

Borders, Boats and Barges: A UK Post-Election Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers policy and rhetoric surrounding the United Kingdom's stance on asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. This is considered from a discourse analytic perspective by examining a corpus of data drawn from three sources at critical time points in recent months. One source of data is drawn from the record of a key debate in January 2024 in the House of Commons on the Rwanda Plan Cost and Asylum System. Another data source is the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill itself and explanatory notes, presented in April 2024. The final data source is news media reporting of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants as an issue in the May-through July UK election campaign period and immediately post-election as the new Labour administration took office. The analysis reveals the different political stances taken on the issue of asylum seekers and the ways in which these are bound up with rhetorical constructions of deterrence, human rights, and practicality.

1. Introduction

As is the case with many counties, there is an ongoing political debate in the UK around refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants and migrants. Although these terms have different meanings they can be collectively grouped together in terms of the shorthand reference of 'refugees, asylum seekers, immigrants' (RASIM) who are constructed as 'out-groups' in modern liberal nations is used as a shorthand reference to these groups of people around the has become increasingly charged and heavily politicised. This paper examines the rhetorical nature of the discourse surrounding asylum seekers and undocumented migrants in the six months prior the general election in the UK in July 2024 and the immediate aftermath when a new Labour Government came into power replacing the previous Conservative Party administration. Three associated research questions are addressed as follows: (i) What are the main discursive repertoires deployed in addressing the UK undocumented asylum seeker issue across the political spectrum? (ii) How are these repertoires rhetorically constructed? and (iii) In what ways are these repertoires drawn upon in a distinct or inter-linked manner? The main objectives of the research involved taking a data triangulation approach to these questions through examining (i) key aspects of the rhetorical discourse deployed in parliamentary debate that were indicative of political stances in the run up to the election; (ii) the rhetorical construction of the Rwanda Bill as a contentious piece of legislation in terms of its focus in seeking to curb undocumented migrants through offshore processing, and in particular those arriving in small boats across the English Channel; and (iii) press coverage of during the UK general election period in terms of rhetorical construction based upon newspaper political allegiances. By taking these three sources of data together the analysis focuses on

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both the broad discursive themes to emerge as well as the rhetorical means through which they advanced.

The previous Conservative Government in the UK reached an agreement with the Government of Rwanda whereby some asylum seekers would be transported to that country to have their claims processed. This form of ‘offshore processing’ has been used by other countries, notably Australia (e.g. Freyer & McKay, 2021; Matera et al., 2023; Nethery & Holman, 2016). The agreement with the Rwandan Government was the subject of various legal challenges including an intervention from the European Court of Human Rights. In the UK, the policy was first declared legal by the UK High Court January 2023 but then The Court of Appeal ruled on 29 June 2023 that the plan was unlawful. An appeal to the UK Supreme Court also leads to a further ruling on 15 November 2023 that the policy was unlawful on the grounds of Rwanda was not considered a safe country. The Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Act 2024 overruled the courts' judgments and declared Rwanda a safe country.

However, the Rwanda policy was only one aspect of the UK response to an influx of asylum seekers. Another aspect was the housing of these undocumented migrants in Government facilities, notably the Bibby Stockholm barge. This is a large 220-bedroom three-story engineless barge, moored in Portland in Dorset, was acquired by the UK Government to house up to five hundred male asylum seekers. The stated reason for acquiring the barge was given as an attempt to reduce the costs of housing asylum seekers in hotel accommodation which on the Government's website puts this as almost £6 million per day. Asylum applicants are waiting for the outcome of Home Office decisions on their cases but this can take weeks to months and therefore accommodating such persons is a major concern. The acquisition of the Bibby Stockholm proved a controversial move by the then Conservative Government and became a totemic symbol of either support for, or opposition, to the treatment of undocumented migrants in the UK. This followed the Government's ‘stop the boats’ campaign; one the key planks of its pledges to the country resulting in the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which became law on 20th July 2023. In the Introduction to the Act (paragraph 1, p.1) it states that its purpose is to ‘prevent and deter unlawful migration, and in particular migration by unsafe and illegal routes, by requiring the removal from the United Kingdom of certain persons who enter or arrive in the United Kingdom in breach of immigration control’.

Although the Conservative Party are now out of government in the UK, there is still a concern with asylum seekers risking their lives in small boats crossing the English Channel (López & Ryan, 2023; Parker et al., 2022). The new Labour Government has made clear that there is no short term solution to this problem and that the longer term aim is to tackle the smugglers who facilitate these crossings by seeking to “smash the gangs”. This paper therefore seeks to examine the ways that in which UK has sought to get to tackle the issue of asylum seekers or undocumented migrants and how there is a commonality in the discourse of the two main political parties on the ‘problem’. The paper proceeds by discussing recent UK asylum policy, including the anticipated changes of the new Labour Government. Thereafter, a discursive analysis is presented drawing on three sources of data previously mentioned. The analysis presented demonstrates how both Conservative and Labour politicians draw upon similar discursive constructions that stress deterrence, human rights, and practicality.

2. Asylum Policy in the UK

Recent UK asylum policy has been challenged by the increasing number people entering the UK by with small boat crossings across the English Channel (Davies et al. 2021; Maggs, 2020). As Parker and Cornell (2024) point out, Conservative politicians built a discourse of ‘moral panic’ around this issue with attempts to, in effect, criminalise asylum seekers who make such crossings and arrive through this ‘irregular’ route. Associated with this moral panic has been an emphasis on deterrence as well as seeking to make such persons ineligible for refugee status. The procedure for this process involved seeking to relieve the strain on the UK home-based immigration system through offshore processing. The policy decision to involve Rwanda as an offshore country for these undocumented migrants is representative of a more hostile approach (Goodfellow, 2020; Yeo, 2022) to asylum than hitherto, although the threat of indefinite detention and potential deportation have been an aspect of UK policy for a number of years. The Nationality and Borders Act 2022 and the Illegal Migration Act 2023

formalised this approach, although offshore processing has been used by other countries such as Australia where ‘boat people’ were transferred to processing centres in other island countries within the Pacific region. In the post-Brexit UK context, the offshore processing policy proposed by the then Conservative Government was set within the context of the pro-Brexit claim of the ability of the UK to control its own borders outwith the EU. As will be seen later in the study, the Labour party was critical of this approach but had to be careful to position itself as still operating withing the discourse of “controlling borders”.

