



"The asylum system is completely broken": An analysis of justifications and resistance for the UK Government's Rwanda policy in parliamentary debates

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Abstract

In April 2022, the UK government announced the signing of a 'partnership agreement' with the Government of Rwanda in which some asylum seekers who enter the UK would be transported to Rwanda where their cases would be decided. This 'Rwanda policy' has been met with strong resistance from opposition politicians. This paper examines how the UK Government has sought to justify this 'offshore processing' policy and the ways in which the policy is resisted by politicians from the Opposition. We present a discursive analysis of the transcript of the Home Office's statement to the House of Commons on the "Global Migration Challenge" and the subsequent debate among Members of Parliament about the statement. We identified three discursive repertoires that politicians on opposing sides used to both justify and resist the Rwanda policy, specifically repertoires focussing on the safety of Rwanda, the need to deter people smugglers and be in line with 'what the people want'. Despite political polarisation in the debate on this policy, we argue that the use of similar discursive devices to both justify and resist this policy creates problems for supporters of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in carving out a clear discursive space for their arguments.

Key words: *Asylum seekers; migration; Rwanda policy; offshore processing; discursive psychology*

1. Introduction

On 19th April 2022, then Home Secretary Priti Patel presented the UK government's response to what they define as a '*global migration challenge*' to the UK Parliament (2022). The key measure outlined in this 'response' was the signing of a 'partnership agreement' (Adamson & Greenhill, 2023) with the Government of Rwanda that would see some asylum seekers who enter the UK transported to Rwanda where their cases would be decided. This announcement meant that a form of 'offshore processing' could be used for the

first time by a UK Government, although similar schemes have been used or proposed by governments of other countries in recent years, with Australia being a notable example (e.g. Freyer & McKay, 2021; Matera et al., 2023; Nethery & Holman, 2016). The first flight to Rwanda was scheduled to carry 30 passengers on 14th June 2022, however no asylum seekers were removed on this flight following legal challenges from a number of campaign groups and intervention from the European Court of Human Rights (Taylor et al., 2022). At the time of writing, despite the UK High Court ruling that the policy was legal in January 2023 (Morris, 2023) the UK Supreme Court overruled this decision in June 2023 declaring it unlawful and repeated this ruling in November 2023 following a legal challenge from the UK Government, meaning that no deportations to Rwanda have occurred under the scheme, although the most recent UK Home Secretaries Suella Braverman and James Cleverly have continued to reiterate their support for the policy (Morris, 2023).

Whilst the UK has received a consistent number of asylum applications over the past 10 years, and certainly well below the peak of applications received in the early years of the 21st century (House of Commons Library, 2023), the ways in which those seeking asylum have entered the UK has changed in recent years as more people have risked their lives in small boats crossing the English Channel (Lopez & Ryan, 2023; Parker et al., 2022). In part, the policy announced by Priti Patel was positioned as a response to what has become known as the ‘Channel migrant crossings’ (Davies et al. 2021; Maggs, 2020), with the stated aim being to disrupt the business activities of smugglers who facilitate these crossings. This paper therefore looks further at the ways in which the UK Government has sought to justify its use of an ‘offshore processing’ policy and also the ways in which the policy is resisted by other politicians. The article begins with a review of how UK asylum policy has developed in recent years, including the anticipated changes announced in this new policy. Here we also discuss how ‘offshore processing’ has been used in other countries before outlining the methods used in this study. We then present a discursive analysis of the UK Parliamentary debate following Patel’s announcement of the policy in the House of Commons on 19th April 2022. Here it will be argued that both the Government and opposition MPs draw on similar themes in their justification or resistance of the policy.

1.1 UK Asylum Policy

Since the UK made the decision to leave the European Union in 2016, and in particular since this came into effect in 2020, the UK has seen not only an increase in the number of people claiming asylum, but also a change in how people have entered the UK in order to do this, with small boat crossings across the English Channel becoming the main route for this (Davies et al. 2021). Conservative politicians have used this as a form of ‘moral panic’ and in keeping with the Brexit rhetoric of ‘taking back control’ passed the *Nationality and Borders Act 2022* which brought forward a wide range of changes to the UK immigration system. Two of the key elements of this Act have been to essentially criminalise asylum seekers who arrive in the UK via ‘irregular’ routes (such as those who cross the English Channel by boat) to disqualify them from being eligible for being granted refugee status, and to create the provisions for asylum

seekers to be removed to third countries in order to have their applications for asylum processed.

