to their country of origin owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion.'*<sup>2</sup>

### 1.1 Introduction

According to UNHCR, 108.4 million people are currently forcibly displaced from their homes across the globe with an additional 62.5 million people displaced within their own country.<sup>3</sup> In the UK, statistics show that in the last 12 months there have been 78,768 applications made for asylum<sup>4</sup> whilst data from the end of 2022 estimates there are 231,597 people who have been granted Refugee Status living in the UK.<sup>5</sup> It is pertinent to highlight that this year the UK has a backlog of asylum claims which are still waiting for an initial decision, currently standing at 136,779.<sup>6</sup>

In comparing the statistics of those displaced worldwide to the number of applications received by the UK, it is clear that the UK is not a top-hosting country, yet this record-breaking backlog of asylum claims evidences a system that is struggling to cope. The knock-on effect of this ever-increasing backlog means it is not unusual for people seeking asylum to be waiting years for a final decision on their claim, a situation which has unfortunately been worsened by Covid-19.<sup>7</sup> The impact of this long waiting period and insecurity on people's physical and mental health is devastating, leaving some people with suicidal thoughts.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, the combination of Covid-19, an ever-increasing backlog and inability to secure housing has meant thousands of people seeking asylum have been accommodated in hotels across the country, which has left people feeling isolated and unable to integrate into the wider community.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, at policy level the UK has consistently congratulated itself for its *'proud history'* of welcoming those who flee persecution.<sup>10</sup> Such declarations seem contrary to the impacts outlined above and the asylum policies and law that have been implemented by the UK government; especially one of the most recent pieces of legislation, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. This policy has sparked interest because it initiated unprecedented change to the UK's asylum system with a focus on ending *'illegal'* entry.<sup>11</sup> One of the most prominent amendments under the act is that the means in which someone travels to the UK will

1 UNHCR, 'Master Glossary of Terms' (*unhcr.org*) <<https://www.unhcr.org/glossary/>> accessed 4 October 2022

2 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137 (Refugee Convention) art 1A(2)

3 UNHCR 'Refugee Data Finder' (*unhcr.org*, 2023) <<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/>> accessed 10 October 2023

4 The Refugee Council, 'Top facts from the latest statistics on refugees and people seeking asylum' (*refugeecouncil.org*, 2023) <<https://www.refugeecouncil.org.uk/information/refugee-asylum-facts/top-10-facts-about-refugees-and-people-seeking-asylum/>> accessed 10 October 2023

5 UNHCR, 'Asylum in the UK' (*unhcr.org*, 2022) <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/asylum-uk#:~:text=How%20many%20refugees%20are%20there,increase%20from%20the%20previous%20year.> > accessed 10 October 2023

6 The Refugee Council, 'Top facts from the latest statistics on refugees and people seeking asylum' (N 4)

7 The Refugee Council, 'Top facts from the latest statistics on refugees and people seeking asylum' (N 4)

8 Andy Hewett, 'Living in Limbo: A decade of delays in the UK asylum system' (The Refugee Council, July 2021)

9 The Refugee Council, 'Lives on Hold: Experiences of people living in hotel asylum accommodation. A follow-up report' (The Refugee Council, July 2022)

10 Refugee Action, 'The UK has a proud future of welcoming refugees' (14 January 2021) <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rA1Ae4Ed-ArI>> accessed 18<sup>th</sup> February 2023

11 Secretary of State for the Home Department, New Plan for Immigration (Cp 412, 2021)

affect their claim to asylum and subsequent rights, even if granted a positive decision.<sup>12</sup> This drastic change has led to questions about the UK's commitment to international refugee law.

## 1.2 Research questions

The overall aim of this project is to answer the overarching research question: how have people seeking asylum been portrayed in political and media discourse throughout the development of UK asylum policy? To answer this, the following sub-questions have also been set:

- What are the pivotal moments in UK asylum policy during the period 1999-2022?
- Are there any patterns in how people seeking asylum are portrayed during these pivotal moments?

The motivations for this project are linked to the passing of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 as it is a momentous moment for UK asylum policy. It has sparked outrage amongst prominent groups historically supporting people seeking asylum and/or with Refugee Status, including Amnesty International<sup>13</sup> and even attracted a response from UNHCR.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, the current state of the UK's asylum system which has been described above, suggests the system requires attention.

This project is innovative because most other works have focused on a specific time in asylum policy, whereas this project aims to take this a step further by analysing policy changes over a twenty-year period. Taking this approach will provide a thorough timeline of asylum policy whilst pinpointing pivotal moments, and still allowing for deep analysis. It is assumed that the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022 did not happen instantaneously; using a timeline permits an examination of what this dissertation predicts to be UK asylum policy which incrementally becomes more restrictive.

## 1.3 UK Asylum Policy

Analysis of UK asylum policy and its subsequent effects on people seeking asylum is well researched. In the 1990s, asylum started to become an important topic in the political sphere, which is also when the number of people arriving in the UK to seek asylum began to increase.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, this period dictates a new era of attempting to restrict access to Refugee Status and reducing welfare benefits to those seeking asylum.<sup>16</sup> Referring to the view of Sales, it is established that the UK has preferred to 'see refugee flows as temporary' which has led to a greater focus upon asylum policy as opposed to the resettlement or integration of people with Refugee Status.<sup>17</sup>

The UK has been long criticised for its asylum policies. For example, organisations like Refugee Action have campaigned against financial support rates provided to people seeking asylum, stating that people were struggling to meet even their basic needs and many people have struggled to access adequately nutritious food.<sup>18</sup> As demonstrated above, organisations like the Refugee Council have created reports to illustrate the harmful impacts of the lengthy application process<sup>19</sup> and housing people in hotels.<sup>20</sup> The most recent criticisms were initiated by the introduction of the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, with organisations like Amnesty International openly illustrating potential shortcomings: it will not deter entry into the UK or save public funds and doesn't evidence a commitment to international law.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International, 'Nationality & Borders Bill: the truth behind the claims' (*amnesty.org.uk*, 2022) <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/nationality-borders-bill-truth-behind-claims>> accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR, 'UNHCR legal observations Nationality and Borders Bill - Oct 2021' (*unhcr.org*, 2021) <<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/media/unhcr-legal-observations-nationality-and-borders-bill-oct-2021>> accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023

<sup>15</sup> Alice Bloch, 'A New Era or More of the Same? Asylum Policy in the UK' (2000) 13 *Journal of Refugee Studies* 29

<sup>16</sup> Rosemary Sales, 'The Deserving and the Undeserving? Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Welfare in Britain' (2002) 22 *CSP: Critical Social Policy: a Journal of Socialist Theory and Practice in Social Welfare* 456

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 462

<sup>18</sup> Refugee Action, 'Briefing on Refugee Action's Bring Back Dignity Campaign' (Refugee Action, April 2014)

<sup>19</sup> Andy Hewett, 'Living in Limbo: A decade of delays in the UK asylum system' (N 8)

<sup>20</sup> The Refugee Council, 'Lives on Hold: Experiences of people living in hotel asylum accommodation. A follow-up report' (N 9)

<sup>21</sup> Amnesty International, 'Nationality & Borders Bill: the truth behind the claims' (*amnesty.org.uk*, 2022) <<https://www.amnesty.org.uk/nationality-borders-bill-truth-behind-claims>> accessed 4 October 2022

Even though this project will focus specifically on the UK, it is helpful to provide some wider context. The UK is not an anomaly when it comes to introducing harsher asylum policy, as Western States in general have become fixated on migration and controlling its inward flow.<sup>22</sup> In particular, Western States have responded to contemporary flows of people seeking refuge by attempting to block their arrival in the first instance: with stringent visa requirements, creating fines for carriers who have transported people without the correct documentation, and intercepting people at sea, amongst other examples.<sup>23</sup> As pointed out by Gammeltoft-Hansen and Hathaway, states are not necessarily obstructing access to all migrants, but those who are not invited and are seeking protection are not usually greeted with warm hospitality.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, when people do manage to claim asylum in the West, even though states in the European Union must provide basic levels of housing and maintenance support during a person's claim, the quality of such support differs across the members.<sup>25</sup> Thus, it is significant to note that the UK appears to align with wider Western trends.

