

Justifying harsh treatment of asylum seekers through the support of social cohesion

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Abstract

In this article I show how politicians and other members in the asylum debate in the UK use arguments about social cohesion to simultaneously present themselves as caring about social relations while also justifying the harsh treatment of asylum seekers. A discourse analysis of a corpus of public domain media texts is used to identify two arguments utilising this strategy. First, that we must be tough on asylum seekers to protect social cohesion, and second, that we must be tough on asylum seekers to prevent the ‘far right’ from gaining support. I discuss how these arguments rely on existing prejudice to justify further prejudicial treatment of asylum seekers, and how members utilise the positive values of anti-prejudice precisely in the service of justifying prejudicial policies.

Key words: Asylum Seekers, Discourse Analysis, Social Cohesion, Prejudice.

Introduction

Inter-group relations represent an important area of research within both social and discursive psychology (DP). Where ‘traditional’ cognitive and experimental social psychologists treat social cohesion – a state of supposedly positive inter-group relations – as a desired goal to be worked towards such as Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1970) and Self Categorisation Theory (Turner, 1987 et al.), in this article I will instead follow the Discursive Psychological approach (e.g. Edwards and Potter, 1992) and instead address how the concept of social cohesion is mobilised and used rhetorically in talk about asylum seekers in the UK.

Asylum seekers have had increasingly harsh measures implemented against them in the UK (Schuster, 2004; Verkuyten, 2005, see also Goodman, 2007; Goodman and Speer, 2007). Asylum legislation is designed to keep asylum seekers from arriving in the country (Weber, 2003). Ghebrehewet et al (2002) state that there is inadequate support for asylum seekers that do arrive and Jones (2001) claims that this lack of support, and rights alongside the continued detention of asylum seekers, amounts to discrimination. Asylum Seekers are therefore increasingly described in the academic literature as vulnerable people (Stewart, 2005; Williams, 2004). In addition, the Refugee Council describe the 2005 Immigration, Asylum and Nationality bill as containing ‘worrying proposals’ (2005a: 1) which include tightening the country’s borders, fast-tracking applications and more detention of asylum seekers (Refugee Council, 2005a). The key question in this article is how is this prejudicial treatment justified and what role does talk about social cohesion play in making such justifications?

The media portrayal of asylum seekers has also been shown to be negative and damaging to asylum seekers (Coole, 2002; Greenslade, 2005). Layton-Henry (1992) Sales (2002) and Steiner (2000) show how asylum seekers are presented as only coming to the country for financial gains which is inconsistent with the finding of Neumayer's (2005) finding that asylum seekers flee oppression, violence and human rights abuses. This has led Schuster and Bloch (2002) to argue that it is this media attention that has led to demands for policy change to restrict their access.

A range of conversational resources are used to justify this harsh treatment of asylum seekers. For example, war and natural disaster analogies, such as floods and invasions, have been shown to be effective in making an 'inflow' of people appear to be problematic (Van Dijk 2000a; 2000b; Van der Valk 2003). Rhetorical work has been shown to differentiate 'them', the asylum seekers, from 'us', the British, in a discursive bid to 'other' these asylum seekers and to discursively remove from them the level of care that would be expected towards British citizens (Lynn and Lea, 2003; 2005; Mehan, 1997, van den Berg et al., 2003, Van der Valk, 2003; van Dijk, 1997, Verkuyten, 2001; 2003; 2005).

Following from asylum seekers being constructed as only entering the country for economic benefits (Layton-Henry, 1992; Sales, 2002; Steiner 2000) there has been a rhetorical separation of 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers (Goodman and Speer, 2007; Lynn and Lea, 2003, Sales, 2002). This means that the 'bogus' asylum seekers can be seen as the target for the tough policies while the 'genuine' asylum seekers are still spoken about sympathetically. Nevertheless, this separation allows for the harsh treatment of *all* asylum seekers as the assumption becomes that all asylum seekers are potentially bogus. Alongside this separation there is also the merger of these two categories to present all asylum seekers simply as immigrants (Goodman and Speer, 2007) which has the effect of denying asylum seekers the special conditions that separate them from other immigrants (that is that asylum seekers are seeking refuge from danger).