The decision to remove asylum seekers to Rwanda in order to process their asylum claims can be seen as a development of the increasingly hostile approach to asylum taken by UK governments, particularly since New Labour came to power in 1997, but which was stepped up during Theresa May's tenure as Conservative Home Secretary from 2010 to 2016 (Goodfellow, 2020; Yeo, 2022). The 1999 *Immigration and Asylum Act* remains a core piece of UK legislation relating to the reception and treatment of asylum seekers in the UK, which created a separate form of support for asylum seekers that differentiates them from British Citizens (and also those with refugee status). Asylum seekers awaiting a decision on their claim for refugee status also receive support payments that are paid at approximately 50% of the equivalent benefit for UK citizens (Allsopp et al., 2014), meaning that many are forced to live in destitution. As part of this Act, and in order to receive financial and housing support, asylum seekers must agree to compulsory dispersal to areas where housing is available (typically outside London and the Southeast) (Sales, 2002). In addition to the requirement to be dispersed and enforced destitution, the threats of deportation and indefinite detention have also been part of the UK Government's 'hostile environment' approach to asylum seekers for some time. These measures were intended to deter asylum seekers from coming to the UK, but as we described above, the deterrence regime has been stepped up further in recent years culminating in the *Nationality and Borders Act 2022* and the *Illegal Migration Act 2023*, which still includes measures such as 'offshore processing' of asylum claimants. The limited work that has been published on this 'offshore processing' thus far, suggests that the implementation of this Rwanda policy will have severely detrimental mental and public health consequences for those people who are forcibly displaced (Chaloner et al., 2022; Smith et al., 2023).

1.2 'Offshore Processing'

As we have discussed above, the concept of 'offshore processing', whilst not used by the UK Government before, has been used by countries such as Australia for many years. There, it was first introduced following the MV Tampa affair in 2001 which saw a Norwegian vessel attempt to disembark over 400 asylum seekers, that the ship had rescued in the Pacific Ocean, on Australia's Christmas Island (Magner, 2004). Although asylum seekers had previously been processed on Australian territory, the diplomatic crisis created by the MV Tampa affair and increasingly hostile rhetoric towards asylum seekers, led the Howard Liberal/National coalition government to introduce a policy that would become known as the 'Pacific Solution' (Devetak, 2004). Under this policy so called 'boat people' would be intercepted before stepping foot on Australian territory and be transferred to processing centres in other island countries within the Pacific region, such as Papua New Guinea and Nauru, whilst their asylum claims were decided. As part of this policy, islands such as Christmas Island were excised from Australian control to ensure that asylum seekers could not arrive in Australia by boat.

To fully understand Australia's approach to 'offshore processing' it is necessary to further consider the international dynamics between Australia and

the countries that it ultimately chose to send its asylum seekers to, and the conditions experienced by asylum seekers in these processing centres since much of the criticism faced by Australia has related to these two points. Firstly, in signing transfer deals with countries such as PNG and Nauru, Australia was in effect paying these third countries to solve its perceived asylum ‘problem’, which caused international criticism and damage to Australia’s reputation (Matera et al., 2023). Secondly, and particularly in the years that have followed, the hot and squalid conditions in the processing centres have been highlighted further damaging Australia’s international standing. Indeed, whilst the ‘Pacific Solution’ was initially scaled down by the Labor Party under Kevin Rudd in 2008, it was partially reinstated again by Julia Gillard in 2012 before being replaced by the Operation Sovereign Borders policy in 2013 that has focussed on turning back boats to act as a form of deterrence and continue with Australia’s policy of not allowing arrivals of asylum seekers by boat in Australia. It is also important to note, that while the UK Government may have drawn inspiration from Australia in seeking to ‘offshore’ asylum, Britain itself has a long-established track record of forcibly displacing people to countries where they have no legal or personal connection (Collyer & Shahani, 2023). This policy arguably has its roots in the deportation and relocation of people, particularly ‘the enslaved, indigenous peoples, indentured labourer, and refugees’ which was common practice during British colonial rule (Collyer & Shahani, 2023, p. 451).

Given the history of Australia’s offshore processing, boat pushbacks and the reputational damage it caused, it is perhaps surprising that the UK government have persisted in pursuing its policy of relocating its asylum seekers to Rwanda. Indeed, Matera et al.’s (2023) research explicitly suggests that the Australian model is not one that the UK should be following. However, the new policy comes at a time when the UK has begun to develop more of its own policy in a post-Brexit environment. As a signatory to the Dublin Convention, the UK, prior to Brexit, was theoretically able to return asylum seekers to the first EU country they had arrived in. Similarly, returning those whose asylum cases have been refused has also been part of the UK government’s asylum strategy for many years and has not been impacted by Brexit. Thus, it appears that the offshore processing policy proposed by the UK government may be both aimed at deterring arrivals in small boats in the English Channel and be part of the UK government’s post-Brexit migration strategy and its Brexit promise of ‘controlling borders’. This study will therefore offer an original contribution by analysing the ways in which the UK Government’s Rwanda policy is discursively constructed, and, in particular how it is both supported and resisted by politicians across the political spectrum.