The other prominent aspect of UK asylum policy is the holding of asylum seekers in detention centres, the most notable of which has been the Bibby Stockholm barge. As noted above this barge has become a symbol of struggle with regard to political debates about asylum seekers and their treatment once on UK mainland territory. This has centred upon either support of the humanitarian treatment asylum seekers and in opposition to Government policy, or in support of Government policy in seeking to problematise such undocumented migrants in such a way through seeking to use measures of deterrence against them. Given the polarising nature of this debate, there has been extensive news media coverage of issues associated with the barge. In terms of coverage of asylum seekers crossing the English Channel from France in small boats, the focus has been on the dangers of attempting to do so and the lives lost as a result. Although camps such as ‘the jungle’ in Calais (Gatrell, 2019: 374) became a hub for asylum seekers aiming to cross the Channel to the UK this was subsequently demolished in October 2016 (Gatrell, 2019: 443) with the dispersal of refugees across France. However, the UK faces a significant problem with these crossings and according to official statistics, 29,437 persons in 2023 were detected as irregular arrivals in small boats (House of Commons Statistics, 2024).

These migrants require temporary accommodation while their asylum cases are dealt with and, of course, this is where political arguments come into force. The UK government has sought additional contingency forms of accommodation to meet these large numbers of undocumented migrants. This policy has attracted criticism on the grounds that such accommodation is often unsuitable but much of the media and public debate has been driven by a post-Brexit trope of “controlling our borders” (Guma et al., 2024). In this context the UK government adopted a policy of deterrence rather than addressing how to tackle the problem at source or opening legal routes for such migrants (Sparrow, 2022).

The UK general election of July 2024 heralded in a new Labour Government who immediately cancelled the Rwanda offshore processing policy. They also made clear that they would not retain the Bibby Stockholm barge as a government facility for housing undocumented migrants. Instead, a new policy is being developed based on tackling the smuggling gangs through greater police provision and the hiring of specialist staff to pursue smugglers through a new Border Security Command (Labour Party Manifesto, 2024). The Labour Government has argued that the previous Conservative Government’s Rwanda policy was an expensive gimmick that it would fail to deter the increasing small boat English Channel crossings. They have also likewise argued that the Bibby Stockholm barge is expensive and that faster system of processing of asylum claims is required.

3. Media and Political Discourse: The Present Study

The study presented in this article adopts a discourse analytic perspective and takes its steer from previous discourse studies that have examined discursive constructions of migrants in government and media discourses (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2006; Parker, 2019). Although the homogenisation of migrants serves as a totem for the creation of a moral panic (Cohen, 1973) around the issue of migration, the picture is more complex than the static construction of migrants as an out-group in the press. For example, with regard to ‘Brexit’, Morrison (2019) found that after the UK voted to leave the EU there was a shift in the reporting of EU migrants, and particularly from Eastern European accession countries, which began to question the economic cost of leaving. However, this proved a short-term shift in reporting and there was a return to the more familiar tropes of welfare chauvinism and invasion (Balch and Balabanova, 2016) within six months. Therefore, this work points to the multidirectional nature of agenda setting within the press concerning migrants and how public debate can reframe media reporting. Also of interest is the changing nature of the use of metaphors in relation to RASIM in the UK press. Wang (2024) conducted an analysis of metaphors across the political spectrum of UK titles

over a 21-year period (1st January 2000 to 30th December 2020) and found that right-biased newspapers use RASIM metaphors more frequently than those who are left-biased. These coalesce around four main frames: water (e.g., “surge”, “swell”, “tide”), disaster (e.g., “chaos”, “tsunami”, “crush”, enemy (e.g., “army”, “invasion”, “war”) and non-human (e.g., “flock”, “boatload”, “swarm”). In general, the metaphorical characterisation of RASIM has been stigmatizing and dehumanizing and has been more of a common feature of the right-wing press. Water metaphors have become more frequently used by the right-wing press representative over the two-decade period.

A discourse analytic study by Kirkwood (2017) of UK parliamentary debates concerning the 2015-16 refugee ‘crisis’ in Europe demonstrates how politicians draw upon the ‘humanness’ of themselves in a national context (Billig, 1991) to construct a position of moral accountability for both government and nation in providing protection for refugees. A follow-up study by Kirkwood (2019) of the same debate examined how collective identities are constructed through producing a historical narrative in which the discourse of nation is mobilized to both at one and the same time legitimize and criticize political actions. This kind of rhetoric constructs justifications for advocating policy through appealing to consensus in terms of the majority of the public (van Leeuwen, 2008). In similar work, Figgou and Anagnostopoulou (2020) examined debates in the Greek parliament concerning refugees. Politicians on both the government and opposition sides draw upon similar rhetorical discourse to justify their political arguments and criticize those of their opponents with regard to refugees. This was accomplished through arguing in favour of national interest rather than political party allegiances. In this context refugees were positioned as potential threats to society while maintaining a stance of compassion towards their plight as vulnerable persons. Finally, in very recent work by Parker and Connell (2024) that is more directly relevant to the present study examined the ‘Rwanda policy’ and how the then Conservative UK Government sought to justify the policy and how this was countered by the Labour Opposition. A discourse analysis of the debate on the presentation of the Government statement on “Global Migration Challenge” from the 19th April 2022 identified three discursive repertoires drawn upon by politicians on opposing sides that was used to both justify and resist the Rwanda policy. These discursive repertoires centred on safety of Rwanda, the deterrence of asylum seeker smugglers, and public concerns around asylum seekers. The authors argue that despite the polarisation of debate politicians from both sides drew upon similar discursive devices to justify and oppose this policy.

These studies attest to the importance of examining the ways in which discursive constructions of migration and asylum can at one and the same time permit rhetorical moves that include as well as exclude refugees and asylum seekers. However, while these discursive similarities may be prevalent, consideration also needs to be given to the strategic nature of political discourse and the ways in which rhetorical force is applied to arguments where politicians or the news media consider they have purchase on an issue in line with their respective publics. In line with this focus, the present study also employs a discourse analytic perspective with the aim of examining how both the prior Conservative administration and new Labour Government discourse on asylum seekers and migration deploy particular strategic discourses to ‘win’ the argument. This also comes through in media reporting where both the left and right-leaning press report on government policy. The study therefore takes into account how the public debate on the asylum seeker issue impacts on political discourse in terms of seeking to offer up policy solutions or critiques as a means of addressing public concerns in terms of vote-winning rhetoric. Following on from Parker and Cornell’s (2024) study there was an expectation that the discourse of deterrence would be prevalent across the political spectrum and that policy solutions could be presented as practicable.

