

Assault on Asylum: media, government and the misinformation campaign

Iain Ferguson and Reece Walters argue that the Blair government's current policies collude with media constructed myths that emphasise asylum seekers as 'the new enemy within'.

Issues of immigration and asylum are poised to take centre stage in the forthcoming British General Election. The reasons for this are not hard to see. For several years, both major political parties have engaged in a bidding war to see who can be most punitive towards those fleeing war, torture, persecution and seeking sanctuary in Britain (McWhirter, 2005). This has resulted in three new major pieces of legislation since 1997 alone, each one aimed at making it more difficult for people to gain asylum here. Deterrence, rather than a concern to uphold international human rights obligations, has been the primary consideration of New Labour governments, with forms of deterrence including ever-tighter border controls, less than subsistence benefits for those who do get here, compulsory dispersal (Robinson, 2003), the use of detention centres, restriction on rights of appeal and increasingly rapid (and brutal) removal for those who fail to convince. Despite claims to the contrary, it is difficult to resist the conclusion that a desire for

which the British government is neglecting or breaching its international human rights commitments.

Consistent with the theme of this issue (namely the media), and with the brief space permitted, we wish to identify how the didactic relationship between media and politics has aided the construction and development of a draconian and punitive government stance on asylum seekers as the new enemy within.

Myths and facts

From a brief selection of media headlines in recent years, it is possible to identify the ways in which constructions have distorted and steered the asylum debate, and in doing so have served to justify the illegal and harmful actions of the British Government.

Myth 1 'Britain the No.1 refugee magnet' – The Sun, 14 September 2002

'Millions More Want Asylum in Britain' – Sunday Mercury, 6 March 2005

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votes, rather than the stated concern to address 'genuine fears' and undercut the far Right, is the primary factor underlying New Labour's demonisation of the powerless and the persecuted (Mynott, 2005).

The media, and above all the right-wing tabloid press, have played a key role in this process. Papers like the *Sun*, the *Daily Mail* and the *Daily Express* have created a kind of 'common sense' about asylum seekers, which as we shall show in this article, is often based on outright lies and misinformation. From a criminological perspective, however, what is significant about this sustained media assault on those seeking asylum is the way in which it has created a culture which legitimises a much wider assault by the state on civil liberties (often through the linking of issues of asylum with 'the war on terror'), while completely ignoring the extent to

UNHCR estimate that there are 19,783,100 people seeking asylum in the world. The UK receives less than 0.5% of the world's refugee population. Moreover, recent Home Office statistics report those asylum applications to Britain continue to decline with a 31% decrease since 2003.

Myth 2 'A tide of humanity that sees Britain as the land of milk and honey' – The Sun, 22 May 2002

Asylum seekers in the UK are not allowed to claim mainstream welfare benefits. If they are destitute, the only option for some is to apply for support with the National Asylum Support Service (NASS), the government department responsible for supporting destitute asylum applicants. NASS support is very basic indeed. A single adult has to survive on £37.77 a week – 30% below the poverty line.

Myth 3 'Asylum seekers: 9 out of 10 are conmen'
Daily Star, 22 May 2002

In fact, statistics published by the Home Office figures show that well over 50 per cent of asylum seekers are given permission to stay in this country: 43 per cent of initial decisions that have been properly assessed resulted in applicants being given the right to remain in this country for their protection and around one in four appeals are successful. The fact that so many asylum seekers who are initially refused go on to win their appeals reflects the poor quality of decision making at the Home Office.

Myth 4 '...Illegal asylum seekers' – Evening Standard, 24 September 2002

By definition, there is no such thing as an 'illegal asylum seeker'. The UK has signed the *1951 Convention on Refugees*, which means that by law, anyone has the right to apply for asylum in the UK and remain until a final decision on their asylum application has been made. In January 2002, the Advertising Standards Authority upheld a complaint against a polling company, which sent out a fax referring to asylum seekers as 'illegals'. The Authority referred to the fax as racist, offensive and misleading.

Myth 5 'Losing the war on asylum crime' – Daily Mail, 26 November 2002

'Asylum: You're Right to Worry' – Daily Mail, 7 February 2005.

A report published by the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) recently confirmed that there is no evidence for a higher rate of criminality among refugees and asylum seekers. In fact, according to ACPO, having fled danger in their home country, asylum seekers are more likely to become victims of crime in the UK. There have been countless attacks on asylum seekers around Britain, including the murder of an asylum seeker in Glasgow in 2001 and in Sunderland. This murder prompted the UN High Commissioner for Refugees to condemn the British media for provoking racial hatred.

Myth 6 'Bogus asylum seekers are draining millions from the NHS' – Daily Express, 26 November 2002

'Our NHS, not the World Health Service' – Daily Mail, 16 February, 2005

This statement is completely unsubstantiated. What is more, asylum seekers are entitled to NHS services, like other legal residents in the UK. According to Home Office research, migrants, including asylum seekers and refugees, are far from being a burden on UK tax payers. On the contrary, in 1999-2000, they made a net fiscal contribution of approximately £2.5 billion. The Government has recently reversed legislation so that asylum seekers are now prevented from working. Home Office research has shown that asylum seekers would by far prefer to support themselves than be supported by the Government.

Myth 7 'One in 20 Asylum Seekers has HIV (and Treating Them Costs GBP 150,000 Each)' – Daily Mail, 7 March 2005

There is no evidence to support this claim. Moreover, a screening of 4,219 asylum seekers between April 2004 and January 2005 at the Dover Induction Centre revealed that only 0.2% tested positive to tuberculosis.

Criminology, human rights and globalised resistance

People who flee from human rights abuses seeking safety from persecution should not have their human rights abused by a nation that purports to provide a safe haven. New anti-terrorism legislation proposed by the Blair government seeks to dispense with the rule of law in favour of a draconian and internationally illegal approach to a 'war on terror' which will serve to imbed institutional racism within British society. Ethnic minorities, immigrants and asylum seekers will clearly bear the brunt of this state sanctioned racism.

The intersection between criminology and human rights is increasingly more important in examining the harms and crimes caused by the 'powerful'. As Cohen (2001) has so persuasively argued, human rights in criminology promote the rights of victims and seek to identify the actions of powerful elites that perpetrate abuses. In this sense, it has emerged as an influential discourse in contemporary analyses of the crimes of the powerful (see Tombs and Whyte, 2003).

Criminologies of resistance must remain connected with social movements in the development of theoretical and empirically sophisticated knowledges that seek to critique the actions and decisions of governing authorities (Ferguson *et al.*, 2002). We argue that the existing asylum policies and practices of the Blair government that are legitimated and popularized through the sensationalist and improper reporting of some tabloid press, serve to perpetuate social exclusion and racism in Britain. In response, what is needed is a growing commitment on the part of academics to challenge such state sponsored racism and marginalization.

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