Goodman, (forthcoming) has shown how opposition to asylum has come to be presented as not racist so that those arguing for the prejudicial treatment of asylum seekers are unlikely to have to deal seriously with accusations of racism. In a debate about the potential separation of asylum seeking families, Goodman (2007) has shown how asylum seeking families are constructed as loving units by supporters of asylum, but are dehumanised through the negative construction of 'breeding units' by opponents of asylum seeking.

Materials and Procedures

Rather than treating 'race' and 'social cohesion' as stable categories, this paper uses discursive psychology (Edwards and Potter, 1992; Lynn and Lea, 2003; Wetherell, 1998) in treating these concepts not as rigid notions but as discursive strategies. Here, talk about race relations can be viewed as a rhetorical tool that can be used to justify particular treatments of asylum seekers. I am interested in the action orientation of talk; I 'observe how language is used to see what speakers/writers are doing with discourse' (Billig and MacMillan, 2005). All of the extracts in this report are examples of people justifying tighter asylum controls or fewer asylum seekers on the basis of protecting good race

relations in the country. They are drawn from a corpus of ‘public domain media texts’ (Leudar et al, 2004: 245) which all form part of the Dialogical Network about asylum seekers. The concept of the Dialogical Network (Leudar and Nekvapil, 2004) is inspired by Bakhtin’s writings on polyphony (1973). Dialogical Networks are debates that are played out in the public sphere – not in a conventional conversational manner, but over time and space. For example, a newspaper article may be written in response to several earlier comments, and may itself be responded to by multiple voices in different media.

All this data is available to the public as part of the society-wide debate about asylum seekers and how they should be treated. This corpus contains data collected between November 2002 and September 2006 from sources including thirty hours of television programmes including speeches, news programmes and debate shows; radio programmes, newspaper and magazine articles, political speeches and internet message boards. Extracts were chosen for inclusion after a date trawl of utterances where speakers are referring to social relations. It soon became clear that there were a large number of extracts where social relations were referred to. Once this more ‘thematic’ analysis was completed I began a more detailed analysis of the ‘action orientation’ (Edwards and Potter, 1992) of my data extracts. It was through the analysis of these extracts that I developed the two major areas of this analysis: that harsh policies towards asylum seekers are justified by i) claiming it is to protect social cohesion and ii) claiming it is to prevent extremists. Of these many extracts I selected those extracts that are both representative and symptomatic of the strategies I am demonstrating. All transcribeable data was transcribed using a ‘simplified version of the Jeffersonian’ convention (Clarke, Kitzinger and Potter, 2004: 535)¹ to show details of the talk, while remaining accessible to all readers.

Analysis

This analysis contains two sections. The first describes the argument which can be described as ‘be tough on asylum to protect social cohesion’, the second studies the construction of the argument ‘be tough on asylum to prevent right wing extremists’.

Be tough on asylum to protect social cohesion:

In this first section I look at the way in which calls to be tough on asylum seekers are justified on the grounds of protecting social cohesion. Here, we begin to see how social cohesion gets mobilised as a members’ category. This first extract, from a televised debate, sees the presenter, Murnaghan in conversation with the then immigration minister, Beverly Hughes.

Extract One: Asylum: Face the Nation. BBC1. 23/07/03

- | | |
|--------------|---|
| 1. Murnaghan | OK (.) OK (.) well lets get Beverly Hughes back on |
| 2. | that it’s a mish-mash (.) virtually irreformable |
| 3. | the system [(.) xxx tinkering at the margins |
| 4. B Hughes | [there’s certainly still (.) there’s certainly still a long |
| 5. | way to go but I I mean I have to say I think that’s pretty ironic |
| 6. | from my point of view because .hhh I’m afraid Oliver and er |

¹ See Atkinson and Heritage, 1984: ix-xvi for details of the Jeffersonian transcription conventions.