Harsh policies towards asylum in the West (Europe, North America and Australasia) seem unsurprising once public attitudes have been considered. For instance, data from Ipsos MORI in 2016 shows that nearly half of their 16,000 respondents from 22 countries felt like immigration was altering their country in ways they didn't agree with.<sup>26</sup> Looking at the UK in particular, The Migration Observatory claims that hostility towards immigration is part of a longstanding history and 2015-2016 marked a time where it became the public's most predominant issue to affect the country.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps this longstanding hostility towards immigration is partly due to some of UK's public attitudes towards migration, who specifically consider it a threat, whether that be towards Britons way of life, towards British safety and security, and/or by using British public services.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note that migration is not homogenous<sup>29</sup>. Yet, the prevalence of labels and subsequent binaries appears to be a consistent theme when analysing the wider discourse on refugee protection. For example, a binary conception of 'migration' often results in its categorization as either 'forced migration' or 'voluntary migration'.<sup>30</sup> Other potential binaries include the categorization of migrants as either potential recipients of refugee protection or economic migrants and also internally displaced people and those who cross borders<sup>31</sup>. What is pertinent about the prevalence of binaries is that they can cause certain groups to be deemed as more warranting of protection than others.<sup>32</sup> In addition, by categorising people on the move in this way, people are given labels that can often lead to a loss of their identity and only being recognised through their migration status.<sup>33</sup> Although binaries can appear clear-cut in theory, in practice they fail to acknowledge the complicated reasons behind migration and how such reasons can be intertwined between forced and voluntary.<sup>34</sup>

22 Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen & James Hathaway, 'Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence.' (2015) 52 *The Columbia Journal of Transnational Law* 235

23 Randall Hansen, 'State Controls: Borders, Refugees and Citizenship' in: E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long & N. Sigona, *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

24 Thomas Gammeltoft-Hansen & James Hathaway, 'Non-Refoulement in a World of Cooperative Deterrence.' (N 22)

25 Randall Hansen, 'State Controls: Borders, Refugees and Citizenship' (N 23)

26 Helen Dempster and Karen Hargrave, 'Understanding public attitudes towards refugees and migrants' (2017) Overseas Development Institute's Forum on Refugee and Migration Policy Initiative 1

27 Scott Blinder and Lindsay Richards, 'UK Public Opinion towards Immigration: Overall Attitudes and Level of Concern' (*migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk*, 20 Jan 2020) <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/resources/briefings/uk-public-opinion-toward-immigration-overall-attitudes-and-level-of-concern/>> accessed 4<sup>th</sup> February 2023

28 Kerrie Holloway, Christopher Smart, Diego Faures, Claire Kumar and Amy Leach, 'Public narratives and attitudes towards refugees and other migrants: UK country profile' (2021) ODI Country Study 1

29 IOM, 'Migration seen through a diversity lens' (*rosanjose.iom.int*, 2023) <https://rosanjose.iom.int/en/blogs/migration-seen-through-diversity-lens> accessed 10 October 2023

30 Ibrahim Awad and Usha Natarajan, 'Migration Myths and the Global South' (*thecairoreview.com*, 2018) <<https://www.thecairoreview.com/essays/migration-myths-and-the-global-south/>> accessed 7<sup>th</sup> February 2023

31 Ibid

32 Kristin Yarris & Heide Castañeda, 'Special Issue Discourses of Displacement and Deservingness: Interrogating Distinctions between 'Economic' and 'Forced' Migration' (2015) 53 *International Migration* 64

33 Amnesty International, 'Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Migrants' (*amnesty.org*, N.D.) <<https://www.amnesty.org/en/what-we-do/refugees-asylum-seekers-and-migrants/>> accessed 10<sup>th</sup> September 2023

34 Jørgen Carling, 'Refugees are also migrants. All migrants matter.' (*blogs.law.ox.ac.uk*, 3 September 2015) <<https://blogs.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2015/09/refugees-are-also>> accessed 18 February 2023

## 1.4 UK Asylum Policy 1999-2022

In the period 1999-2022, the UK made multiple changes to its asylum policy. This research project focuses on five pieces of legislation which are considered particularly pivotal:

- Immigration and Asylum Act 1999<sup>35</sup>
- Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002<sup>36</sup>
- Immigration Act 2014<sup>37</sup>
- European Union Referendum Act 2015<sup>38</sup>
- Nationality and Borders Act 2022<sup>39</sup>

How each act impacts people seeking asylum is unique in its own right. Yet, there are some consistent themes throughout the eras. People seeking asylum are continually othered, leading to their separation from the rest of society alongside a distinct focus on binaries. For example, in 1999, the Immigration and Asylum Act created the social group of people seeking asylum as distinct from people with Refugee Status.<sup>40</sup> The Act transferred the responsibility to house and financially support people seeking asylum from Local Authorities to the Home Office with accommodation provided on a no-choice basis.<sup>41</sup>

Next, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 aimed to separate people seeking asylum even further by proposing accommodation centres that would host people during their asylum claim, as set out in the Home Office White Paper from 2002.<sup>42</sup> These plans were met with hostility from the towns which had been selected as potential sites, arguing they could not host large numbers of people who would be residing at such centres.<sup>43</sup> Human Rights Watch on the other hand, were more concerned with whether the centres were being built for administrative ease rather than out of protection needs.<sup>44</sup>

Subsequently, the Immigration Act 2014 saw an effort from the Conservatives to reduce overall migration to the UK and to penalise those living here illegally, creating what was known as the 'hostile environment'.<sup>45</sup> This term is mostly accepted to be used to identify policy intended to make it progressively more difficult for migrants, including irregular (or so-called 'illegal') migrants, to live in the UK.<sup>46</sup> The act arguably expanded separation from the rest of UK society, by trying to restrict people's access to healthcare, work, education and even bank accounts, depending on their immigration status.<sup>47</sup> What is pertinent about this era, is that the concept of othering becomes part of everyday life, as service providers in the above-mentioned sectors are required to conduct immigration checks before providing a service.<sup>48</sup>

The EU referendum is pertinent to this project's discussion due to the conflation of 'Brexit' with the 'refugee crisis'.<sup>49</sup> In particular, the Leave campaign utilized immigration as an argument in favour of leaving the EU, with the slogan '*take back control*' commonly used across media channels and in public debate.<sup>50</sup> It could be said this focus on immigration ahead of the Brexit vote created an anti-immigrant sentiment that was

35 Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

36 Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002

37 Immigration Act 2014

38 European Union Referendum Act 2015

39 Nationality and Borders Act 2022

40 Rosemary Sales, 'The Deserving and the Undeserving? Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Welfare in Britain' (N 16)

41 The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999

42 Secretary of State for the Home Department, *Secure Borders, Safe Haven Integration with Diversity in Modern Britain* (CM 5387, 2002)

43 Phil Hubbard, 'Inappropriate and incongruous': opposition to asylum centres in the English countryside.' (2005) 21 *Journal of Rural Studies* 3

44 Human Rights Watch, 'Human Rights Watch Briefing Paper Commentary on the United Kingdom Home Office White Paper: *Secure Borders, Safe Haven: Integration with Diversity in Modern Europe*' (*hrw.org*, 2002) <<https://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounder/eca/uk-briefing.htm>> accessed 13 August 2022

45 Colin Yeo, 'Briefing: what is the hostile environment, where does it come from, who does it affect?' (*freemovement.org*, 2018) <[https://freemovement.org.uk/briefing-what-is-the-hostile-environment-where-does-it-come-from-who-does-it-affect/#The\\_modern\\_hostile\\_environment\\_the\\_Immigration\\_Acts\\_2014\\_and\\_2016%20](https://freemovement.org.uk/briefing-what-is-the-hostile-environment-where-does-it-come-from-who-does-it-affect/#The_modern_hostile_environment_the_Immigration_Acts_2014_and_2016%20)> accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2022

46 JCWI, 'The Hostile Environment Explained' (*jcwi.org.uk*, N.D.) <<https://www.jcwi.org.uk/the-hostile-environment-explained>> accessed 19<sup>th</sup> August 2022

47 Colin Yeo, 'Briefing: what is the hostile environment, where does it come from, who does it affect?' (N 45)

48 Ibid

49 Simon Goodman, & Amrita Narang, 'Sad day for the UK': The linking of debates about settling refugee children in the UK with Brexit on an anti-immigrant news website.' (2019) 49 *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 1161

50 Stuart Gietel-Basten, 'Why Brexit? The Toxic Mix of Immigration and Austerity.' (2016) 42 *Population and Development Review*, 673, 673

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strong enough to pave the way for stricter asylum policy in the years to come.

In the most recent policy change, the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, the role of binaries is evident because the Act is underpinned by deterring '*illegal*' migration.<sup>51</sup> In its policy statement, the Nationality and Borders Act outlined a two-tier approach between those who arrive legally versus illegally: the latter will receive a '*temporary protection status*' with fewer rights upon a successful asylum claim, it will only last for 30 months with less access to entitlements such as family reunification.<sup>52</sup>

This combination of othering, separation, and binaries has perhaps created a '*perfect storm*' to justify asylum policy which has only become increasingly restrictive within the UK from 1999-2022. The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 stands out as it arguably laid the foundations for everything that has since come, by initially restricting the rights of people seeking asylum in the UK, starting with a denial of financial and housing entitlements. Whilst the hostile environment and Brexit vote illustrates that wider legal and political change also has an impact on those seeking asylum. The next section of this paper provides more detail on the research methods and analysis used for this project.

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51 Secretary of State for the Home Department, New Plan for Immigration (N 11)

52 Ibid

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Introduction

This chapter will explore the research approach taken to answer the overarching question ‘*how have people seeking asylum been portrayed in political and media discourse throughout the development of UK asylum policy?*’ It will outline the overall research approach, the sampling method, the coding process, critical discourse analysis, and any ethical considerations.

### 2.2 Research approach

This research project has taken a qualitative research approach, comprised of desk-based research and examination of secondary data, to understand how people seeking asylum have been portrayed in political and media discourse throughout the development of UK asylum policy. The data from qualitative research will present clarifications in a sequential order, aiding this research project which focused on a timeline of events.<sup>53</sup> Firstly, pivotal moments in UK asylum policy from 1999-2022 were identified using the analysis of secondary research. The second part of this study uses critical discourse analysis to identify how people seeking asylum have been depicted in political and media discourse throughout these pivotal moments in UK asylum policy.

Evidently, the examination of documents has been instrumental for this research project. Such analysis is justified since documents have no fixed meaning, which allows for varied understandings and potential new insights.<sup>54</sup> The documents for this project have been accessed via the University of London’s online library, which has retrieved both academic and newspaper articles. Parliamentary debates were accessed online using Hansard whilst websites, including that of the UK government and relevant NGOs, were used to access particular reports and policies.