4. Methods

Data for this study is derived from three sources: (i) the Hansard record of the debate in the House of Commons on 9th January 2024 on the Secretary of State for the Home Office’s statement to the House of Commons on the ‘Rwanda Plan Cost and Asylum System’ (UK Parliament, 2024) ; (ii) the ‘Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration)’ Bill and its explanatory notes; and (iii) news media reporting of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants as an issue in the May-through July election campaign period and immediately post-election as the new Labour administration took office. These three sources were selected as a way of focusing upon the preceding Conservative Government policy and the contrast

with Labour Party policy as it took office in July 2024. The Rwanda Bill represents the then Conservative Government's official policy discourse while the preceding parliamentary debate permitted a fuller analysis of the range of political positions on the policy. The news media sources examined during the general election campaign period (24th May – 3rd July) were derived from a search using LexisNexis, a web-based archive of news titles in the UK. This involved a selective search of news articles covering asylum seekers from the range of broadsheet and tabloid titles across the political spectrum, including their weekend editions (i.e., *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The Sun*). The key search terms were 'asylum seekers', 'migrants', 'Labour' and 'Conservative' which yielded 140 articles. These were filtered to remove duplicates and to only include stories relating to political party policy on asylum seekers resulting in 94 articles.

The data set was then subject to an analysis broadly in line with that of Critical Discursive Psychology (CDP). This was adopted in order to address the research questions given the requirement to examine broad discursive repertoires as well as the detailed nature of their rhetorical construction across the transcribed parliamentary speeches, the Rwanda Bill, and newspaper reports. CDP combines the fine-grained micro-analysis found in Conversation Analysis and Discursive Psychology while also being concerned with wider societal discourses and power relations that are characteristic of broader macro-level approaches to discourse found in Critical Discourse Analysis. Where this approach gains purchase is in the recognition that discourse and its relationship with ideology operates in ways that can weave together different repertoires in flexible ways that are "drawn on and reworked in the vagaries of practice" (Hepburn and Wiggins (2007: 12). The utility of this approach has been shown to good effect in the work of Wetherell and Potter (1992) in their work on racist discourse in New Zealand by showing how White Pākehā New Zealanders characterised the indigenous Māoris in terms of their 'culture'. The Culture-as Heritage repertoire was presented as something that belonged to the Māoris as part of inheritance and to be safeguarded when set against the 'modern world'. Yet culture was also drawn upon in terms of Culture-as-Therapy repertoires through which it was presented terms as something that could prevent the Māori people from becoming psychologically unstable and rootless. These repertoires can be drawn upon in everyday conversation, newspaper reports, and parliamentary debate to delegitimise Māori political challenges by sidestepping potential connotations of racism (Hepburn and Wiggins, 2007: 12).

Therefore, a focus on repertoires seeks to combine a focus on broad discursive patterns with their instantiation in rhetorical practices in order to explicate 'the social and political consequences of discursive patterning' (Wetherell, 1998: 405). The analysis proceeded through coding the data in line with the approach to CDP advocated by Potter and Wetherell (1987), where 'interpretative repertoires' were identified across the data set. Wiggins (2016: 244) defines interpretative repertoires as 'a collection of words or ways of talking about objects or events in the world which provide a relatively coherent and culturally recognisable characterisation of that object or event'. Whilst Seymour-Smith et al. (2002: 255) talk of repertoires as 'a recognizable routine of arguments, descriptions and evaluations found in people's talk often distinguished by familiar clichés, anecdotes and tropes ... 'what everyone knows''. The study is also informed in a broader sense by the work of Demasi et al., (2021) in terms of applying a discursive perspective to political communication.

The corpus of discursive material was analysed by coding the data first by identifying broad discursive patterns in the ways in which political claims were made in relation to undocumented asylum seekers (e.g., deterrence). The aim here was to determine the nature of these claims at the level of political rationality; how such claims were tied sense-making in terms of policy. A second phase of analysis followed by examining the rhetorical constructions of these different repertoires. This was accomplished through a careful reading of the discursive construction of repertoires in a manner that was sensitive to the either their unitary deployment, or if they were combined in some way. Greckhamer and Cilesiz (2014: 437) argue that while it is "inappropriate to reduce the practice of qualitative research, which includes interpretive, intuitive, and artistic processes, to technical issues", nonetheless, "interpretive acts" need to be explained. In keeping with this maxim, the analysis presented in this paper was derived from an iterative process of moving between examining these broad discursive patterns and detailed features of rhetorical construction. The focus of the latter was to seek an understanding of

how these repertoires were constructed, either in terms of direct references to claims (e.g., mention of the word deterrence) or through indirect means or qualifications that seek to attend to potential counter-claims and positions. In this sense the reliability of the findings lies in how they account for the data in a holistic manner. Finally, the analytic examples presented below were selected on the basis of their typification of the repertoires revealed through the analysis. The Rwanda Bill excerpts are based on the passages that explicitly deal with the stated purpose of the legislation and exclude legal sections. The Rwanda Plan Cost and Asylum System parliamentary debate includes a selection of Members of Parliament contributions that represent the spectrum of political representation. The selection of press excerpts is drawn from across the range of types of newspaper and their political leanings in order to give an indication of how asylum seeker policy was reported on.

5. Analysis

In this section, each of the three sources are examined from which three discursive repertoires are derived for justifying, or challenging and abandoning, the previous Conservative administration's migration and asylum policy. In each, the strategic rhetorical force of these repertoires is examined through the lexicon deployed. Illustrative quotes are presented in relation to each of the repertoires identified. These have been selected in order to evidence their rhetorical construction in both advancing a political position while also attending to competing counter-positions.

5.1. The Discourse of Deterrence

The opening section of the Safety of Rwanda (Asylum and Immigration) Bill makes clear the focus of deterrence:

The purpose of this Act is to prevent and deter unlawful migration, and in particular migration by unsafe and illegal routes, by enabling the removal of persons to the Republic of Rwanda under provision made by or under the Immigration Acts.

Likewise, an accompanying Home Office Factsheet on the Bill also draws attention to the purpose of the policy in terms of deterrence:

Why do we have a new bill and treaty?

The overarching purpose of this bill is to deter dangerous and illegal journeys to the United Kingdom, which are putting people's lives at risk, and to disrupt the business model of people smugglers who are exploiting vulnerable people.

A press release also accompanying the passage of the Bill also stresses its role in setting in motion a policy of deterrence:

"Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said: The passing of this landmark legislation is not just a step forward but a fundamental change in the global equation on migration. We introduced the Rwanda Bill to deter vulnerable migrants from making perilous crossings and break the business model of the criminal gangs who exploit them. The passing of this legislation will allow us to do that and make it very clear that if you come here illegally, you will not be able to stay.