7. Simon here opposed all the measures (.) er .hhh that we brought
8. in in recent legislation they opposed the closing of Sangatte
9. they've oppo opposed the joint border controls (.) with France
10. that were bringing in (.) that have actually in the first quarter
11. of this year (.) reduced the intake reduced the number of claims
12. compared to the (.) quarter last year by a third already and
13. we're certainly on target to meet the er (.) the objective of
14. reducing the claims by half in September and I might say .hhh
15. y'know (.) I don't share (.) er Oliver's pessimism (.) I think
16. we are radically transforming the system and generating
17. public confidence in er in the asylum system .hhh it's a
18. fundamental prerequisite for us its fundamental for community
19. relations in this country (.) its fundamental to the whole
20. question of immigration which is a separate issue .hhh erm uhm
21. which I hope we'll be able to talk about tonight
22. Murnaghan Well Tony Saint you've er worked in the er ...

Beverly Hughes, then immigration minister, justifies the harsh treatment of asylum seekers (outlined on lines 7-14) on the grounds of aiding social cohesion. On lines 16 and 17 the measures taken are presented as 'generating public confidence in the asylum system'. Hughes uses a three part list – a structural device which can bolster the case being made by emphasising that the object being described is normative (Jefferson, 1990) – to highlight how important and critical she is claiming confidence in the system is: it is fundamental for 1: 'us' (line 18), 2: 'community relations in the country' (lines 18/19) and, 3: 'the whole question of immigration' (lines 19/20). In this extract, then, good community relations are presented by Hughes as the desired outcome, which can only be achieved if public confidence in the asylum system exists, which in turn is being generated by the Labour party through the tough measures they have used. This justification allows Hughes and her party to appear moral and caring, as displayed by their orientation to the positive values of good community relations, precisely because of their harsh dealings with asylum seekers.

The following interaction takes place minutes after the previous extract and shows Hughes restating her previous point about a tough asylum policy maintaining social cohesion. Then Sir Andrew Green, the head of the influential anti-immigration think tank Migration Watch UK, claims that there is a lack of toughness that will damage social cohesion (lines 20-21).

Extract Two: Asylum: Face the Nation. BBC1. 23/07/03

1. Murnaghan [s s Beverly Hughes this is
2. a problem for you or all the mainstream parliamentary parties
3. isn't it?
4. B Hughes That's why we've been trying in government to deal with it
5. and I do reject what Peter's just said about not having a debate
6. I mean David Blunkett's and Jack Straw before him have raised
7. this issue and been criticised for (.) many of the measures (.) er
8. which as I said before Simon an' an' Oliver opposed us on (.)
9. in making sure that we do toughen up the asylum system (.) I

10. think as I say public confidence in that system is crucial (.) uhm
11. and that's why we brought in the measures that we've brought
12. in
13. Murnaghan =Well Andrew Green I saw you waving there er er they're
14. talking tough (.) are they getting tough enough?
15. Green (.) Well (.) let me say first we have a large post bag and one
16. of the things that people say a constant theme is "thank
17. goodness someone is at last raising this matter in rational terms
18. (.) that we can associate ourselves with .hhh (.) and I think
19. there's a real risk (.) that people are going to feel that (.) er
20. immigration and asylum is not under control (.) and this is
21. what is undermining confidence in the system (.) and doing
22. great damage I think to community relations (.)

Here, both speakers talk of the need to be tough on asylum to protect community relations. Beverly Hughes restates the comments she made in extract one, here being more explicit in her linking of a tough system and public confidence: 'that's why we brought in the measures we've brought in' (lines 11&12). As in extract one, Hughes justifies the 'tough' (line 9) treatment of asylum seekers on the grounds of 'public confidence' (line 10) which again presents her actions as moral, reasonable and defensible.