### 2.3 Sampling

To obtain the documents for this research project a purposive sampling method was applied. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method and involves an assessment from the researcher as to whether a sample meets the requirements of the study.<sup>55</sup> As it has not been possible to complete an exhaustive study, purposive sampling meant the documents examined were related to the research within certain timeframes that were specific to each era.<sup>56</sup>

Parliamentary debates were examined on the day a government White Paper was released and prior to the enactment of a new act. The same timeframe was applied when researching media discourse, however, media articles yielded more results in comparison. Boolean operators were used to condense searches with terms like ‘*asylum AND UK*’, as well as searching the names of each act. In addition to a variety of newspapers being used, the researcher attempted to minimise bias by choosing media articles based upon their relevance to the topic and judged as being a standard representation of that time.<sup>57</sup>

Purposive sampling usually corresponds to a smaller sample size and is not considered to generate a representative sample.<sup>58</sup> This study has a relatively small sample size for each period yet is arguably comprehensive in that it addresses a large time scale overall. Moreover, the small sample size has allowed for deeper

<sup>53</sup> David Gray, *Doing research in the real world* (3rd Edition, Sage 2014) 602

<sup>54</sup> Aimee Grant, *Doing Excellent Social Research with Documents : Practical Examples and Guidance for Qualitative Researchers* (1st Edition, Routledge 2018) 28

<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Brown Urban & Bradley Matthews van Eeden-Moorefield, *Designing and proposing your research project*. (American Psychological Association, 2018) 61

<sup>56</sup> Aimee Grant (N 54) 38; Henry, G., *Practical Sampling* in L. Bickman & D. Rog, *The SAGE handbook of applied social research methods* (Sage Publications, 2008) 77

<sup>57</sup> Nicholas Walliman, *Social Research Methods* (1st Edition, Sage Publications 2006) 75

<sup>58</sup> Tim May, *Social Research: Issues, Methods and Processes* (4th Edition, Open University Press, 2011) 100; Jennifer Brown Urban & Bradley Matthews van Eeden-Moorefield (N 55)



analysis.

## 2.4 Coding

The coding process was completed manually, without any pre-determined codes, allowing for inductive analysis.<sup>59</sup> In line with Braun and Clarke's six-step guide to thematic analysis, first the documents were read to familiarise the researcher with their contents before identifying initial codes.<sup>60</sup> Next, tables were used<sup>61</sup> to link codes that had common qualities.<sup>62</sup> This created overarching frameworks, which were then reviewed to ensure the coherence of codes.<sup>63</sup> Following this, the overarching frameworks were titled to pinpoint what was noteworthy about each one before moving onto the next stage and applying critical discourse analysis.<sup>64</sup>

## 2.5 Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis is a unique form of discourse analysis owing to its spotlight on power whilst also binding itself to a sense of equality.<sup>65</sup> Although there is no universal definition of critical discourse analysis,<sup>66</sup> Widdowson describes it as '*linguistics with a conscience and a cause*'.<sup>67</sup> Critical discourse analysis recognises that documents are influential in initiating or strengthening societal beliefs.<sup>68</sup> Distinctively, within critical discourse analysis, language is analysed innovatively to gain a deeper understanding of its possible meaning.<sup>69</sup> These understandings are compounded by considering *who* is behind such language<sup>70</sup>.

In addition, as critical discourse analysis generally concentrates on power structures and those who wield such power,<sup>71</sup> it is an applicable methodology for the analysis of the documents due to the project's focus on dominant discourse like politics and media. Attributable to the powerful spaces that political debates operate in, and their relation to the media, it is possible that politicians not only speak for themselves but for wider groups in society.<sup>72</sup>

As a methodology, critical discourse analysis has its limitations. It is still open to bias, and it is possible for researchers to manage texts and align them with their own discourse.<sup>73</sup> At the same time, critical discourse analysis has been praised for urging researchers to connect with their own beliefs and observe reflexivity during their research.<sup>74</sup> Thus, since the researcher is passionate about the rights of people seeking asylum and with Refugee Status it might impact the interpretation of results.<sup>75</sup>

Overall, critical discourse analysis is an appropriate analytical approach for this research project due to its commitment to equality, its openness to creativity and recognising the power behind the words, which are

59 Virginia Braun & Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (2006) *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3 77

60 Virginia Bruan & Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (N 59)

61 Ibid 19

62 Johnny Saldana, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Sage Publications, 2013) 9

63 Virginia Bruan & Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (N 59)

64 Virginia Bruan & Victoria Clarke, 'Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology' (N 59) 22

65 Paul Baker, et al., A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press (2008) 19 *Discourse & Society* 273; H G Widdowson, *The Theory and Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis* in: Clive Seale, *Social Research Methods* (Routledge, 2004) 366

66 Aimee Grant, *Doing Excellent Social Research with Documents* (N 54) 87

67 H G Widdowson, *The Theory and Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis* (N 65) 366

68 Aimee Grant, *Doing Excellent Social Research with Documents* (N 54) 87

69 Tian Lirong, *Critical Discourse Analysis of Political Discourse--A Case Study of Trump's TV Speech* (2021) 11 *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*

70 Paul Baker et al, A useful methodological synergy? Combining critical discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to examine discourses of refugees and asylum seekers in the UK press (N 65)

71 Tuen A. van Dijk, *Principles of critical discourse analysis* (1993) 4 *Discourse & Society* 249

72 Ibid

73 H G Widdowson, *The Theory and Practice of Critical Discourse Analysis* (N 65) 368

74 Melissa Johnson & Ethan McLean, *Discourse Analysis* [2020] *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* 377

75 Roni Berger, *Now I see it, now I don't: researcher's position and reflexivity in qualitative research* (2013) 15 *Qualitative Research* 219

all necessary to understanding how people seeking asylum are represented throughout the eras in British political and media discourses.

## 2.6 Ethical considerations

Ensuring the research methods of this project support the University of London's ethical guidance is of the upmost importance.

The information collected from documents was all accessible for public use. Throughout the project, researchers have been credited for their work and any sensitive information that was included has continued to safeguard the anonymity of previous participants.<sup>76</sup> Similarly, this project investigated UK parliamentary debates that were accessed via Hansard, which is covered by the Open Parliament Licence, and states that documents can be used '*freely and flexibly*'.<sup>77</sup>

Next, the results of the analysis will be displayed to show the patterns identified in how people seeking asylum were represented in political and media discourse during each pivotal moment in UK asylum policy.

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<sup>76</sup> University of St Andrews 'Secondary Data' (*St-Andrews.ac.uk*, 2021) <https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/research/integrity-ethics/humans/ethical-guidance/secondary-data/> accessed 18 September 2021.

<sup>77</sup> UK Parliament 'Parliamentary Copyright' (*Parliament.uk*, 2021) Available at: <https://www.parliament.uk/site-information/copyright-parliament/> accessed 18 September 2021.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter will present the results of coding political and media discourse during each pivotal moment in UK asylum policy between 1999-2022. There will be a brief description of the codes and their subsequent frameworks with a focus on which codes yielded the highest results.

#### 3.2 Results

The tables below display the results after coding the documents collected for each era. Following the coding process, it became clear that certain codes were related and belonged in a similar category. Therefore, the codes were split into three overarching frameworks: people seeking asylum as unacceptable, acceptable, or a political matter.

Each number represents how many times that particular code was applied to documents in the respective time period. In order to establish any patterns or anomalies, the eras have remained separate for every code, with a total number of instances shown in the final column. Regarding the first two tables, A/S is shorthand for people seeking asylum.

Results show that throughout the years, ‘*people seeking asylum as abusive*’ was the highest occurring code in total, followed by people ‘*seeking asylum as human*’ and then a ‘*political failure*’. It was unsurprising to discover that the most frequently occurring code would be inherently negative in its portrayal of people seeking asylum. Nonetheless, it was encouraging to find that ‘*people seeking asylum as human*’ was the second most frequently occurring code. The code ‘*political failure*’ was also surprisingly frequent as the researcher expected it to be another code from the framework ‘*people seeking asylum as unacceptable*’. It is interesting to note that the top three codes have all derived from a separate overarching framework.

Before discussing each code any further, it is significant to draw attention to a code that remained absent throughout the eras but was acknowledged by the researcher: the voices of people seeking asylum and or with Refugee Status. It is telling that a topic which has clearly been high on the political agenda for the last two decades is without the voices of the very people it is concerned with. Even within political discourse when MPs reflected on case studies of people seeking asylum in their constituencies, there is no guarantee such examples are genuine or are without any modifications to fit MP’s intended message. Equally, media discourse tended to mirror this approach and the voices of people seeking asylum or with Refugee Status were missing.

#### 3.3 Tables of results

People seeking asylum as unacceptable						
	Immigration and Asylum Act 1999	Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002	Immigration Act 2014	The EU Referendum 2016	Nationality and Borders Act 2022	Total
A/S as abusive	68	21	40	25	53	207
A/S as invasive	36	40	22	46	10	154
A/S as illegal	1	6	17	36	79	139

A/S as a strain	54	24	7	17	16	118
A/S as desperate	2	6	10	19	18	58

Table 1: People seeking asylum as unacceptable

People seeking asylum as acceptable						
	Immigration and Asylum Act 1999	Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002	Immigration Act 2014	The EU Referendum 2016	Nationality and Borders Act 2022	Total
A/S as human	33	64	20	17	43	177
A/S as genuine	19	7	13	22	35	96
A/S as wanted	2	4	7	4	4	21

Table 2: People seeking asylum as acceptable

People seeking asylum as a political matter						
	Immigration and Asylum Act 1999	Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002	Immigration Act 2014	The EU Referendum 2016	Nationality and Borders Act 2022	Total
Political failure	40	28	35	23	42	168
Avoidance of responsibility-sharing	4	10	8	13	18	53
Reference to international obligations	3	5	5	1	18	32

Table 3: People seeking asylum as a political matter

The following section will use critical discourse analysis to elaborate further on the results and meanings of each code.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter will discuss each code that was drawn from analysing political and media discourse during the pivotal moments in UK asylum policy from 1999-2022. This chapter mirrors the structure of the results tables with codes divided according to their framework: people seeking asylum as unacceptable, people seeking asylum as acceptable and people seeking asylum as a political matter. Each code will be discussed using critical discourse analysis and uses certain extracts from the documents analysed.