Were this discourse of deterrence to be offered in a singular manner without other accompanying discourses that offer qualifications and mitigations then it would be open to potential challenge as being a harsh policy and perhaps even inhumane. However, the discourse is constructed in such a way as to maximise its rhetorical force through particular key words, notable in drawing attention to the "unlawful" nature of such migration and that the small boat crossings are "illegal". As Parker and Connell (2024) point out the policy is also framed through discourse that humanises asylum seekers in terms of being "vulnerable migrants", their "lives being put at risk" and being the subject of "criminal gangs who exploit them". In this way the discourse of deterrence is legitimised on the grounds of tackling unlawful activity but also with the welfare of the asylum seekers in mind.

However, there is also an accompanying set of statements that provides a means of heading off potential counterarguments and that seeks to reassure the public that the policy is humane. One way this is accomplished is by pointing to the scale of the problem as a way of justifying the need for the policy:

Last year (to 10 December 2023), 29,090 people have arrived in the UK by small boat. This compares to around 44,600 at the same point in 2022 - a fall of around a third, but we need to do more to fully resolve the problem and stop the business of smugglers and traffickers.

Note that these figures are set with the context of seeking to “stop the business of smugglers and traffickers”. This makes clear that the line of attack is not simply aimed at the “vulnerable” asylum seekers but rather those who exploit them in seeking to make the journey to the UK in small boats. The Bill also explicitly points to its humaneness in terms of international law and conventions:

For the purposes of this Act, “international law” includes:

- a. the Human Rights Convention,
- b. the Refugee Convention,
- c. the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 1966,
- d. the United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or

Degrading Treatment or Punishment of 1984,

- e. the Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings

done at Warsaw on 16 May 2005,

- f. customary international law,
- g. and any other international law, or convention or rule of international law,

whatsoever, including any order, judgment, decision or measure of the European Court of Human Rights.

The listing of these aspects of international law provides a means of pointing to the policy of deterrence being enacted in a way that is in accordance with humane treatment of persons. The list while naming specific pieces of international legislation and conventions also provides a ‘catch all’ element by including what is “customary” as well as “any other” laws, rules and convention that apply.

Finally, the key issue of the safety of Rwanda is a matter of judgement and one that the accompanying Home Office Factsheet tackles:

Is Rwanda really safe?

An Evidence Pack (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/safety-of-rwanda>) is published alongside the bill, which details the evidence HMG has used to inform their assessment on the safety of Rwanda. It concludes that, alongside the treaty, Rwanda is safe for the purposes of asylum processing, and the Policy Statement outlines the key findings.

If the safeguards in the treaty make Rwanda safe, why do you need a bill at all?

The treaty will go through the proper ratification process and the government is clear that the guarantees in the treaty, alongside evidence of changes in Rwanda, will enable Parliament to conclude that Rwanda is a safe country. The bill gives Parliament the opportunity to consider the evidence and come to a conclusion as to the safety of Rwanda.

These statements make clear that the consideration of Rwanda as a ‘safe country’ is just that, a matter of consideration and judgment. Note the way in which this is framed as the Government as having concluded it is a safe country but Parliament is the arbiter of such a judgment in the final analysis. Putting the Government’s conclusion first prior to claiming that Parliament will debate the safety of Rwanda is a way of getting one’s word in first. The claim that Rwanda has been considered safe already is a means of setting up the Parliamentary debate on the issue as one of placing the Government’s majority position as being the ‘correct’ view.

The press also reported on the issue of asylum seekers and the Rwanda policy during the election period in the UK. In line with expectation the right-leaning press stressed the deterrence discourse in their reporting as can be seen in the examples below.

The Times (London), July 3, 2024

Labour has urged bilateral agreements with European countries that would enable Britain to return migrants to countries they have passed through en route. This would be desirable but presupposes a common commitment, which a British government cannot guarantee. In the meantime, deterrence and physical enforcement remain the only pragmatic and humane option. EU states are increasingly coming to recognise this; the British government's scheme of relocating asylum seekers to Rwanda is a good faith attempt to implement it in practice.

The Sun (England), June 1, 2024

THE PM has vowed flights carrying illegal migrants to Rwanda will take off if he wins the election - giving voters a "clear choice".

Rishi Sunak told The Sun the electorate can choose between "building a deterrent" for small boats and Labour's plan to stop planes leaving.

He said: "If I win, all the people we've detained are getting on those flights - and those flights are going to Rwanda. Those people have been detained, flights are booked, airfields are on standby, escorts are there, casework is happening and flights will go because that's how we build a deterrent.

"You've got to make it clear - if you come here illegally you won't stay."

He said "the penny is dropping" across Europe as 15 EU states voted for a similar scheme.

These examples draw attention to the deterrence effect of the then Conservative Government asylum seeker policy. Note how The Times frames the issue around the policy in terms of "physical enforcement" whilst being "humane". The tabloid Sun newspaper opts for quoting the Prime Minister in his claim of "building deterrence" and the Labour Opposition to "stop the planes leaving". This kind of direct quotation, in effects, give space for the Conservative Government to make its case.

Finally, the discourse of deterrence was also made explicit in the Debate on the House of Commons on 9th January 2024 when the Rwanda Plan Cost and Asylum System was debated. Unlike worked over textual material, spoken debates involve an interactive element where rhetorical effect can only be understood in relation to previous speakers' remarks. In the Hansard record of the debate there are instances where the mention of deterrence is deployed in response to the Opposition criticism of the policy. This can be seen in the following remarks in response to these criticisms:

Yvette Cooper, (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

"... the Prime Minister is not planning to tell anyone before the election what the total costs are. In the end, the only deterrence that the Prime Minister believes in is deterring his Back Benchers from getting rid of him. It is weak, weak, weak, and the taxpayer is paying the price.

Mr Alistair Carmichael, (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)

"We do know a few facts here, and one of the facts we know is that the scheme has been in the making for 18 months. In those 18 months, the money that has been spent on it would have employed 6,000 caseworkers in the Home Office. Might that not have been a better way of proceeding?"

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border, Tom Pursglove

"... We must stop the boats and save lives. The moral imperative could not be clearer. Ensuring that those who arrive in the UK through unnecessary, illegal and dangerous means cannot stay here should prove a deterrent to others who may try to do the same thing. We need to stop criminal gangs profiting from this through decisive action. We know deterrents work. We have seen that clearly demonstrated through the returns agreement with Albania. That strong deterrent has seen us return 5,000 Albanians in 2023 alone and Albanian arrivals fall by 90%."