After Hughes, Murnaghan selects Andrew Green to speak (lines 13 & 14) by asking if they (Labour) are 'getting tough enough' (line 14); a formulation which invites a 'no' response (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 303). Green does disagree with Hughes, but does not directly respond to what she said. Before he makes a point that mirrors Hughes' he provides a little background to his group, Migration Watch UK, and attempts to build its credibility by referring to the mail it receives which claims that it is 'raising the matter in rational terms that we can associate ourselves with' (lines 17&18). By emphasising the group's popularity ('large post bag' line 15) and rationality (line 17), Green works to show that it is reasonable and representative, that is he shows the group's worthiness and is rhetorically boosting its credentials (Wetherell, 2003: 19); this dissociates it from criticisms of prejudice and extremism. Goffman (1981) used the term 'footing' to describe who a speaker is speaking on behalf of (this may be the individual or a group level identity). Here, Green's footing is one in which he positions himself as speaking for a great deal of the public which aids an appearance of neutrality (Clayman and Heritage, 2002: 186).

Green uses these letters of support as evidence for what he considers to be the 'risk' (line 19) that people will feel that 'asylum is not under control' (line 20). Green claims that this will do 'damage' to 'community relations' (line 22). Good community relations are, according to Green, worthy of maintaining and dependent on there being confidence in the asylum system; this confidence will only exist if the system is under control, which in turn means a tough system (strictly limited immigration is the aim of Migration Watch UK). Tight immigration and less asylum is therefore presented as necessary for good community relations. Here, as with the previous extract, restricted asylum is presented as a means to the moral end of preserving community relations.

The following extract shows the immigration minister, Des Browne, in a speech to parliament as part of the debate over the bill that became the Asylum and Immigration Act of 2005. In his bid to promote the new bill we see him equate confidence in the asylum system with good social cohesion.

Extract Three: Asylum and Immigration (Treatment of Claimants, etc.) Bill debate. Hansard 12/07/2004 Column 1188.²

1. Browne: We believe that the best way is for them to engage in activities
2. for the benefit of the community in which they are staying. The
3. Government believe that it is essential for continuing social cohesion
4. the public have confidence in the asylum system. The UK must
5. continue to offer sanctuary to those who have a well-founded fear of
6. persecution. However, both social cohesion and public support for our
7. international obligations can be undermined when failed asylum
8. seekers—those who by definition have no right to remain in the United
9. Kingdom—are receiving state support while giving nothing back. If
10. hon. Members are in any doubt about that, they should see my postbag
11. on the subject. It is true that, generally speaking, hard case support
12. is available only as an interim measure when return is not immediately
13. possible. However, there is a real danger that public concern about
14. state support continuing to be offered to failed asylum seekers who
15. have no right to remain in the UK could fuel misconceptions and
16. prejudices about other asylum and immigration issues, which could
17. have adverse effects on social cohesion in particular communities. To
18. maintain confidence in the system, and to protect social cohesion at
19. local level, taxpayers need to be satisfied that those receiving state
20. support acknowledge the cost to others and the attendant
21. responsibilities that are placed on them. By participating in community
22. activities, failed asylum seekers will be occupying themselves
23. purposefully. This will reduce the potential for tension that could
24. otherwise surface.

Browne claims that it is ‘essential’ (line 3) to have public confidence and that it is this confidence that he is trying to ensure with the proposal of new policies to make failed asylum seekers work for their support. In justifying this new, contentious, policy, Browne contrasts the right to asylum (lines 4-6) with failed asylum seekers ‘receiving state support while giving nothing back’ (line 9). This contrasts a fair and just system (the right to asylum) with an unfair abuse of the system, which presents the policy as ‘firm but fair’ where ‘the humanitarian aims are recognised, but at the same time they are rejected as being ‘too idealistic’ (van Dijk, 1993: 189). It is this abuse that Browne claims can ‘undermine’ (line 7) social cohesion and it is for this reason that the abuse must be ended.