### 4.2 People seeking asylum as unacceptable

#### 4.2.1 People seeking asylum as abusive

*'The problem is that they (genuine asylum seekers) are in a state of limbo because the system is clogged with bogus asylum seekers.'* Mr. Gerald Kaufman<sup>78</sup>

Throughout the years, it became clear that people seeking asylum were thought of as a dichotomy: bogus or genuine. As demonstrated by the statement above, those considered bogus were seen as negatively impacting the ability of the UK to protect people with genuine asylum claims. It is worth discussing what constitutes a bogus asylum application and this research found that within the political and media discourse they were generally considered as those based on economic migration:

*'Many claims for asylum are made by those seeking to migrate for purely economic reasons'* Mr Jack Straw<sup>79</sup>

These assertions are clearly based on a distinct difference between people who are forced to migrate in comparison to those who choose to move for *'economic reasons'* and appear out-of-date with recent scholars who argue the reasons behind migration are more complex and intertwined.<sup>80</sup> In political debates, sweeping statements like the above, were often accompanied by Home Office statistics, for example, Simon Danczuk asserted that 57% of asylum claims were refused at the first instance between 2012-2013.<sup>81</sup> Interestingly, the quality of decision-making was rarely questioned and the conflation between bogus applications and economic migrants was the preferred approach. Unsurprisingly, this conflation was not contained within the House of Commons and media outlets also followed suit:

*'Six out of 10 are rejected as economic migrants'*<sup>82</sup>

*'[...] Economic migrants from Albania, Vietnam and elsewhere, smugglers are offering a "guaranteed" arrival in Britain'*<sup>83</sup>

*'Stop young, male economic migrants elbowing their way to the front of the queue.'*<sup>84</sup>

This point adds further evidence to Clement's work that found the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act justified stricter asylum support policies to deter economic migration and thus abuse of the system.<sup>85</sup>

*'[...] Bearing down on the so-called pull factors in the present system which, unquestionably, have attracted*

78 HC Deb 9 November 1999, vol 337, col 996W

79 HC Deb 27 July 1998, vol 317, col 96W

80 Stephan Scheel & Vicki Squire, Forced Migrants as 'Illegal' Migrants in E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long & N. Sigona *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies* (Oxford University Press, 2014)

81 HC Deb 3 May 2016, vol 609, col 33W

82 David Taylor 'Black market jobs racket to be broken' Evening Standard (London, 7 Feb 2002)

83 Rebecca Camber 'Migrants smuggled to UK for just P5100; Revealed: British trafficking gangs make millions from refugee crisis' Daily Mail (London, 13 April 2016)

84 Harry Cole and Jonathan Reilly 'Priti: Illegals to go within 24hrs; The Home Sec's pledge to Sun UK boot on arrival traffickers face life legal lefties ruined' The Sun (London, 24 March 2021)

85 L. Clements, 'Changing the Support System for Asylum Seekers' (2001) 23 *Journal of Social Welfare and Family Law* 173

*many asylum seekers with unfounded claims to this country'* Mr Jack Straw<sup>86</sup>

Ahead of the introduction of the Immigration Act 2014, the theme of abuse spanned beyond the asylum system as people were considered to be exploiting public services.<sup>87</sup> In House of Commons debates, it was deemed as unjust that people could access the NHS and housing if they were without a legal status.<sup>88</sup> As demonstrated earlier, the remedy was to limit people's access to such services in the first instance,<sup>89</sup> a pattern that carried through to the EU referendum with MPs such as James Brokenshire wishing to '*send a clear message to those who seek to exploit the system*'.<sup>90</sup>

The findings showed that, more recently, the notion of 'abuse' was taken a step further, with asylum seekers being considered abusive for simply travelling to the UK. There was a noticeable emphasis on claiming asylum in the first country you arrive in:

*'If someone enters the UK illegally from a safe country such as France, where they should and could have claimed asylum, they are not seeking refuge from persecution, as is the intended purpose of the asylum system'* Priti Patel<sup>91</sup>

This blanket assumption of European countries as '*safe*' left little room to explore why someone would not claim asylum in the first country or for the reasons behind someone's asylum claim. Rather, people were branded as '*asylum shoppers*' choosing the UK as their '*preferred destination*'.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4.2.2 People seeking asylum as invasive

People seeking asylum were usually referred to as invasive, whether that be represented by the number of people arriving in the UK, into local communities, or even as a demographic that were viewed as uncontrollable. The noticeable peaks in usage of these labels were in 2002 and ahead of the 2016 EU referendum.

In 2002, there was particular concern over the accommodation centres the government proposed to build and their impact on the rural communities, which caught much of the media's attention:

*'Plans to create "asylum villages" in the countryside'*<sup>93</sup>

As asserted by Hubbard, media discourse showed the idea was not welcomed by local communities, with many seeing the arrival of people seeking asylum as a risk to a peace.<sup>94</sup>

*'[...] The local postmaster and owner of Bishampton's general store, Steve Osborne, said: 'If 70 blokes from the centre came walking down the street, I'd want to shut up shop. I can't afford to lose 10 pounds worth of stock, let alone more.'*<sup>95</sup>

In addition, a belief that people seeking asylum were a demographic that needed to be controlled stemmed from the House of Commons in the early 2000s, with the then Home Secretary making comments like:

*'They [people seeking asylum] will not be imprisoned or confined, but they will be expected—as will the reporting centres—to ensure that we know where they are.'* David Blunkett<sup>96</sup>

This theme of control then spanned across the eras of this study with a particular media headline standing out in 2014:

86 HC Deb 11 September 1999, vol 337, col 982

87 HC Deb 22 October 2013, vol 569, col 158W

88 Ibid

89 JCWI, 'The Hostile Environment Explained' (N 46)

90 HC Deb (N 81) col 43W

91 HC Deb 24 March 2021, vol 691, col 921W

92 Harry Cole and Jonathan Reilly 'Priti: Illegals to go within 24hrs' (N 84)

93 Martin Bright and Paul Harris 'Asylum centre plans spark protests: Campaigners oppose Home Office choice of remote rural locations' The Observer (London, 10<sup>th</sup> February 2002)

94 Phil Hubbard, "Inappropriate and incongruous": opposition to asylum centres in the English countryside.' (N 43)

95 Martin Bright and Paul Harris 'Asylum centre plans spark protests: Campaigners oppose Home Office choice of remote rural locations' (N 93)

96 HC Deb 7 February 2002, vol 379, col 1038W

*'Italy's threat to let African refugees into rest of the EU'*<sup>97</sup>

The headline possibly infers the uncontrollable nature of people seeking asylum if *'let loose'*. The use of the word *'threat'* is pertinent and perhaps goes as far as to say Italy is using this demographic as a weapon. There is also no doubt that the headline has played on racial differences to ignite reactions from its readers.

Reference to the EU only increased ahead of the 2016 referendum. In accordance with Gietel-Basten, the numbers of people arriving in the EU and Britain was at the centre of much of the debate and of Vote Leave's campaign (one of the organisations that campaigned to leave the EU).<sup>98</sup> The overall sense was that staying within the EU left Britain vulnerable to uncontrollable migration, another key point found as part of the Leave campaign,<sup>99</sup> This message became clearer within media discourse:

*'First ever quantitative survey in the Jungle reveals thousands of refugees still trying to reach the UK'*<sup>100</sup>

*'[...] When we asked them what they needed, like blankets or health care, they just said, "open the border"'*<sup>101</sup>

*'Germany admitted that half of the one million refugees who have entered the country have vanished [...] The EU's free movement rules leave Britain wide open too.'*<sup>102</sup>

Arguably, such stories were designed to reinforce a belief that people seeking asylum are going to take over Britain. Although it may sound extreme, there is an overarching sense within this theme of war, with people seeking asylum becoming an increasingly larger enemy that must be met with tough control. This specific discourse around *'asylum seekers as invasive'* contributes to wider discussions of securitisation theory, primarily the Copenhagen School's conception of securitisation.<sup>103</sup> In addition, it adds to Innes research into British media discourse and representations of people seeking asylum, who described it as an *'irony'* that people seeking asylum are thought of as a threat rather than by their vulnerabilities.<sup>104</sup>

#### 4.2.3 People seeking asylum as illegal

Illegality and the conflation of people seeking asylum with criminality was a common trend in the latter eras. There was a specific spike around the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act. Interestingly, there is a steady incline of this code throughout the years, starting from just one reference in 1999 to 79 instances by 2022.