In examining the response, it is evident that the Conservative Government Minister does not directly address the cost issue of the Rwanda policy but instead points to “moral imperative” involved. Note the direct statement “We know deterrent work.” There is no room for ambiguity or challenge to such a general statement. The general nature of the statement is then noting the specific case of Albania.

These data sources point to the way in which the discourse of deterrence is constructed in written texts and in spoken debate. The rhetorical force of this discourse relies upon specific lexical choices but, more importantly, the way in which it is constructed in tandem with other discourses that implicitly tackle potential counterarguments. In this way the centrality of this discourse is maintained so that its rhetorical force can operate.

5.2. The Discourse of Human Rights

An alternative discourse in opposition to the deterrence discourse stresses the human rights of asylum seekers. While human rights are addressed in the Rwanda Bill, as previously mentioned, it is the discourse of deterrence that is central to the legislation. However, in arguing against this position human rights can be raised as a counter in different ways. One way is to point to the human rights abuses suffered by asylum seekers and set this against the deterrence policy. This can be seen in the January House of Commons debate on the Bill:

Jeremy Corbyn, Islington North) (Ind)

Does my right hon. Friend agree that instead of spending this vast amount of money on a failed Rwanda scheme, Britain and the other European Governments ought to be thinking about the numbers of people, many from Afghanistan, who are leading a marginal existence, in desperate poverty and freezing to death, on the streets of Calais and other cities around Europe? They are the victims of human rights violations and war all around the world. Should we not be thinking about them and helping them rather than pouring money into the Rwandan Government, which has achieved absolutely nothing?

Alison Thewliss, (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

I would like to put on the record yet again that the SNP wholeheartedly opposes the principle of the Rwanda plan, of offshoring people as if they were some kind of tiresome trash that the UK does not want to deal with—a plan that amounts simply to state-sponsored people trafficking. It is not just about the money, as Labour set out in its motion today, as egregious and obscene a waste of money as this is; it is about how we treat our fellow human beings. These are people who have experienced torture, have seen their families murdered and are running from horrors that we are fortunate never to have known.”

Both extracts demonstrate the way that human rights discourse can be advanced to counter The Rwanda Scheme by pointing to the experiences of asylum seekers and how these have made them a vulnerable group. There is a strong moral tone advanced through the use of modal auxiliary verbs such as “ought” and “treat”. Here the emphasis is on obligation as a counter to that of the discourse of deterrence. Such obligation to put human rights above deterrence is rhetorically advanced through the adjectival characterisation of asylum seekers as in “desperate” (poverty), “freezing” (to death on the streets), or through the usage of verbs to convey the severity and immediacy of the situation: “seen” (families murdered) and “running” (from horrors). Note also in the extract from Thewliss that this takes the part of a three-part listing which adds to the rhetorical effectiveness of her speech (“...have experienced torture, have seen their families murdered and are running from horrors...”).

Thewliss was one of the most vocal critics of the Rwanda Scheme having made her points in other debates (see Parker and Connell, 2024). Her speech in the Rwanda Bill debate in January also draws upon two other rhetorical forms to make her case for opposition:

“...The asylum seekers I listen to want to be able to work, contribute and rebuild their lives. They are skilled and talented people with a lot to give to their communities, and they are grateful for the opportunity, but as long as they are kept out of the labour market and prevented from working, they lose their skills and confidence, and their mental health deteriorates. I have seen far too many people at my advice surgeries who cannot understand a system that treats them with such disdain.”

“It does not need to be this way—everything that has happened has been a political choice. This is about our duties and obligations in the world; about the European convention on human rights, which protects all of our rights; and about the refugee convention, which treats others as we would expect to be treated if a catastrophe happened on our own doorstep. Scotland wants none of these cruel, inhumane plans.”

As can be seen above, she supports her case against a scheme built on deterrence by referring the contribution that asylum seekers could potentially make to “their communities” but who “lose their skills and confidence and whose “mental health deteriorates”. It is evident from this remark that she is pointing to the asylum system as damaging to these people in general. However, she then makes a discursive move that makes this general point more concrete by pointing to her own personal experience (“I have seen far too many people at my advice surgeries.....”). This personalisation is difficult to challenge given that the speaker is making a claim based on their own experience and so moves the argument to one of ‘telling it how it is’, so to speak in that she has witnessed who these people regard the are being treated with “disdain”.

Her second line of attack is to press home her argument about human rights through pointing arguing that pointing to the “political choice” of the then Conservative Government. Note the use of the extreme case formulation (Edwards, 2000) in the phrase “everything that has happened” that precedes this. The use of the declarative “This is about our duties and obligations in the world.....” also presents the human rights discourse as a clear an unambiguous moral duty that overrides a discourse of deterrence “as if catastrophe happened on our own doorstep”. The final sentence invokes a collective national opposition (“Scotland wants none of these cruel, inhumane plans.”).

The human rights discourse was also apparent in the news media during the election campaign. As might be expected, this was mainly covered by the liberal and left-leaning press as can be seen in the two examples below.

The Independent (United Kingdom), June 20, 2024

“The world is watching this election (because it is seen as) a turning point of whether the UK believes in consistency and support for ... the international human rights order”.

Sacha Deshmukh, Amnesty International UK

The organisations have long criticised the Illegal Migration Act 2023, a law intended to stop people who arrive in the UK illegally from being able to stay here and which the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC) has previously said effectively amounts to an “asylum ban”.

The Guardian (London), June 13, 2024

Adam (not his real name), an Eritrean asylum seeker, was one of them. He has now been released after a month’s detention and said he was still suffering from the effects of being incarcerated.

“The experience of being locked up, even though I did not commit any crime, has affected me very greatly,” he said. “I feel like an egg that has been broken and which can’t be put back together again.”

He added: “Detention was a very bad thing. I was given a very dirty blanket and instead I used my coat to cover myself with. We were told we were in a detention centre but as far as I could see it was a prison. We were locked in our cells overnight and at lunchtime. I fled forced conscription in my country and struggled for eight years before I reached the UK. I thought this was a country of human rights.”

He added: “At first I was too frightened to leave my house after I came out of detention. I lost a lot of weight there. I am trying to enjoy my freedom outside but I am still very scared.”

Both newspapers make use of quotations, in the example from The Independent this is the Chief Executive of Amnesty International UK, the human rights organisation; and in the case of The Guardian, a pseudonym is used in reference to an asylum seeker. This contrast is interesting in terms of offering either a comment on the status of human rights as an election issue in relation to asylum seekers, or through the direct voice of an asylum seeker. In the case of The Independent the quote included makes reference to the “world” “watching”. The use of the category “world” combined with the verb “watching” seeks to point to international interest in the UK general election and specially because of its commitment “the international human rights order”. Note how this discursive construction of the

report places this commitment under threat. The attribution of this threat is the Illegal Migration Act 2023 which it is claimed “effectively amounts to an “asylum ban””. Note here how the use of the phrase “effectively amounts to” provides a means of calling into question the legality of the Conservative Government legislation but this is sourced to a previous comment from the United Nations Human Rights Committee (UNHRC).