1.3 The Present Study

The present study is influenced by previous discursive work that has explored constructions of migrants in government and media discourses (e.g. Charteris-Black, 2006; Parker, 2019). Goodman et al. (2017) examined media discourses about the ‘refugee crisis’ in Europe in 2015 and 2016. Through their discursive psychological analysis they show how the categories used to refer to refugees throughout the ‘crisis’ evolved over time, each with different ideological outcomes and implications for how refugees should be treated.

Kirkwood (2017) undertook a discursive psychological analysis of UK parliamentary debates about the 2015-16 refugee 'crisis' in Europe with a particular focus on how refugees were humanised in such debates. He suggests that politicians draw on the human qualities of both themselves and the nation ('us') and of refugees to make the government and nation morally accountable for protecting refugees. In further analysis of the same parliamentary debates, Kirkwood (2019) also explored the ways in which 'history' is employed by speakers within these debates in order to construct the nation in a particular way that involved the mobilization of collective identities and at the same time legitimized or criticized political actions. Figgou and Anagnostopoulou (2020) similarly analysed political talk in the Greek parliament about the 'refugee issue'. Drawing on ideas from Rhetorical Psychology (Billig, 1991) they show how Greek politicians, of both the government and opposition parties, mobilise similar argumentative moves in order to justify their political choices and resist the practices of their political opponents in relation to refugees. In particular, this is shown to be achieved through a focus on national interests, rather than narrow party allegiances, with the use of rhetorical moves that present refugees as potential social threats, whilst at the same time presenting themselves as being compassionate towards vulnerable people.

These studies highlight the importance of understanding the use of discourses in relation to migration and asylum and the ways in which such political talk can create discursive spaces that allow for both the inclusion and exclusion of refugees and asylum seekers. As we have discussed here, the use of 'offshore processing' in countries such as Australia, has the potential to create a specific discursive space of exclusion and Kirkwood and Goodman (2018) argue for the importance of taking a discursive psychological approach to understanding how refugees and asylum seekers are constructed through discourse and go as far as to suggest that the consequences of which can be a matter of life or death. Therefore, given that the removal of refugees to Rwanda could be similarly regarded as a matter of life or death, it seems appropriate to take a discursive psychological approach to analyse the ways in which the policy has been constructed in parliamentary discourse. Specifically, the aim is to show how the policy is justified and resisted, legitimized and criticised, within the parliamentary debates by government and opposition politicians.

2. Methods

The data for this study come from the Hansard record of the Secretary of State for the Home Office's statement to the House of Commons on the 'Global Migration Challenge' (UK Parliament, 2022). This statement was delivered in the House of Commons by the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, on 19th April 2022 and was followed by debate among Members of Parliament about the statement. In total the session lasted around 90 minutes. 55 Members of Parliament (MPs) (in addition to Priti Patel as Home Secretary and the Speaker of the House of Commons) took part in asking questions to the Home Secretary and these MPs represented political parties from across the political and geographic spectrum of the UK. 27 of those who contributed to the debate were from the Conservative party, 20 from Labour, 3 from the Scottish National

Party, 2 Liberal Democrats, 1 Independent MP and 1 MP each from Plaid Cymru, the Democratic Unionist Party. Ethical approval for this research was provided by the Business, Law and Social Sciences Faculty Research Ethics Committee at the Authors' institution.

The transcript of the debate was downloaded from the UK Parliament Hansard website (UK Parliament, 2022), following which we read through the transcript several times to familiarise ourselves with the content of the parliamentary debate on the new policy. Following this, we engaged in a process of intensive coding of the data, identifying all sections of the transcript that involved specific justification of, or resistance to, the Rwanda policy announced in the statement. Finally, the principles of Discursive Psychology (Wiggins, 2016) were applied to the identified sections of the transcript to analyse the discursive features involved in justifying or resisting the policy and the function that such discourse had. Discursive psychology is a research methodology and form of critical discourse analysis that examines the discursive practices people undertake in pursuit of particular objectives (see Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Willig, 2008), such as – in the case of this study – defending or opposing the Rwanda policy. As a methodology, discursive psychology is underpinned by the idea that discourse is both constructive and constructed. In other words, discourses are generated from a specific set of cultural resources (e.g. words, expressions) but simultaneously position and create a particular version of the world. As such, discursive psychology is concerned with the action-orientation of discourse, and aims to elucidate how language is used to achieve context-specific functions (Wiggins, 2016). Following Potter and Wetherell (1987) we focussed on identifying the specific 'interpretative repertoires' used by speakers within the debate. Wetherell and Potter (1992, p.90) suggest that interpretative repertoires are 'broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech often assembled around metaphors or vivid images'. As such, our analysis of the debate involved identifying the discursive devices (Wiggins, 2016) which politicians used in the course of the debate when drawing on these repertoires and the functions that these had in justifying or resisting the Rwanda policy. More broadly we draw on recent work that has taken a discursive perspective to political communication (Demasi et al., 2020). When examining the transcript of the debate we have considered how various MP's manage stake and interest; the discursive strategies they draw on in this debate (for example, use of category entitlement, categorisations, and extreme case formulations) and what function these particular discursive strategies serve in this particular discursive context (Willig, 2008).