Although the 2002 Nationality Immigration and Asylum Act had limited reference to illegality, the description of accommodation centres was striking. In fact, they perhaps represented a conflation with criminality as the descriptions appeared to reflect that of prisons:

*'Residents will have to sleep at the centres or lose all state support, but will be free to leave the centres during the day. The new camps will provide health, education and recreation facilities as well as dormitories.'*<sup>105</sup>

Furthermore, illegal migration was a central issue surrounding the 2014 Immigration Act and the hostile environment.<sup>106</sup> As well as MPs' wishes to make life difficult in the UK for those without status, there was concern about criminals living in the country:

*'Under the current system, the winners are foreign criminals [...] and the losers are the victims of these crimes'*

97 *'Italy's threat to let African refugees into rest of the EU'* The Daily Mail (London, 15<sup>th</sup> May 2014)

98 Stuart Gietel-Basten, 'Why Brexit? The Toxic Mix of Immigration and Austerity.' (N 50)

99 Ibid

100 Lizzie Dearden, 'Calais crisis: First ever quantitative survey in the Jungle reveals thousands of refugees still trying to reach the UK' The Independent (London, 21<sup>st</sup> May 2016)

101 Ibid

102 James Slack, "'STAGGERING' NUMBER OF EUROPEAN JIHADISTS: EU's own agency admits terrorists are exploiting migrant crisis as illegal border crossings hit record 1.82m' The Daily Mail (London, 6<sup>th</sup> April 2016)

103 Barry Buzan, Ole Wæver and Jaap de Wilde, 'Security: A New Framework for Analysis' (Lyne Rienner, 1998)

104 Alexandria Innes, 'When the Threatened Become the Threat: The Construction of Asylum Seekers in British Media Narratives' (2010) 24 International Relations 456

105 Martin Bright and Paul Harris 'Asylum centre plans spark protests: Campaigners oppose Home Office choice of remote rural locations' (N 93)

106 Colin Yeo, 'Briefing: what is the hostile environment, where does it come from, who does it affect?' (N 39)

and the law-abiding public' Theresa May<sup>107</sup>

Similar to other codes, the above statement represents a feeling of 'otherness' to separate 'criminals' from 'law-abiding public'. This is arguably extended by describing criminals as 'winners' and British public as 'losers'. Likewise, the word 'criminal' arguably became an umbrella term in this era, and it was not always clear who constituted a criminal and whether this included people seeking asylum. It seems unfair if people seeking asylum were included in this label whilst the use of 'winner' to describe someone forcibly displaced is simply insulting.

The focus on illegal migration was extended in 2022 when it became clear that people seeking asylum were considered criminals:

*'Our system is collapsing under the pressures of parallel illegal routes to asylum, facilitated by criminal smugglers'* Priti Patel<sup>108</sup>

The above statement appears juxtaposed, especially describing routes to asylum as 'illegal' whilst the Refugee Convention stipulates that, subject to specified conditions, people should not be penalised for entering a country illegally to claim asylum.<sup>109</sup> Not only are people seeking asylum described as criminals by MPs, but the Nationality and Borders Act treats them as such:

*'Whether people enter the UK legally or illegally will have an impact on how their asylum claim progresses and on their status in the UK if that claim is successful'* Priti Patel<sup>110</sup>

This code represents a loss of what it is to seek asylum. No longer are people considered to be fleeing persecution in UK political and media discourse, rather this study has shown that to be an asylum seeker is to be a criminal. The way people seeking asylum are described as criminals and then treated as such, links to the work of Scheel and Squire, who argue that by deeming people seeking asylum as criminals actively causes them to become criminals.<sup>111</sup> Furthermore, the multifaceted nature of what could cause someone to be displaced from their home seems to be non-existent in 2022, especially by those in power:

*'Priti Patel defends 'inhumane' overhaul of UK asylum system; Migrants who arrive in UK by illegal routes will be indefinitely liable for removal even if granted asylum.'*<sup>112</sup>

#### 4.2.4 People seeking asylum as a strain

Reference to people seeking asylum as a strain, whether that be financial or on the community, became noticeable throughout the time periods and was a focal point for the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act. As discussions began around supporting people seeking asylum separately from mainstream benefits, their impact on Local Authorities, particularly in London and Kent, were often used as a justification by the then Home Secretary:

*'The pressure on housing and other social services both from asylum seekers and those housed by Local Authorities in those areas is intense and unsustainable. It results in problems for London Local Authorities, and indeed for Kent Local Authorities, in discharging their duties towards local homeless households under homelessness legislation.'* Jack Straw<sup>113</sup>

Despite potentially addressing the concerns over strains on particular Local Authorities, the cost of the new support system was questioned by some MPs:

*'Even at that, however, the Home Secretary plans to spend almost £1 billion over the next three years on support of asylum seekers. That is almost four times what he plans to spend on his new crime programme, and it is al-*

107 HC Deb, (N 87) col 162W

108 HC Deb (N 91) col 921W

109 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) 189 UNTS 137 (Refugee Convention) art 33

110 HC Deb (N 91) col 922W

111 Stephan Scheel & Vicki Squire, Forced Migrants as 'Illegal' Migrants (N 80)

112 Sarah Marsh, 'Priti Patel defends 'inhumane' overhaul of UK asylum system; Migrants who arrive in UK by illegal routes will be indefinitely liable for removal even if granted asylum.' The Guardian (London, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2021)

113 HC Deb (N 78) col 979W



*most as much as total extra spending on the police during the same period. It must be sensible to reduce that bill radically, and to divert the money to better purposes.* Norman Fowler<sup>114</sup>

Such responses leave people seeking asylum in a lose-lose situation. Either way, they are considered as too much of a financial strain, whether that be on the Local Authority or central government. Equally, both quotes suggest that attention or funds should be directed elsewhere, which insinuates people seeking asylum are less deserving of such attention. Deservingness possibly links to the previous code, '*people seeking asylum as abusive*', in that this demographic are less deserving of support because their claims are unfounded, adding to arguments made by Sales and discussions on 'deservingness' made earlier in this paper.<sup>115</sup>

Additionally, the creation of accommodation centres under the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act in 2002 sparked a sense of strain on local communities, especially within media discourse:

*'Locals say they are only just recovering from the crisis and have told the Home Office that they should not be expected to integrate hundreds of refugees into their tiny Midlands farming community.'*<sup>116</sup>

The contrasting choice of words like '*hundreds*', '*tiny*', and '*community*' leads to the plans sounding almost impossible and over-bearing. Yet, there is little consideration of the needs of people seeking asylum or what they can bring to local communities. Rather, media discourse is centred on the potential strain. As above, people seeking asylum are almost left with nowhere to go: they are too much of a strain on existing boroughs yet not welcomed by other local communities. This point is strengthened by Mynott's criticisms of the dispersal policy, which stated that it led to the '*dumping*' of people seeking asylum in areas that were ill-equipped to offer the necessary support.<sup>117</sup>

In the latter periods, reference to people seeking asylum as a strain decreased but was still present, evidenced by quotes below:

*'Rochdale has been dumped with an unequal share of the burden'* Simon Danczuk<sup>118</sup>

*'Currently 42,000 failed asylum seekers are supported at taxpayers' expense.'*<sup>119</sup>

Evidently, the way people seeking asylum are represented as a financial strain on Local Authorities and within the community remained pertinent throughout the years, especially coupled with the representation that people seeking asylum are abusive. Yet, this discussion has added another dimension by demonstrating that people seeking asylum are seen as a strain no matter the circumstance, whether that be an existing strain, or a potential strain brought about by a new policy change.

#### 4.2.5 People seeking asylum as desperate

The theme of people seeking asylum as desperate became obvious in the later years of the periods analysed, especially during the 2016 EU referendum and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, which will be the focal point of this section. The code '*desperate*' is situated in the overall framework of '*people seeking asylum as unacceptable*' because to some extent it appears to degrade rather than come from a place of concern for people's circumstances. For example, this code leaves a feeling of disdain towards those who are seeking asylum in the UK. This was particularly evident in media discourse:

*'The price depends on the weather, with some criminals offering cut-price PS80 deals for dangerous sea crossings in bad weather from Turkey to Greece.'*<sup>120</sup>

114 HC Deb (N 79) col 39W

115 Rosemary Sales, 'The Deserving and the Undeserving? Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Welfare in Britain' (N 16)

116 Martin Bright and Paul Harris 'Asylum centre plans spark protests: Campaigners oppose Home Office choice of remote rural locations' (N 93)

117 Ed Mynott, 'Analysing the Creation of Apartheid for Asylum Seekers in the UK' (2000) 3 *Community, Work & Family*, 318

118 HC Deb (N 81) col 34W

119 D. Barrett, 'Priti: I'll turn back boats: Tough plan to smash gangs hitting Channel ...but France will have to agree to take arrivals' *The Daily Mail* (London, 25 March 2021)

120 Rebecca Camber 'Migrants smuggled to UK for just PS100; Revealed: British trafficking gangs make millions from refugee crisis' (N 83)

*'Asylum seekers have been run over, hit by trains and drowned in desperate attempts to swim to England'*<sup>121</sup>

The above quotations are similar in their reflection of the desperation of people to travel to Europe and the UK. Considering the time period, and the conflation of the *'refugee crisis'* with Brexit,<sup>122</sup> the motivations behind such portrayals must be questioned. This is especially true when compiled with the Vote Leave campaign's emphasis on regaining control and images of people queuing at borders.<sup>123</sup>

Firstly, by describing the costs of travel as *'deals'* it links to quotes used earlier in this chapter such as *'asylum shoppers'*,<sup>124</sup> which insinuates people have a choice in their migratory journey and are making false claims. Equally, these descriptions potentially contribute to a feeling of *'otherness'*, the situations described seem so distant from the lives of people reading such articles. These findings show that the concept of *'otherness'* is intended to degrade people seeking asylum rather than ignite sympathy for their circumstances.