The Guardian’s use of the words of an Eritrean asylum seeker constructs the human rights discourse in experiential terms unlike The Independent which offers a more legal and abstract discursive construction. There are several aspects of the asylum seeker’s rhetorical construction which humanise his story. First, he constructs his detention as an injustice (“...being locked up, even though I did not commit any crime...”; “We were told we were in a detention centre but as far as I could see it was a prison.”). Second, he provides an emotive description couched in metaphorical terms of his experience (“I feel like an egg that has been broken and which can’t be put back together again.”). Third, his discourse alludes to the basis of his seeking asylum (“I fled forced conscription in my country and struggled for eight years before I reached the UK.”). Fourth, he contrasts his experience with what he “thought” prior to his detention in the UK (“I thought this was a country of human rights.”). And lastly, he points to the effects the detention has had on him, both physically and mentally (“...I was too frightened to leave my house after I came out of detention. I lost a lot of weight there. I am trying to enjoy my freedom outside but I am still very scared.”). The net effect of this level of rhetorical construction and detail is to convey a sense of poor treatment that fails to place human rights at the centre of asylum policy.

5.3. The Discourse of Practicality

The final discourse identified that that of practicality. Whereas the other two forms of rhetorical construction were drawn upon in opposition to each other, the discourse of practicality was used by both Government and Opposition Members of Parliament as well as featuring in the right and left-leaning press. In looking at the parliamentary debate first, there were several instances where the practicality of the then Conservative Government’s immigration and asylum policy is raised. In the example below the then Shadow Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper, indirectly raises the issue by pointing to the Government’s apparent lack of practical action on the back of its legislation.

Yvette Cooper, (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab)

Five broken promises from a failing Prime Minister. He promised to clear the backlog—it is still 100,000. He promised to stop the boats—last year saw the second-highest number of crossings on record. He promised to end hotel use—it went up, not down. He promised to return everyone—returns are down 50%. He promised to pass a new law and, to be fair, he did pass a new law—he just did not implement it.

That is the problem with this Prime Minister: shiny graphics but shoddy gimmicks; wide-eyed promises but never delivery. The Tories all know it, which is why they should all be calling for the same facts as us, because those facts will expose what is really going on in this Government—the con on everyone. They should stop letting their Front Benchers play smoke and mirrors. They should be asking for the figures. The House should get those figures, as they are the figures we need. That is what this Humble Address should deliver.

The rhetorical construction of this statement can be considered as typical of an Opposition attack on Government policy. In this sense, the Opposition has to be seen to be doing its job of holding the Government to account. Given, that these parliamentary speeches are not only intended for those present in the House of Commons but are also part of broadcast news media stories, they are often rhetorically constructed in an almost theatrical manner. This involves hyperbole and the overemphasis of points so that the points being made are more memorable for a public audience. In the case of the speech above, the claim of “Five broken promises” are then unpacked one by one so as to emphasize the lack on practical action in tackling the immigration and asylum issue. Each of the five claimed “promises” are stated in turn followed by the claims as to the failure to of policy to successfully address these resulting in a worsening situation. The final remark is rhetorically constructed to highlight the lack of practical

action: “He promised to pass a new law and, to be fair, he did pass a new law—he just did not implement it.” Cooper then presses further her claim of lack of practical action but arguing that the Government’s policy is shiny graphics but shoddy gimmicks; wide-eyed promises but never delivery.” She personalizes this against the Prime Minister but also claims that “The Tories all know it, which is why they should all be calling for the same facts as us, because those facts will expose what is really going on in this Government—the con on everyone.” The word “con” implies deliberate Government obfuscation around the lack of practical policy measures.

However, from the Government side the same words were levelled at the Opposition Labour position on immigration and asylum seekers. This can be seen in the following from one of the Conservative MPs:

Tim Loughton, (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con)

This is a sham, a shambles, a Labour gimmick and a con. It is a feeble attempt to show that the Opposition are somehow tackling illegal migration by talking about it, attacking the Government and voting against every attempt to bring forward practical measures, while having no credible working plans of their own. They need to be called out for it, and I shall be voting against this motion.

Note how the same words “gimmick and “con” are used here in much the same way as the Opposition against the Government as a means of claiming that they are engaging in oppositional rhetoric for the sake of political point scoring rather than what is claimed to be the Government’s “attempt to bring forward practical measures”. This is contrasted with the claim that the Opposition has “no credible working plans of their own” and “need to be called out for it”.

A similar rhetorical construction is made in the following example by another Conservative MP who explicitly makes the claim that the Opposition are engaging in political rhetoric for the sake of appearance rather than constructive criticism.

Katherine Fletcher, (South Ribble) (Con)

Government Members are putting practical ideas in place, and what is the Labour party doing? Changing its mind. It has no plan and no ideas. Its soundbites are so brittle that its Members cannot take interventions from Conservative Members.

We have a worked-through plan that is trying something different to make sure we handle this in a global context. Everybody is facing this problem and, with channel crossings already down by a third, a nascent deterrent effect is occurring. We are working with the social media firms to make sure these—rude word—gangsters cannot sell absolute nonsense on TikTok and Facebook to kids who just dream of a better life. That is the action we are taking, and what are Labour Members doing? They are tabling process motions and asking for details but, crucially, they will not tell us their plan, because they do not have one.

The contrast structure of the rhetorical construction here is noteworthy. One way of claiming a superior politic-moral position is to claim ownership for converting policy into practical action and contrast this with those who criticize that policy and who have nothing to advance in its place. This is a commonplace in everyday argumentative experience as a way of basically saying ‘don’t criticize my action if you have nothing to offer that’s better yourself’. The MP claims that the Government has put in place “practical ideas” and then poses the rhetorical question “...and what is the Labour Party doing?” with the answer provided that “it has no plan and no ideas”. She then claims that the Opposition are engaging in “soundbites” and couples this with the metaphor that they are “brittle” to the point that Labour MPs cannot “take interventions from Conservative Members”. The use of “brittle” brings with it the connotation that these Members’ “soundbites” are rigid political rhetoric that cannot stand up to the test of challenge. She then moves on to point out that “Everybody is facing this problem...” which conveys a sense of a pressing international issue before detailing action being taken against “gangsters” using social media to promote “nonsense” to “kids who just dream of a better life”. The implication here is that the UK is being sold as a better life and that this is why asylum seekers are seeking to come to Britain. She then reiterates her rhetorical question “What are Labour Members doing?” and answers it

by suggesting that they are engaging in Parliamentary procedural matters and that “they will not tell us their plan, because they do not have one.”. This returns to the familiar claim of ‘put up or shut up’.