3. Analysis

In this section, we focus on 3 particular ways in which politicians justified and resisted the Rwanda policy within the House of Commons debate. In each case we demonstrate how the same repertoire/discourse is used by politicians on opposing sides of the political spectrum to achieve diverse discursive outcomes.

3.1 'Rwanda is a Safe Country': Justifying and Resisting the Policy on Safety Grounds

As part of her opening statement about the policy, Priti Patel states that:

Rwanda is a state party to the 1951 United Nations refugee convention and the seven core United Nations human rights conventions, and has a strong system for refugee resettlement. The United Nations has used Rwanda for several years to relocate refugees, and of course it was the European Union that first funded that.

Within this opening statement Patel does much of the discursive work that forms the basis of her later justifications for the policy and choosing Rwanda as an 'offshore processing' location in particular. From the outset, Rwanda is presented as a country that has the approval of major international organisations such as the UN and the EU and as a country which upholds the UN refugee convention. Interestingly this is one of the few mentions of the EU in the entire debate, throughout it is a noticeable silence, which may perhaps be due to the Conservative government choosing not to opt into the Dublin Convention as part of their post-Brexit deal. Indeed, when a member of the EU and a signatory to the Dublin Convention, the UK had the right to return any asylum seekers to the first EU country they had arrived in (Yeo, 2022). Overall, this opening statement by the Home Secretary constructs Rwanda as a safe country, a discursive strategy that is used throughout the debate by supporters of the policy.

In contrast to Patel's opening statement constructing Rwanda as a safe country, opposition members of Parliament also drew on notions of 'safety' to construct their resistance to the policy. In Extract 1, below, Alison Thewliss (a Scottish National Party MP), employs a similar strategy to Patel in using international agencies, and reporting their findings, to question the Home Secretary's suggestion that Rwanda is a safe country.

Extract 1: Resistance

My constituents want none of this despicable plan. As the chair of the all-party group on immigration detention I went to Napier barracks. It is not fit for purpose: it is cold, bleak and lacking in dignity and privacy. Vulnerable people struggle to get medical, social and legal support but at least we could visit. Can the Home Secretary tell me how facilities in Rwanda will be scrutinised, particularly given that Human Rights Watch says of Rwanda: "Arbitrary detention, ill-treatment, and torture in official and unofficial detention facilities is commonplace"? (Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP))

I would be delighted to tell the hon. Lady how accommodation facilities in Kigali in Rwanda will be scrutinised. That is part of the monitoring work the Home Office and technical officials have established and is part of the memorandum of understanding—as if she has read the details in the MOU. (Priti Patel)

Thewliss begins her speech using emotive terms to describe the policy as 'despicable' and draws explicit comparisons between temporary asylum accommodation in the UK and the accommodation expected to be used in Rwanda. She uses a form of category entitlement as the chair of the all-party

group on immigration detention to add weight to her comparison. Her use of ‘at least we could visit’ implies that beyond simply being accessible to visitors, it is also open to scrutiny and the ability to be monitored to ensure it is safe for residents, which would be less possible with accommodation in Rwanda. Whilst the poor conditions in the UK accommodation are noted and stressed with the use of a three-part list (‘cold, bleak and lacking in dignity and privacy’), they are used to draw a comparison with reports of ‘torture’ and ‘ill-treatment’ of residents in detention in Rwanda, which further constructs Rwanda as being a country that is not safe. In response, Patel once again justifies the policy on the basis of Rwanda being a safe country by suggesting that the accommodation would be ‘scrutinized’ by the Home Office.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, Rwanda was also constructed as a safe country by supporters of the Home Secretary’s policy. Extract 2, below, demonstrates how many Conservative MPs within this debate attempted to justify the policy by accusing those who resisted the policy on the grounds of safety as being prejudiced about Rwanda and ill-informed.