Conversely, whilst announcing initial plans of the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act, the then Home Secretary illustrated desperation as way to justify or gain support:

*'[...] Because while people are dying we have a responsibility to act. People are dying at sea, in lorries and in shipping containers.'* Priti Patel<sup>125</sup>

Whilst at surface level, it would appear these statements represent a feeling of concern, it was decided to consider such statements with a negative connotation of desperation because of the wider context of the Nationality and Borders Act. It seemed contradictory to consider such statements as caring when the same Home Secretary has initiated a policy which includes *how* someone arrives at the UK affects their claim to asylum.<sup>126</sup> The need to be critical of similar statements became more evident with further contributions from other MPs:

*'The most obvious example of that unfairness is the exploitation of people who are paying human traffickers just to be pushed out into the channel in a dinghy, particularly when they are coming from a safe country.'* Ben Bradley<sup>127</sup>

Again, although this statement initially represents concern, the reference to a *'safe country'* potentially reflects an underlying view that, despite people's desperation, it is unacceptable for them to make a claim for asylum in the UK. This point ties to an earlier code, *'people seeking asylum as abusive'*, where it was clarified that within political discourse this demographic had unfounded claims simply by just travelling to the UK.

Thus, the code desperation is arguably multifaceted and includes degradation to cause a feeling of *'otherness'*. At the same time the code desperation required a critical perspective to unveil deeper meanings behind initially *'caring'* comments.

## 4.3 People seeking asylum as acceptable

### 4.3.1 People seeking asylum as human

Next, codes which considered people seeking asylum as *'acceptable'* will be discussed starting with people seeking asylum as *'human'*. The code that identified people seeking asylum as humans and/or acknowledged their human needs continued throughout each era. It is certainly encouraging that it was a code with one of the highest instances, especially within the framework of *'people seeking asylum as acceptable'*. Notably, this code was more prevalent in political discourse than media discourse throughout each time period. One statement from a debate in 2002 specifically stood out:

121 Lizzie Dearden, 'Calais crisis: First ever quantitative survey in the Jungle reveals thousands of refugees still trying to reach the UK' (N 100)

122 Simon Goodman, & Amrita Narang, "Sad day for the UK": The linking of debates about settling refugee children in the UK with Brexit on an anti-immigrant news website.' (N 49)

123 Ibid

124 Harry Cole and Jonathan Reilly 'Priti: Illegals to go within 24hrs; The Home Sec's pledge to Sun UK boot on arrival traffickers face life legal lefties ruined' (N 84)

125 HC Deb (N 91) Col 921W

126 Secretary of State for the Home Department, New Plan for Immigration (N 11)

127 HC Deb (N 91) Col 932W

*'Asylum seekers are not a homogeneous group.'* Neil Gerrard<sup>128</sup>

After analysing each document, the above quotation remains prominent because it appeared to be one of the only times individualities are recognised. Yet despite the fact that Refugee Status Determination is intended to be an individualised process,<sup>129</sup> this research has shown that individuality has been lost within political and media discourse. Comments like the above are significant and hopefully reminded people in powerful positions of the humanity of who they are debating about. This particular point is reinforced by an extract during a debate on the 2014 Immigration Act:

*'The problem is that the impact on individual lives gets lost in the grandstanding of headlines. When immigration is all about reducing numbers on a spreadsheet to meet an arbitrary cap or creating arbitrary political dividing lines and traps for opponents to fall into, the subjects of the legislation—the human beings at the centre of it—are somehow invisible.'* Sarah Teather<sup>130</sup>

As with the above, drawing attention to human needs was generally used to oppose new plans or to criticise existing asylum policy:

*'In other words, the dispersal of asylum seekers is not matched by appropriate support—whether healthcare, schooling or language classes—leaving asylum seekers isolated and vulnerable.'* Keir Starmer<sup>131</sup>

This comment elucidates the multitude of needs which should be met for people seeking asylum. Capturing these everyday needs possibly makes people seeking asylum appear more relatable to others in society. Equally, the choice of adjectives like *'isolated'* and *'vulnerable'* foster empathy and counteracts the emotions ignited by earlier codes, such as people seeking asylum as abusive or invasive.

Conversely, the humanity of people seeking asylum has been drawn upon to justify policy changes including the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act. For instance, Priti Patel<sup>132</sup> states:

*'I simply say that while people are dying, we must act to deter these journeys.'*

Similar to discussions on the code *'people seeking asylum as desperate'*, whilst the above statement initially appears as caring, the policies surrounding it requires a more critical stance to be taken. Undoubtedly, the human cost of seeking asylum has been recognised, yet has been met with defence: the word *'deter'* insinuates a misplaced focus. Rather than act to support people, the Act must be to discourage such journeys. Moreover, the Nationality and Borders Act received critical responses from humanitarian organisations like UNHCR.<sup>133</sup> It then seems contradictory for the then Home Secretary to justify such policy whilst drawing on humanitarian grounds.

Thus, people seeking asylum as humans with needs is a generally positive code which perhaps breaks down barriers of *'othering'*, which previous codes have built. However, the use of this code to justify recent changes to UK asylum policy in political discourse illuminates an ulterior motive.

#### 4.3.2 People seeking asylum as genuine

The code *'genuine'* is the second half of the dichotomy identified earlier in this chapter, directly contrasting the former code of *'abusive'*. It remained fairly constant throughout the time periods with more reference in 1999, 2016 and 2022. Within political discourse, it remained apparent that MPs wished for the UK to be considered a safe place for *'genuine'* people seeking asylum. How *'genuine'* people seeking asylum were illustrated ahead of the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999 to justify the dispersal policy was particularly interesting:

*'[...] And I do not believe that the genuine asylum seeker who is fleeing persecution will mind where in the coun-*

128 HC Deb 7 November 2002, vol 392, col 459W

129 UNHCR 'Handbook on Procedures and Criteria for Determining Refugee Status under the 1951 Convention and the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees' HCR/IP/4/Eng/REV.1 (1992)

130 HC Deb (N 87) Col 185W

131 HC Deb (N 81) Col 41W

132 HC Deb (N 91) Col 923W

133 UNHCR 'UNHCR Observations on the Nationality and Borders Bill, Bill 141, 2021-22' ([unhcr.org](https://www.unhcr.org/uk/615ff04d4.pdf), October 2021) <<https://www.unhcr.org/uk/615ff04d4.pdf>> accessed 23 August 2022

*try he is properly accommodated for the period while his claim is processed.'* Jack Straw<sup>134</sup>

Such comments seek to present people seeking asylum as passive. Conversely, it can also have the opposite effect and make it seem absurd for somebody to have a preference over where they are accommodated. These findings show, although they might be considered extreme, that the voice of people seeking asylum is eroded. It makes it acceptable for people to be without an opinion and rather reinforces people seeking asylum as a demographic that can be controlled and thus deemed acceptable.

Moreover, case studies were frequently used by MPs to exemplify the need to protect 'genuine' people seeking asylum:

*'[...] She had been persecuted because of her Ahmadiyya Muslim faith, and I believed it to be an open-and-shut case. She had been subjected to awful abuse in Pakistan. She was twice violently kidnapped for refusing to abandon her religion [...] I would always be prepared to support that kind of asylum case.'* Simon Danczuk<sup>135</sup>

What is striking about this case study is the extremity of it. As discussed in the previous chapter, the voices of people seeking asylum or with Refugee Status were generally absent in political discourse unless case studies were called upon by MPs. It is not immediately clear what constitutes 'that kind of asylum case', but the way it is described as 'open-and-shut' possibly indicates genuine cases as only those with such abhorrent circumstances and a reluctance to consider any complex claims.

Once the government announced the White Paper for the Nationality and Borders Act 2022, 'genuine' people seeking asylum became synonymous with those who arrived 'legally':

*'First, we will continue to provide safe refuge to those in need, strengthening support for those arriving through safe and legal routes'* Priti Patel<sup>136</sup>

This research considers that people with genuine asylum claims are those who are invited to seek refuge in the UK. For those who arrive 'illegally' perhaps by boat, lorry or shipping container,<sup>137</sup> they in fact arrive spontaneously, without an invite and thus cannot be considered genuine. This observation is reinforced by media discourse:

*'But asylum seekers who use new safe and legal routes through aid agencies and charities will be welcomed with resettlement packages and given priority.'*<sup>138</sup>

Overall, the genuine person seeking asylum is someone who is passive, has been subject to extreme persecution and someone who has been invited to seek sanctuary in the UK.

#### 4.3.3 People seeking asylum as wanted

People seeking asylum as wanted was the code which appeared the least frequently. However, it felt important to recognise positive comments made by MPs about the contributions of migrants, because the discourse has predominantly been negative:

*'It is particularly important for us to acknowledge the huge contribution that immigrants and the descendants have made to our society in all walks of life.'* Jack Straw<sup>139</sup>

Within media discourse it became noticeable that people seeking asylum were considered wanted if they could add something or 'fill in the gap':

*'[...] Many of them are useful, often doing the jobs that the indigenous don't want to do, particularly at a time of nearly full employment.'*<sup>140</sup>

134 HC Deb (N 78) Col 982W

135 HC Deb (N 81) Col 33W

136 HC Deb (N 91) Col 922W

137 Secretary of State for the Home Department, New Plan for Immigration (N 11)

138 Harry Cole and Jonathan Reilly 'Priti: Illegals to go within 24hrs; The Home Sec's pledge to Sun UK boot on arrival traffickers face life legal lefties ruined' (N 84)

139 HC Deb (N 79) Col 35W

140 The Daily Telegraph, 'Blunkett shows initiative', The Daily Telegraph (London, 8 February 2002)

It could be argued the above quotation again adds to 'othering' by portraying people who seek asylum or migrants as different for taking jobs that British people will not. This adds another layer to the concept of othering and separation that was referred to earlier in this paper, which focused on people seeking asylum being physically separated from society.<sup>141</sup>

Even though the quote may appear to praise the benefits of migration, such comments perhaps have the power to undermine the contributions of people seeking asylum and other people who migrate, by creating an image that these demographics are *only* capable of such jobs.