Aside from the Government and Opposition attacks on each other over the issue of the practicality of the Government’s immigration measures, another line of attack came from the Scottish National Party MP, Alison Thewliss. This can be seen in her speech below.

Alison Thewliss, (Glasgow Central) (SNP)

Twenty years on, that is chillingly reminiscent of the current Conservative Government.

Back in 2003-4, Labour was also trying to find a way of offshoring people to Tanzania, and it has been reported that it has recently been consulting with the architects of that plan. If Labour still plans to offshore people, I ask how many, on what terms, and at what cost? How can it possibly be cost-effective to send people halfway around the world, only to bring them back if their case is successful? When Full Fact asked Lord Blunkett about those historic plans, he said that he had “looked at a system for processing appeals for failed asylum seekers in other safe countries but rejected it as impractical”. So is Labour for or against offshoring, and is that in principle, or on the basis of cost? Will it categorically rule out offshoring, or is it prepared to sell out the world’s most vulnerable just to get Labour over the threshold of No.10?

The rhetorical construction of this speech obliquely pitches the humanitarian against the practicality discourse. She begins with the emotive claim that Labour’s position is “chillingly reminiscent of the current Conservative Government” in terms of its previous consideration of “offshoring people to Tanzania”. Note how she claims “it has been reported that it has recently been consulting with the architects of that plan” which raises the prospect that Labour may be considering offshoring again. She then points out that a previous Labour Home Secretary, Lord Blunkett, “rejected it as impractical”. She then poses a rhetorical question that is in effect a challenge and rebuke to the Labour party’s concern with practicality over human rights: “. “So is Labour for or against offshoring, and is that in principle, or on the basis of cost?” This challenge is furthered through here next question: “Will it categorically rule out offshoring, or is it prepared to sell out the world’s most vulnerable just to get Labour over the threshold of No. 10?”. Note the way the challenge is posed as a claim that the Labour Party is simply seeking political power rather than adopting a principled humanitarian position on asylum seekers.

Finally, the discourse of practicality was also apparent in press reporting during the General Election period. Frequent reference was made to claim that the Labour Party were claiming that if they were elected they would not engage in “gimmicks” such as the Rwanda scheme. The implication of this claim is that the then Conservative Government were doing just this and that the policy is impractical. This discourse was evident in both the politically liberal and left-leaning press as can be seen in the examples below.

The Independent, May 23, 2024

Sir Keir said the Prime Minister has never believed in the Rwanda plan and has called an election early so it is not tested before the poll.

“We have to deal with the terrible loss of control of the border under this Government, we have to tackle the small boats that are coming across – nobody but nobody should be making that journey.

“But the serious response to that, rather than the gimmick from the Government, is to smash the gangs with a new border command that will work across countries to take those gangs down and stop this vile trade.”

Daily Mirror, May 25, 2024

Ms Rayner also confirmed Keir Starmer would scrap the costly Tory Rwanda plan if he becomes PM.

Ms Rayner said: "How many billions has already gone and all we've sent over is a few Home Secretaries so far?

"That is so scandalous. It is so transparently a gimmick. Keir will not put the Rwanda scheme in place."

The Independent reports Sir Keir Starmer's claim that the Rwanda scheme was deliberately not put to the "test" prior to the election given that the Conservative Government had no faith in it and that it was a "gimmick", and by implication a means of doing something that attracts attention but is impractical. Note how he makes a moral case against the "vile trade" and that "nobody but nobody should be making that journey". An often repeated claim expressed in metaphorical terms was that in contrast Labour would seek to "smash the gangs". The Mirror on the other hand reports the Labour Shadow Deputy Prime Minister, Angela Rayner's words on the Rwanda scheme. She uses the extreme case formulation (Edwards, 2000) in her rhetorical question by suggesting "billions" had gone into the scheme. Again, the word "gimmick" is to describe the Government's policy, suggesting that it is a political sleight of hand rather than a serious practical measure.

The politically left-leaning Guardian newspaper published an opinion piece that draws attention to Labour's repeated use of the word "gimmick" as a way of criticizing the Conservative Government's Rwanda Scheme and use of the Bibby Stockholm. However, this piece turns the use of the word around on the Labour party by suggesting that they have turned their back on a humanitarian approach and instead are as keen as the Conservatives in focussing on the UK border in relation to immigration.

The Guardian, May 27, 2024

Keir Starmer isn't interested in "gimmicks", "talking tough" or, God forbid, protesting. He wants to roll up his sleeves and get things done – on this much he has been clear. Except, that is, for the times when it suits him to indulge in some "gesture politics". This is especially true for asylum: Labour is headed into the snap July election promising to be tough on the "small boats crisis" and, if Starmer's speech in Dover earlier this month is anything to go by, its plans are not good.

Gimmicks – the policies behind which could do untold damage – seem to be all Labour has. Starmer swapped Rishi Sunak's "stop the boats" slogan for "border security". He invoked the widely peddled myth that the UK, which has an incredibly strict asylum system, is a "soft touch" – suggesting deporting people more quickly would serve as a deterrent. And he promised a new border security command, which seems strangely similar to the small boats operational command. Granted, Labour does not look set to be quite as harsh as the Tories in every respect; Starmer committed to scrapping the Rwanda scheme. But that is the very least it could do, given how unpopular the policy is with the broader public. Look beyond the headline announcements and you find more of what we've had for decades – more borders, more brutality, more suffering.

This critical opinion piece deploys an oblique humanitarian discourse as a counter to the Labour Party position on immigration and asylum seekers. The writer suggests that while Starmer claims to avoid "gimmicks" and "gesture politics," his stance on the "small boats crisis" is contradictory to that claim though his own focus on "border security". In other words, while Labour is focusing on the practical means of tackling the "small boats crisis" its focus only on such measure leaves at the exclusion of a humanitarian outlook leads to "more borders, more brutality, more suffering". This while not directly drawing upon a humanitarian discourse the critique of Labour's position is accomplished through the rhetorical style adopted that through the use of a three-part list at the end where the use of the words "brutality" and "suffering" leave the humanitarian stance as inferred.