Extract 2: Justifying

Ever since this policy was announced over the bank holiday weekend, we have heard some very strong rhetoric from the Opposition parties, leaning into some very lazy tropes about Africa and dripping with European exceptionalism. Can I ask my right hon. Friend whether she agrees with me in condemning that kind of language when talking about Rwanda, and can I advise her to keep on this course, because when I was talking to my constituents over the weekend, the one phrase everyone was using was ‘not before time’? (Chris Clarkson (Heywood and Middleton) (Con))

I thank my hon. Friend for his comments, and I refer to some of the undercurrents of the tone that has been used—not just in this House today, but more broadly—about our partnership with Rwanda. I could go so far as to say that some of this is quite xenophobic and, quite frankly, I think it is deeply egregious. Rwanda is one of the fastest growing countries in Africa, and we have an incredible partnership with it. Rwanda will be the host of the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting later this year, and it is leading the way on the international stage on many international issues. I actually think this is pretty distasteful, and it says a great deal about Opposition Members’ understanding of global Britain and internationalism. (Priti Patel)

In this extract we see consensus developed between the Conservative MP Chris Clarkson and the Home Secretary that justifies the policy on the grounds of safety through positioning opposition MPs (and those who oppose the policy on safety grounds) as misinformed at best, or prejudiced at worst, about Rwanda (and Africa), which is emphasised through the repeated use of the extreme case formulation ‘very’ within that sentence (Edwards, 2000). Clarkson begins by suggesting that opposition parties have used ‘strong rhetoric’ but goes on to suggest that this includes ‘lazy tropes about Africa’ and ‘European exceptionalism’. In developing consensus, the Home Secretary takes this further with her response and suggests that those who oppose the policy on safety grounds are both ‘xenophobic’ and ‘egregious’. In this way consensus is built between the two Conservative politicians that Rwanda is a safe country and that to suggest otherwise would be ‘xenophobic’. Such accusations of xenophobia are perhaps ironic given the plan they have devised and support

relates to the removal of people from other countries that they would regard as undesirable.

3.2 ‘We Must Break their Lethal and Evil Business Model’: Deterrence of People Smugglers as a Primary Justification but at what Cost?

A second key repertoire that we identified in the data related to a focus on the policy as a way of deterring people smugglers. Indeed, for several years, Conservative politicians, as we discussed above, have suggested that leaving the EU would bring greater control over migration policy, i.e. that they are acting in the national interest, and by focussing on deterring people smugglers they are also able to justify their policy as being compassionate towards refugees. In Extract 3, below, we see an example of how this justification of the policy positions people smugglers as ‘evil’, the UK Government as a ‘proud’ protector of refugees and those who oppose the policy as apathetic.

Extract 3: Justifying

I am incredibly proud of this country and this Government’s track record in providing a safe welcome to more than 185,000 asylum seekers and refugees since 2015, but I hope that my right hon. Friend will be ramping up the welcome for Ukrainian refugees—I know she will be working flat out at it. What I find abhorrent and inexplicable is the way in which many Opposition Members, and even those in the top echelons in the Church of England and in other faiths, seem to have completely forgotten the images of children lying drowned on our beaches. How can they not seek to try to remedy that appalling situation? These people are not refugees and asylum seekers—they are coming from France. (Dame Andrea Leadsom (South Northamptonshire) (Con))

I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments and observations. She will be well aware of the work that our noble Friend Lord Harrington is currently doing in the other place on the Ukrainian scheme in terms of resettling people and bringing people over for the Homes for Ukraine scheme. The left in particular like to preach compassion, but there is little compassion when they do not have the backbone to make difficult decisions when it comes to the protection of human life. For months and months, they have talked about saving lives and lost lives, and now that there is the prospect of action to save lives and to go after the evil people smugglers, they wring their hands and choose to play party political games. (Priti Patel)

In this extract, Conservative MP Andrea Leadsom draws on emotive imagery, referencing ‘children lying drowned’ to underscore the urgency of supporting the Rwanda policy. Both Leadsom and Patel establish a false equivalence between criticism of the Rwanda policy and apathy in the face of people smuggling. By framing the Rwanda policy as the only viable (and compassionate) solution to addressing people smuggling, the possibility of any alternative approaches are muted within this discourse. The Conservative Party is repeatedly constructed by both Leadsom and Patel with an emphasis on action and morality (‘track record in providing safe welcome’, ‘working flat out’), with ‘the left’ – in contrast – being positioned as passive (‘for months and months, they have talked’), disinterested (‘little compassion’, ‘completely forgotten images of dying children’) and cowardly (‘do not have the backbone