Nonetheless, a particular extract from a debate in 2016 reflects the overall contribution people seeking asylum add to local communities:

*'The asylum seeker community has done nothing but benefit the society and culture of my city. We must recognise the huge contribution that people make to Scotland and the United Kingdom when they come here from all over the world for a wide range of reasons.'* Patrick Grady<sup>142</sup>

Considering this was the year of the EU referendum, a time where migration was high on the agenda,<sup>143</sup> it is significant to recognise such positive remarks. It is equally significant to point out that the above statement is not solely focused on the economic benefits or job opportunities people seeking asylum can bring. Arguably, by seeing beyond economic benefits it certainly adds more humanity to perceptions of people seeking asylum.

People seeking asylum were generally considered wanted with a principal focus on their economic contributions and job prospects. Despite this, their wide contributions were rightly acknowledged by some MPs at a time that was particularly significant.

## 4.4 People seeking asylum as a political matter

### 4.4.1 Political failure

Often, policies related to people seeking asylum were criticised in political discourse, whether that policy be incoming or historic. As a result, most debates included MPs insulting past or current decisions of their opposition and thus it seemed necessary to code this pattern. The peaks of people seeking asylum being considered as political failures were in 1999, 2014 and 2022. Labour inherited a backlog of asylum claims<sup>144</sup> and ahead of their reform to asylum support in 1999, the then Home Secretary referred to the current arrangements at that time:

*'Yet the system has been subject to piecemeal and ill-considered changes that have failed to tackle the real problems.'* Jack Straw<sup>145</sup>

*'The system in place is simply not up to the job. We need radical change to deliver a modern and efficient system that is fairer, faster and firmer.'* Jack Straw<sup>146</sup>

Such critiques of the opposition became standard throughout the eras and transpired into media discourse:

*'The Immigration Act continues the work that this Government has done since 2010, reforming our immigration system and clearing up the mess we inherited from the last Labour Government.'*<sup>147</sup>

The above quote perhaps reinforces findings that during this time period, the Conservatives were fixated

141 Lydia Morris, 'New Labour's Community of Rights: Welfare, Immigration and Asylum.' (2007) 36 *Journal of social policy* 39

142 HC Deb (N 81) Col 37W

143 Matthew Goodwin & Caitlin Milazzo, 'Taking back control? Investigating the role of immigration in the 2016 vote for Brexit' (2017) 19 *British journal of politics & international relations* 450

144 Dallah Stevens, 'The Immigration and Asylum Act 1999: A Missed Opportunity?' (2001) 64 *The Modern Law Review* 413

145 HC Deb (N 79) Col 35W

146 HC Deb (N 79) Col 38W

147 Mark Harper, 'The Immigration Act received Royal Assent this week. The last few amendments to the text of the Act were agreed by the House of Commons and the House of Lords, allowing the Act to become law before the end of the Parliamentary Session' *The Gloucestershire Citizen* (Gloucestershire, May 14 2014)

on reducing migration into the UK.<sup>148</sup> While debatable, the above quotes also demonstrate that policies designed for people seeking asylum are perhaps made to try and outdo the previous government and the opposition. As a result, it is unlikely the needs of people seeking asylum are at the centre. Instead, people seeking asylum are consistently seen as a ‘mess’ that must be cleared up. Equally, by shifting blame onto the opposition it is possibly a tactic used to lessen pressure from the government in power at the time.

Despite this, in 2021, it was encouraging that MPs debated the mental health of people seeking asylum whilst acknowledging the negative impact of the failing asylum system:

*‘Tragically, the current UK asylum system often exacerbates their suffering, with long waits for asylum decisions, poor accommodation and a ban on working all contributing to this situation.’* Carol Monaghan<sup>149</sup>

This was perhaps ignited by the alarming backlog of asylum claims.<sup>150</sup> What is unique about this debate and the quote is that it evidences a shift in thinking which puts people seeking asylum first. There is still recognition of a failing system, yet people seeking asylum are taking precedence over blaming others. However, this remains the exception to the rule and when the New Plan for Immigration was announced, the then Home Secretary remained committed to ‘*fix our broken system*’, per Priti Patel.<sup>151</sup>

According to these results, political and media discourse has shown that from the late 1990s until now, the asylum system constantly needs fixing. Yet, if people seeking asylum are continually considered a demographic who are shaped by failed policies and the results of other’s failures, it remains unclear how to best meet their needs.

#### 4.4.2 Avoidance of responsibility sharing

The code ‘*avoidance of responsibility sharing*’ represents instances whereby political or media discourse blames other countries for the flow of migration in the UK or fails to recognise that the protection of people seeking asylum may require a collective response. This code peaked within certain eras including the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002, the 2016 EU referendum, and the Nationality and Borders Act 2022. In the political sphere, people who travelled through ‘*safe*’ countries caused concern from the earliest period of this project:

*[...] What my constituents cannot understand is why, at the very least, the Government are not and have not been able for the past year to say simply that, if people arriving in this country have travelled right across Europe, through France, Germany and Belgium, we shall immediately determine that they cannot possibly be asylum seekers, and return them to their country of origin. What is he going to do about it?’* Roger Gale<sup>152</sup>

This extract clearly lacks an understanding of forced migration as a whole and disregards the reasons why people might travel across Europe. For instance, asylum systems in Italy and Greece are under pressures and whilst living in a camp might be physically safe, it is hardly a way to build a life.<sup>153</sup> Moreover, the overall attitude appears to lack any interest in understanding such reasons. This is compounded by the fact the sentence ends with a question that puts an onus on somebody else, leaving little room for self-reflection.

Unsurprisingly, relationships with the EU were key throughout the 2016 referendum. There was a specific focus on the Dublin Convention, which centred its own debate in 2016. The Dublin Convention was created to establish which State will examine an asylum claim and is generally the first country where people seeking asylum have entered the EU.<sup>154</sup> Mostly, MPs critiqued the Dublin Convention and its effectiveness:

*‘Other partners need to fulfil their obligations under Dublin and deal with matters in their countries so that peo-*

148 Colin Yeo, ‘Briefing: what is the hostile environment, where does it come from, who does it affect?’ (N 45)

149 HC Deb 13 April 2021, vol 692, col 59W

150 The Migration Observatory, ‘Asylum backlog hits more than 70,000 despite reduction in asylum applications’ (*migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk*, 2021) <<https://migrationobservatory.ox.ac.uk/press/asylum-backlog-hits-more-than-70000-despite-reduction-in-asylum-applications/>> accessed 23 September 2021

151 HC Deb (N 91) Col 923W

152 HC Deb (N 79) Col 46W

153 Nick Nason, ‘Should refugees claim asylum upon arrival in their first ‘safe’ country?’ (*freemovement.org*, 2017) <<https://freemovement.org.uk/refugees-claim-asylum-upon-arrival-first-safe-country/>> accessed 30 September 2022

154 UNHCR, ‘The Dublin Regulation’ (*unhcr.org*, N.D.) <<https://www.unhcr.org/4a9d13d59.pdf>> accessed 30 September 2022

*ple do not end up coming to Calais seeking to come over to the United Kingdom.'* Keith Vaz<sup>155</sup>

Evidently, this statement immediately disregards the efforts of neighbouring countries, which links to the Leave campaign's focus on the EU not being able to control its borders.<sup>156</sup> At the same time, it reflects the unwillingness of the UK to share the responsibility of protecting people seeking asylum across the EU. Similar to the quote from 1998, the liability seems to be on other countries rather than thinking about a UK response.

Another key aspect of the political and media discourse were certain remarks that insinuated the UK dealt with high numbers of people seeking asylum in comparison to other countries, especially within the EU:

*'Only Germany, Italy, France and Austria received more (asylum applications) than Britain.'*<sup>157</sup>

*'It is not fair on the United Kingdom to take the lion's share of protecting some of the most vulnerable people in our society.'* Shaun Bailey<sup>158</sup>

Both quotes arguably exaggerate the UK's contribution to asylum protection. To describe the UK's efforts as the '*lion's share*' is particularly noticeable and certainly unfounded when analysing statistics: Germany remains one of the world's top-hosting countries.<sup>159</sup> Overall, these findings have revealed that a theme of selfishness runs through this code, whilst people in power misunderstand or possibly refuse to learn more about the topic of forced migration.

#### 4.4.3 Reference to international obligations

Throughout the time periods, reference to international obligations remained minimal, yet there was a noticeable increase in 2022. This code signifies any mention of the UK's international obligations, whether that be the 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 protocol, 1959 UN Declaration of the Rights of the Child or the European Convention on Human Rights. These references possibly indicate recognition that protecting people seeking asylum is a global effort and reframes the focus from only the UK. Similarly, since the 1951 Refugee Convention forms the basis of refugee protection,<sup>160</sup> it was valuable to capture it being mentioned.

Mostly, especially in the earlier years, comments made in regard to international obligations were brief in both political and media discourse:

*'Mr Straw insisted those genuinely fleeing from persecution would be protected, fulfilling the UK's treaty obligations.'*<sup>161</sup>

*'The Bill develops a careful balance between our human rights and convention obligations – which we accept readily and openly'* David Blunkett<sup>162</sup>

Initially, it appears optimistic that both statements display a commitment to the UK's international obligations. Yet, the degree to which commitments are made is debatable. Specifically, the second quote's description of a '*careful balance*' perhaps signals a minimal commitment in order to introduce controversial laws, which seems plausible considering David Blunkett's aim was to introduce separate accommodation centres for people seeking asylum.<sup>163</sup> This might create a knock-on effect for people seeking asylum who are then considered a demographic whereby the bare minimum is sufficient.