³ This speech is reproduced from Hansard publications.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200304/cmhansrd/cm040712/debtext/40712-21.htm>

It is therefore transcribed by their criteria, and not in the more detailed way developed from Jefferson’s approach. Pauses, emphasis and intonation, for example are not noted

Browne reiterates this point when he speaks of the ‘real danger’ (line 13) associated with a lack of public confidence. This suggests that social cohesion is finely balanced and that failing to placate ‘public concern’ (line 13) could have terrible and dangerous consequences. ‘Concern’ here is used to refer to public opinion about an issue that could equally be described as reactionary or unjust (see Potter and Hepburn, 2003). The reasoning in this section of the address is that public concern may ‘fuel’ (line 15) prejudice that would damage social cohesion. Social cohesion is presented as the unquestioned desired goal and the policies being proposed are presented as designed to ensure this. The term ‘fuel’ suggests that prejudice always exists in society, waiting to emerge given the opportunity; an opportunity which may be provided by the appearance that asylum seekers are not being treated harshly enough. It is on the grounds of this existing prejudice that Browne is able to justify the harsh treatment of failed asylum seekers.

Despite Browne’s theme of social cohesion and how prejudice is always potentially about to ‘surface’ (line 24) if not dealt with, there is a strong ‘them’ and ‘us’ theme running through the speech. In line one Browne separates ‘we’ and ‘them’ and throughout he differentiates the ‘public’ (lines 4&13) (and ‘taxpayers’ (line 19)) from ‘failed asylum seekers’ (lines 7, 14 &22). This means that the ‘them and us’ dichotomy (Lynn and Lea, 2003; 2005; Mehan, 1997, van den Berg et al., 2003, Van der Valk, 2003; van Dijk, 1997, Verkuyten, 2001; 2003; 2005) which has the effect of separating asylum seekers from the British ‘us’ is used alongside and in the service of the seemingly conflicting message of social cohesion that Browne claims to be advocating.

This section has looked at the ways in which the argument is made that asylum should be limited to protect the society that already exists. This argument relies on existing prejudice (‘natives’ and ‘foreigners’ cannot mix without trouble, and British race relations are so poor that racism is always bubbling under the surface) to justify further prejudice in the form of a tougher asylum system. It allows the speakers to present themselves as guardians of good community relations, which allows them immunity from accusations of undue harshness and prejudice.

Be tough on asylum to prevent right wing extremists:

In this section I will analyse the related, yet distinct argument that justifies a tough asylum system on the grounds of preventing right wing extremists, such as the British National Party, from gaining electoral success. The first extract in this section shows Andrew Green of Migration Watch UK doing precisely this.

Extract Four: BBC 1 o’clock News – Howard Immigration speech 24/01/2005

1. Sanford the chairman of the anti
2. immigration organisation migration (.) watch toured the studios
3. this morning (.) welcoming Conservative proposals to reduce
4. those figures (.) sharply
5. Green eighty percent of the population want to see much tougher
6. immigration control:s (.) including very importantly .hhh
7. fifty two percent .hhh of the ethnic minority communities (.)
8. when public er feeling is that stro:ng (.) the main political

9. parties must respond to it (.) or they leave the field wide
10. open to the extremists

This news report follows an announcement by the Conservative leader, Michael Howard, about a new, tough asylum system³. The presenter, Sanford, introduces Andrew Green as the chair of Migration Watch. Green uses statistics to show that many people ('80%', line 5) want tougher controls; this also presents Green as informative, serious and precise about immigration as 80% is more persuasive than simply stating 'many people' (See van Dijk (2000b) for a discussion of the 'numbers game'). Green then invokes the voice of 'ethnic minority communities' (line 7) who he claims also want tougher controls. Opponents of immigration and asylum often invoke ethnic minorities in their arguments (Goodman, 2007); this is a very useful footing (Goffman, 1981) as it presents the speaker as both neutral and aligned with, not opposed to, potential recipients of racism. The use of 'communities' (line 7) (rather than say, 'people') is also relevant as it is consistent with the good community relation argument made in the previous section; it shows a concern for the communities in the country, and helps to position Green as 'in touch' with the population.