to make difficult decisions’, ‘wring their hands and choose to play party political games’), with repetition and hyperbole used throughout to lend weight to these constructions. Additionally, a careful distinction is made by Leadsom between migrants ‘coming from France’ and others such as Ukrainian refugees. This categorisation of types of migrants acts to legitimise the variation in the responses considered appropriate by the Conservative Party. Actions to ‘ramp up the welcome’ are seen as suitable for Ukrainian refugees, however, anything but the Rwanda policy proposed in response to migrants arriving ‘from France’ for example, is constructed as ‘abhorrent’ inaction. Whilst in Leadsom’s intervention no mention is made specifically of people smugglers, Patel constructs her consensus with her party members. Patel’s focus on the ‘evil’ of the people smugglers, obfuscates the many other sources of harm refugees and asylum seekers may face, indeed harm caused by the policies of her own Government.

Extract 4: Resistance

The Home Secretary says that this policy will deter boats and traffickers, but the permanent secretary says otherwise: he says that there is no evidence of a deterrent effect, and that there has been a total failure to crack down on the criminal gangs that are at the heart of this problem. The number of prosecutions for human trafficking and non-sexual exploitation has fallen from 59 in 2015 to just two in 2020. The criminals will not be deterred because someone whom they exploited was sent to Rwanda. They do not give money-back guarantees under which they lose money if their victims end up somewhere else instead. They will just spin more lies. The Home Secretary is totally failing to crack down on criminal gangs. Why does she not get on with her basic job, crack down on human traffickers, do the serious work with France and Belgium to prevent the boats from setting out in the first place—which she did not even mention in her statement—and make decisions fast? (Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab))

That response to my statement was, if I may say so, wholly predictable. It is important to say to everyone in the House that we cannot put a price on saving human lives, and I think everyone will respect that completely. The right hon. Member for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford (Yvette Cooper) was a Minister in the Blair Government when the powers that give this Government the legal basis for this policy were introduced. When she occupied a seat in the Blair Government, I do not remember her exploding in synthetic rage when all those policies were implemented, after Acts were passed in 1999, 2002 and 2004 to bring about similar partnerships—the same partnerships, by the way, that were used to establish the Dublin regulations to return inadmissible asylum seekers to EU member states. The right hon. Lady has gone on record multiple times attacking the Government for abandoning those regulations, and at the same time calling for a replacement. Now she is attacking the Government for using the very powers that only a few weeks ago she said we could still be using if we had not left the EU. (Priti Patel)

Those in opposition to the policy, such as the Labour MP Yvonne Clarkson, similarly emphasise the evil of people smuggling with repeated reference to ‘criminal gangs’, however, this construction is instead used to resist the Rwanda policy and argue for other forms of intervention. Where Leadsom draws on emotive imagery to underpin her argument in extract 3, Clarkson establishes corroboration and legitimacy for her position by referencing ‘evidence from the

permanent secretary' and drawing on statistics that indicate that the policy will not deter people smugglers. Clarkson challenges Patel and Leadsom's framing of the Conservative Party as moral and proactive, by foregrounding other actions that may be taken to address people smuggling and positioning these as a logical and essential part of the Home Secretary's 'basic job'. In this construction, the Conservative Party's inaction is emphasised with the use of extreme case formulations such as 'a total failure to crack down on the criminal gangs' (Edwards, 2000).

3.3 'What the People Want': Priorities of the Public as Justification for and Resistance to the Policy

The final key discursive repertoire that we identified focusses on the ways in which politicians constructed a sense of consensus with the British public when justifying and resisting the Rwanda policy, as something that the 'people' want or do not want. In Extract 5, below, the Conservative MP Lee Anderson begins his turn by using the first-person plural pronoun 'we', which is typically employed in political speech to reinforce a sense of cohesion, to emphasise the collective identity of those in support of the Policy, in this case in contrast to the outgroup of 'the Opposition' (Filardo-Llamas & Boyd, 2017).

Extract 5: Justifying

We can see from the level of questions coming from the Opposition, especially the Labour party, that they are completely out of touch with the British public. In the interests of safety, can the Home Secretary please confirm that if anybody does not want to go to Rwanda, they can claim asylum in France? (Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Con))

France is a safe country. (Priti Patel)

Anderson constructs the Labour Party's views on migration as incongruent with those of the general public, using the extreme case formulation 'completely' to highlight his point (Edwards, 2000). Evoking the will of the 'British public' is a form of aggregation, through which group nouns are used to "manufacture consensus opinion" (van Leeuwen, 2008, p. 37). Indeed, attempts at legislative and policy reform are often justified in political rhetoric through suggestions that they are considered legitimate by a majority group (van Leeuwen, 2008). Whilst in this extract the response from Patel is brief and achieves consensus with Anderson on the safety of countries that asylum seekers may pass through on route to the UK, in Extract 6 below, Patel, at another point of the debate, more explicitly draws on the 'what the people want' repertoire when responding to a Conservative colleague.