5.4. Post-Election Policy

The UK General Election on the 4th July 2024 resulted in a Labour Government with a sizeable majority. One of the first actions of the new Government was to abandon the Rwanda scheme. Thus, in a BBC News report on the 6th July 2024 the new Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer confirmed the Rwanda deportation scheme is "dead and buried" and that "gimmick" had "never been a deterrent". He said, "It's had the complete opposite effect and I'm not prepared to continue with gimmicks that don't act as a deterrent." Note that the import of his words is that the focus remains of deterrence. The Labour Government instead has insisted that tackling the problem at source is required and to this end have initiated a new Border Security Command to tackle the people smuggling gangs and have also boosted the number of officers working in the National Crime Agency to work with agencies across Europe. The Labour Government has also confirmed the Bibby Stockholm barge contact is not being renewed.

past January 2025. A BBC news report on the 25th July quoted Dame Angela Eagle, the Minister for Border Security and Asylum, as saying she wanted the asylum system to operate "swiftly, firmly and fairly".

These measures are part of a wider rhetoric of claiming prudence and competence in government. The discourse of deterrence and practicality is evident in this rhetoric but tempered by claims that stopping the small boat crossing cannot be accomplished in a short period of time. The tragedy of such crossings has recently been made all too apparent again with the death of twelve asylum seekers in a small boat off the coast of France. Included in the death toll were six children and a pregnant woman. A BBC news report from the 4th September quoted the Home Secretary, Yvette Cooper as describing the incident as "horrific and deeply tragic". She also said that Government efforts to "dismantle these dangerous and criminal smuggler gangs and to strengthen border security is so vital and must proceed apace". It is clear from this statement that border security and deterrence are the focus of attention rather than providing safe alternative means of accessing the UK asylum system and removing the need for smugglers' boats.

6. Discussion and Conclusions

This article has demonstrated three main discourses in operation in relation to immigration and asylum seeker policy in the UK: deterrence, human rights, and practicality. While the first and second of these are, in the main, in opposition to each other, the third has a more ambivalent status and is applied by both left and right of the political spectrum. The discourse of deterrence is aimed at deterring unlawful migration, mainly through small boat crossings in the English Channel. While much of the rhetorical construction of this discourse seeks to claim that it aimed at tackling the people smuggling gangs, the underlying desire of asylum seekers to reach the UK through this route is the main target. Thus, although this discourse is associated mostly with the previous Conservative Administration in terms of its Rwanda Scheme, the incoming Labour Government has also sought to deploy this discourse in terms of its focus on border security. The human rights discourse is often rhetorically constructed in opposition to that of deterrence. The focus of this discourse is on constructing asylum seekers as a vulnerable group, through ill treatment and warfare in their home countries. This then leads to the moral claim that they should be treated with compassion rather than entering a hostile immigration system. The third, and final discourse of practicality sits between the other two discourses and is often drawn upon as a means of claiming active intervention in tackling the immigration and asylum matters. Both right and left-leaning political discourse has laid claim to practicality, often by seeking to criticize opposing views as impractical.

While these discourses can be considered as distinct from one another, they are sometimes rhetorically constructed in such a way as to involve drawing on elements of one or another, either in support or in opposition to claims being made. In other words, the rhetorical exigencies of the argumentative nature of the situation result in a particular deployment of these discourses. The discourse of deterrence can be drawn upon alongside the discourse of practicality as means of accomplishing a stronger rhetorical position. However, the discourse of (im)practicality can also be drawn upon as a means of claiming that deterrence has been avoided. The discourse of human rights in its singular usage, while usually drawn upon to counter that of deterrence and practicality, can nevertheless be alluded to as a means of claiming that effective practical measures must be taken to tackle the people smugglers who exploit asylum seekers. This study therefore demonstrates the flexible way that these discourses are rhetorically constructed by both those on the left and right of the political spectrum. The examination of these discourses therefore adds to discursive research that has explored such things as migration discourse and the Rwanda scheme features in parliamentary debate (e.g., Figgou & Anagnostopoulou, 2020; Goodman & Kirkwood, 2019; Kirkwood, 2017, 2019; Chaloner et al., 2022; Collyer & Shahani, 2023; Morano-Foadi & Malena, 2023; Smith et al., 2023).

While Parker and Cornell (2024) rightly point to the way that politicians from the left and right draw upon similar discourses such as deterrence in relation to undocumented migration the analysis presented in this article points to a more complex picture. The rhetorical force of these constructions often relies on the premise of problematising migration and that of undocumented asylum seekers arriving in small

boats. This is often accomplished by pointing to humanitarian nature of the problem and the need to protect asylum seekers. The ‘solution’ is then combined with this discourse in the form of claiming that deterrent measures ‘work’ and that these are effective in terms of their practicality. The argument then arises around the (im)practicality of the measures adopted such the Rwanda Scheme but both sides of the political spectrum do not disagree in the humanitarian need to “stop the boats”. In contrast, those who adopt a human rights discourse challenge the premise of the ‘problem’ of border security and instead argue for a humanitarian approach and legal safe routes for asylum seekers. It is notable that the Scottish National Party MP, Alison Thewliss, was most vocal on this point given that 62% of the Scottish electorate voted to remain in the EU in the 2026 referendum. For this reason, the SNP can argue against the post-Brexit migration strategy of ‘controlling borders’ that both the Conservative and Labour parties regard as something they must adhere to lest they alienate a significant proportion of the UK electorate.

This article, in focussing on the rhetorical construction of discourse on migration and asylum seekers in the UK prior to and post general election, has eschewed a political orientation that is characteristically found in critical discourse studies. Indeed, researchers in the field can be “torn between social research and political argumentation” (Wodak, 2014: 311). It is also the case that there is often an impetus in this area of research to examine broader macro-patterns (Breeze; 2011: 515) or metapolitical issues in terms of the clash of political projects and models (Breeze, (Zienkowski, 2019). While these approaches can yield interesting analytical insights, they are often intrinsically political and can run the risk of privileging the researcher’s own political viewpoint (Potter, 2010: 666) that can perhaps lead to overlooking more nuanced aspects of the data. A more fruitful approach given in the analysis presented, evidences the ways in which discourse is constructed flexibly and that can result in the “combination of liberal principles for illiberal ends” (Tileagă, 2006: 483). In this regard, it is difficult to disagree with Parker and Cornell (2024) who argue that rhetorical collaboration between the main political parties in framing migration and asylum policy around border sovereignty and securitisation has problematised any opportunity for more humanitarian or even pro-immigration discourse to gain a hold. At present there seems little opportunity for any discursive space being available for a critique of migration policy that focuses on border security, save the odd opinion piece in the liberal or left-leaning press.

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