Excluding the above, mentions of international obligations were arguably negligible until the White Paper

<sup>155</sup> HC Deb 4 May 2016, vol 609, col 180

<sup>156</sup> William Outhwaite, 'Migration Crisis and "Brexit"', in C. Menjivar, M. Ruiz & I. Ness (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Migration Crises* (Oxford University Press, 2018)

<sup>157</sup> Giles Sheldrick, 'Britain received equivalent of 111 asylum applications a DAY for start of this year' *Express* (online) (London, 16 June 2016)

<sup>158</sup> HC Deb (N 91) Col 926W

<sup>159</sup> UNHCR, 'Refugee Date Finder' (*unhcr.org*, 2022) < <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/> > accessed 19 September 2022

<sup>160</sup> Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (adopted 28 July 1951, entered into force 22 April 1954) (N 2)

<sup>161</sup> Jennifer Veitch, 'Straw to crack down on bogus refugees' *Evening News* (Edinburgh, 27 July 1998)

<sup>162</sup> HC Deb 7 November 2002, vol 392, col 453W

<sup>163</sup> Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002

for the Nationality and Borders Act was first announced. The UK's commitment to international law was questioned multiple times by MPs, specifically in response to the two-tiered approach which treats people seeking asylum differently depending on how they arrive at the UK:

*'Are we or are we not still a signatory to the UN refugee convention? Is the Home Secretary aware of article 31, which prohibits penalising someone for the way in which they reached a country or, for that matter, arriving so-called illegally? Does she know that nowhere in there does it say that someone cannot transit through another country to get here? That was never the intention of the convention, and to say it is simply untrue.'* Anne McLaughlin<sup>164</sup>

The above quote is consistent with findings from organisations like the Bingham Centre, who questioned the legality of the act.<sup>165</sup> If respecting international obligations is considered the basic level of commitment, questioning whether the UK is even adhering to them is significant in itself. This adds to UNHCR's criticism in response to the Act.<sup>166</sup> The last sentence of the above quote possibly reflects a misreading of the Refugee Convention or that it has been morphed into a way suitable to the government's plans. Responses to comments like the above were similar to the following:

*'Our new plan for immigration is in line with our international obligations, including the refugee convention.'* Priti Patel<sup>167</sup>

Such blunt assurances began to lack any compassion. These findings have demonstrated that respect for international obligations is considered as a minimal level of commitment. However, this minimal level began to break down further in latter eras and people seeking asylum might be seen as a demographic undeserving of even this basic commitment.

## 4.5 Conclusion

Overall, this chapter has used critical discourse analysis to investigate how people seeking asylum have been portrayed during the pivotal moments identified in chapter 2 in UK asylum policy from 1999-2022. Each code has demonstrated the multifaceted nature of the portrayal of people seeking asylum whilst also illustrating patterns that have continued throughout the eras. In the framework *'people seeking asylum as unacceptable'* a binary pattern certainly emerged. People seeking asylum are considered as bogus or genuine, illegal or legal, which at times contrasted directly to some of the codes within the framework *'people seeking asylum as acceptable.'* In the final framework *'people seeking asylum as a political matter'*, it was shown that codes were generally plagued by selfishness, with political discourse preferring to blame others, rather than put the needs of people seeking asylum at the forefront.

The next chapter will synthesise these discussions to draw on final conclusions and possible future directions for similar research.

<sup>164</sup> HC Deb (N 91) Col 926W

<sup>165</sup> Ronan Cormacain, 'Nationality and Border Bill: A Rule of Law Analysis of Clauses 9 and 11' (Bingham Centre for the Rule of Law, 2022)

<sup>166</sup> UNHCR 'UNHCR Observations on the Nationality and Borders Bill,' (N 133)

<sup>167</sup> HC Deb (N 91) Col 927W



## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored how people seeking asylum have been portrayed in political and media discourse throughout the development of UK asylum policy, between the years 1999-2022. In chapter 1, the wider attitudes towards asylum in the West were identified, along with some of the broader debates impacting discourse on refugee protection today, including the use of binaries. This helped frame the research and provided some greater understanding as to why UK asylum policy has only become more restrictive in the last two decades. Next, chapter 1 pinpointed pivotal moments of UK asylum policy during the years 1999-2022 to provide structure for the research. It was noted that within this timeframe, the 1999 Immigration and Asylum Act particularly stood out, as it was the first major reform that began to restrict the rights of people seeking asylum, by reducing access to both financial and housing rights.

Critical discourse analysis was then used to investigate how people seeking asylum have been portrayed in political and media discourse during pivotal moments in UK asylum policy from 1999-2022. Details of the overall research approach, the sampling method, critical discourse analysis, and why these were the most appropriate methods for this research were outlined in chapter 3. Ethical considerations also formed part of chapter 3. Then both political and media discourse from each era were analysed and coded to identify relevant themes.

As illustrated using tables in chapter 4, the identified codes were counted for each era as well as providing a total number of occurrences. This provided some quantitative analysis and helped to detect patterns throughout the eras. Eleven codes were identified in total, yet it became apparent that certain codes were connected. Subsequently the codes were split into three separate frameworks as illustrated in the tables: people seeking asylum as unacceptable, people seeking asylum as acceptable and people seeking asylum as a political matter. The top three codes with the highest number of occurrences included '*people seeking asylum as abusive*', '*people seeking asylum as human*' and '*people seeking asylum as a political failure*'. Chapter 4 also identified a code that was absent in the discourse but was easily identifiable and remained constant throughout the eras, the lack of voice from people seeking asylum or with Refugee Status. Chapter 5 then discussed the codes within each framework individually whilst using quotes from relevant documents throughout.

Findings from chapter 4 showed the multifaceted nature of how people seeking asylum have been portrayed during pivotal moments in UK asylum policy. Firstly, the framework '*people seeking asylum as unacceptable*' showed how people seeking asylum have been considered as: abusive, invasive, illegal, a strain, and desperate in political and media discourse throughout the decades. As '*abusive*' was the highest occurring code, highlighting its discussion is noteworthy: it was illustrated how the term has evolved throughout the eras, starting in 1999 as those who were considered economic migrants and were making unfounded asylum claims, to 2022 whereby people were thought of as abusive just for simply travelling to the UK to make a claim for asylum. An interesting pattern also emerged within the codes that illustrated people seeking asylum in political and media discourse as binaries, including '*abusive or genuine*' and '*illegal or legal*'. At points, these binaries directly contrasted with codes from the second framework '*people seeking asylum as acceptable*'.

Under the framework '*people seeking asylum as acceptable*' the codes identified were: human, genuine, and wanted. As '*people seeking asylum as human*' was the code with second highest occurrence, its discussion is pertinent. It was exemplified that at certain points the individuality of people seeking asylum was recognised and usually human needs were mentioned to critique asylum policies. Equally, when such needs were acknowledged it possibly made people seeking asylum more relatable or ignited feelings of empathy. However, in political discourse surrounding the 2022 Nationality and Borders Act, a more critical stance was taken to dissect certain quotes. It was shown that there was a misplaced focus and the needs of people seeking asylum were not actually at the centre, highlighting an ulterior motive. Thus, whilst the code is generally positive, some deeper analysis illustrated a more negative finding.

The final framework '*people seeking asylum as a political matter*' incorporated the codes: political failures, avoidance of responsibility sharing, and reference to international obligations. Attention will be paid to the code '*political failure*' as it had the third highest occurrence. In political discourse in particular, MPs would constantly critique asylum policy throughout the eras. Furthermore, it was then suggested that asylum

policies were made only to outdo previous governments and the opposition whilst shifting blame onto previous governments as to lessen pressures at each respective time period. Conversely, in 2021 a debate on the mental health of people seeking asylum potentially broke this pattern and put people seeking asylum at the centre without blaming others. Overall, the code '*political failure*' proved that over the last two decades the asylum system has consistently needed fixing in political and media discourse, as such, it seems difficult to put the needs of people seeking asylum first if they are seen as a demographic built from failed policies.

All things considered, it became clear that the representations of people seeking asylum throughout the periods appeared consistent with the wider attitudes referenced in chapter 1. In particular, it was noted at the beginning of this paper that hostility towards migration perhaps grew from feelings of threat. The concept of threat was certainly alluded to in some of the codes, especially people seeking asylum as abusive. Similarly, chapter 1 introduced the notion of binaries in the wider discourse of refugee protection. Undeniably, binaries remained a constant throughout the codes identified in this paper, whether people seeking asylum were '*abusive*' or '*genuine*', '*legal*' or '*illegal*'. This research has also added another dimension to understandings of binaries, as seen in the code '*people seeking asylum as wanted*', whereby the contrasts of the economic contributions of people who had sought asylum now working in both the lowest level jobs compared to highest level jobs were referenced.

## 5.1 Future direction

This paper has set the groundwork for future investigations that wish to understand the UK's historical approach to asylum policy and how this had led to the most recent overhaul of the asylum system. When it comes to future research, this could be completed on a wider scale and or by using different research approaches. This could overcome some of the weaknesses of this project, including its small sample size and potential subjectivity. Other approaches could use other empirical methods or conduct primary research to interview policy makers. Such approaches would certainly complement the findings of this project.

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