Extract 6: Justifying

I thank my hon. Friend for his support and his comments. As I said earlier, I think the Opposition should just be honest about their position. They clearly stand for open borders; they do not believe in controlled immigration. We have a points-based immigration system that provides legal routes for people to come to the United Kingdom. They do not want the differentiation between legal and illegal routes, but I will tell you who does, Madam Deputy Speaker—the British people. (Priti Patel)

Patel begins by again emphasising the coherence within her own party by thanking Lee Anderson for his support of the Policy. As with Extract 3 and her reference to the Labour Party's 'apathy', here Patel frames opposition to the Policy as a sign of deficiency within the Opposition, in this case, an indication of their dishonesty. Much like how Patel earlier created a false equivalence between opposition to the policy and enabling people smugglers, she constructs all objection to the Policy as a form of blanket support for policies that embrace open borders. She then immediately sets up these policies as directly against the will of the British people, with a collective noun once again used to imply majority consensus.

Contrastingly, as with the other discursive repertoires we have discussed, this repertoire was also used by opposition politicians as a way of resisting the Policy and again attempting to seek consensus, this time by suggesting that the 'people' have other priorities and do not agree with the government's proposed policy.

Extract 7: Resistance

The Home Secretary is using this policy to distract people from years of failure. She promised three years ago to halve the number of crossings, but it has increased tenfold, and this will make trafficking worse. The top police chief and anti-slavery commissioner has said that the Home Secretary's legislation will make it harder to prosecute traffickers. When Israel tried paying Rwanda to take refugees and asylum seekers a few years ago, independent reports showed that that increased people-smuggling and increased the action of the criminal gangs. This is the damage that the Home Secretary is doing. She is making things easier for the criminal gangs and harder for those who need support, at a time when people across our country have come forward to help those who are fleeing Ukraine—to help desperate refugees. Instead of working properly with other countries, the Home Secretary is doing the opposite. All she is doing is making things easier for the criminal gangs. (Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab))

Unlike Lee Anderson and the Home Secretary who reference the will of the British people but do not offer further evidence of broader public support for the Policy, Yvette Cooper achieves consensus in this extract by naming specific actions that the British public have taken (helping Ukrainian refugees), which she positions as at odds with support for the proposed Rwanda Policy. Cooper lends weight to this construction by grounding these actions in the present moment ('at a time when') and emphasising the breadth of the national support for Ukrainian refugees ('across our country'). Additionally, while the Home Secretary positions the Conservative Party as in touch with the desires of the British public, Yvette Cooper constructs the Conservative party as manipulating the British people and attempting to use the Rwanda policy to obfuscate the Government's failed track record in relation to addressing people smuggling. Cooper works to build the factuality of this construction by corroborating this claim in reference to named experts ('the top police chief and anti-slavery commissioner'). Indeed, citing an expert other is a common way that politicians lend rhetorical power to their claims and demonstrate corroboration (Dickerson, 1997). It is clear that both the Conservative Party and the Opposition, utilise popular consensus in building their arguments around the Rwanda Policy. Politicians across the political spectrum justify their political

ends by constructing particular versions of 'the British public'. Within the discursive space of the same debate, we see the public's wants and needs invoked in conflicting ways, with these varied constructions enabling and limiting different actions.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

In this article we have demonstrated how MPs in the UK Parliament used similar discursive strategies to both justify and resist the government's recently announced policy to send asylum seekers to Rwanda to have their asylum claims determined. As such it adds to the growing body of discursive and political psychology research that has explored parliamentary discourse in relation to migration (e.g. Figgou & Anagnostopoulou, 2020; Goodman & Kirkwood, 2019; Kirkwood, 2017, 2019) and the small but emerging body of research on the Rwanda policy (e.g. Chaloner et al., 2022; Collyer & Shahani, 2023; Morano-Foadi & Malena, 2023; Smith et al., 2023). The decision to create a partnership with Rwanda and to remove asylum seekers there represents a step up in the UK government's hostile rhetoric and actions in relation to asylum seekers and as such it is perhaps unsurprising that the debate on this issue was polarised within the parliamentary session we analysed. However, we highlighted that, despite this polarisation, the policy was both justified and resisted in the debate using similar discursive repertoires focussing on the safety of Rwanda, the deterrence of people smugglers and being 'what the people want'. Whilst the safety of Rwanda was questioned by opposition politicians as a form of resistance, it was used by the Home Secretary as a way of implying that the opposition MPs lacked knowledge about Africa and that their claims were xenophobic. In this way accusations of the policy itself being racist or xenophobic were effectively countered by instead constructing the individuals who make those claims as the ones who are xenophobic, supporting Durrheim et al.'s (2018) findings about the ways in which accusations of racism were rebuffed by right-wing populist politicians in the Brexit campaign. Similarly, through use of a discursive repertoire about the evil of people smugglers, consensus was created that people smugglers were the problem which left opposition politicians with little discursive space to create alternative lines of argument to oppose the policy, such as the creation of safe routes for refugees to be able to come to the United Kingdom. Finally, justification of, and resistance to, the policy was created through drawing on a repertoire of being 'what the people want'. In both uses of this repertoire the British people are constructed as caring and compassionate and, as with other repertoires, opposition politicians base this on examples and evidence. However, in justifying the policy, MPs from the government offer no such evidence of this being 'what the people want'. Thus a clear distinction is made between groups that the British people are supposedly caring and compassionate about; a more inclusive group of world citizens when resisting the policy and a narrower more exclusive group of British nationals when justifying the policy. However, it is important to note that although within a democratic political system, political policies should to some extent reflect the will of the majority, in emphasising popular consensus to justify or resist the

Rwanda Policy, these politicians ignore that majority public support for a policy is not necessarily a reflection of a policy's intrinsic fairness, justness or value. Indeed, 'appeals to the people' and majority consensus have been used throughout history to uphold and promote fascist and discriminatory political policies. In justifying the policy in this narrower way, it creates a space in which any immigration, unless bringing direct economic benefits to the British people and explicitly reflecting the will of the majority, becomes problematic and again silences suggestions that safe and legal routes are a solution to the 'problem' rather than those proposed in the Rwanda policy.

Despite much international criticism of countries such as Australia that have used 'offshore processing' as a means of denying asylum seekers entry to their country (e.g. Matera et al., 2023), these criticisms were rarely drawn upon during the debate, despite opposition politicians frequently resisting the policy using research evidence and statistics. Similarly, the United Kingdom's decision to leave the European Union (Brexit) was another notable silence within this debate, despite support for Brexit often being framed around controlling immigration and 'taking back control of our border' (Goodman, 2017). Interestingly, Durrheim et al.'s (2018) analysis of debates around the United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) "Breaking Point" poster in relation to Brexit identified that supporters and critics of Nigel Farage used similar discursive strategies when discussing whether or not the poster was racist. In that context they describe the rhetorical collaboration that exists between defenders and critics of racism but also point to the problems that this creates for antiracist movements when social elites and right-wing populists also draw on these terms and struggles to advance their own agenda. We would argue that this type of rhetorical collaboration was also evident in the debate that we analysed and suggest that this similarly creates problems for supporters of refugees, asylum seekers and migrants in carving out a clear discursive space for their arguments. Indeed, at present in UK politics, there seems to be little opportunity for opposition politicians to be decidedly pro-migration when such rhetorical collaboration that we have analysed here appears to take precedence. Arguably, this rhetorical collaboration, is indicative of the relative consensus around border sovereignty and securitisation that exists among politicians of the major political parties in the UK. To this end, it is important to acknowledge that although current members of the Opposition may attempt to resist the more recent punitive policies proposed by the Conservative Party, the previous New Labour Governments of the late 1990s and early 2000s did introduce many restrictive pieces of legislation and policy reforms around immigration. These Labour Party policies can in many ways be seen to have laid the groundwork for the generally hostile approach towards and brutal treatment of refugees and asylum seekers taken up by the Conservative Government since they have been in power (Sales, 2002). At the time of writing in Summer 2023 it remains the case that no asylum seekers have yet been sent to Rwanda from the UK despite it being over 14 months since the debate in parliament that we have analysed here. However, it remains a key part of the government's rhetoric and new reforms of immigration policy and is discussed frequently in parliament and in the media using the types of repertoires we have discussed here. Given that the UK Supreme Court ruled in June 2023 that the policy was unlawful and represented a risk of refoulement for asylum seekers sent there, it

remains to be seen if or when this policy will become more than just rhetoric. As we have argued here, it is important that, in resisting this, and other aspects of the current Conservative government's hostile approach to immigration (and asylum seekers in particular), opposition parties should seek to create an alternative discursive space that avoids engaging in the type of rhetorical collaboration we have highlighted here, and which ultimately rejects discourses of border sovereignty and securitisation in favour of more humane and constructive approaches to immigration and asylum.

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