It is once these figures have been stated that Green makes his main point. Green demands that the main political parties deal with immigration or risk allowing extremists space. The emphasis on 'wide' (line 9) suggests a very real danger of these extremists finding this space. The logic of this argument is 'if not a, then b'; if the main parties do not do something about immigration then the extremists will become mainstream. This two-part 'conditional structure' (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005: 682) 'if not a, then b' (see also 'if x, then y' (Wooffitt, 1992)) help to 'describe circumstances or activities as having particular consequences ... [which] construct the event as factually robust and as knowable in advance' (Sneijder and te Molder, 2005: 682). Green claims that it is precisely because anti-immigration feeling is so common that the extremists may gain support, and warns that as the main political parties are not speaking for the majority of the people, they will have no choice but to turn to extremists. Green is therefore arguing against extremism and racist political parties by arguing for the very thing these extreme parties stand for.

The following extract picks up this same news item a little later. In this extract we see one of the BBC's political correspondents using a similar argument to that of Andrew Green.

Extract Five: BBC News – Howard Immigration speech 24/01/05

1. Presenter our political editor Andrew Marr is at Westminster (.)
2. Andrew (.) isn't it a high risk strategy for the Tories to put
3. immigration so high on their agenda
4. Marr well there's certainly a risk (.) that they will turn off some
5. people (.) but if you look at the opinion polls (.) asylum
6. and immigration is right up there now as one of the issues
7. people are most concerned about (.) and if the Tories don't

³ It is worth noting that for the Conservatives, as well as other opponents of asylum seeking, issues of asylum and immigration are conflated (Goodman and Speer, 2007). This makes it difficult to determine if a speaker is conflating asylum seekers and immigrants themselves, or if they are reflecting the Conservative policy which did not distinguish these two groups.

8. talk about it (.) there's a whole lot of people to their right
9. (.) who will and are talking about it (.) so I think (.) they're
10. (.) they may be concluding (.) that the bigger risk (.) er is
11. not raising it certainly (.) I haven't seen (.) er immigration
12. put up in lights if you like (.) as a political issue (.) by the
13. Conservatives in quite the way they're doing it today its
14. not the detail of the policy (.) that matters so much perhaps
15. (.) as the fact that they have determined to foreground it (.)
16. and bang on to it until now from now until the election

Here Marr is justifying the Conservative's new harsh policies on the grounds of preventing extremist parties from gaining political capital out of the immigration issue. The presenter, in introducing the correspondent's segment, refers to the 'high risk strategy' (line 2) of talking about immigration. This 'risk' shows an orientation to the potential criticism that can arise from talking 'tough' about immigration in this way – such as criticisms of racism (Goodman, forthcoming) – and a move towards the domain of the extremist parties. Marr, the correspondent, responds initially by acknowledging that some people will find this strategy off-putting. However, he then talks about the public's 'concern' (line 7), the use of which hints at a rational, logical and reasoned response to an 'issue' rather than a knee-jerk or racist reaction to seeing foreigners.

As with Green in the previous extract, Marr refers to the many people to whom immigration is a major issue and uses this to qualify what comes next. What does come next mirrors Green's 'if not a, then b' rationale: if the Conservatives don't talk about immigration then the extremists will (lines 7-9). By claiming that the Conservatives 'may be concluding' (line 10) that it is more risky not to talk about immigration, Marr suggests that the party have rationally decided that this is the best way to go about preventing the problem of extremists. In this way Marr claims that it is not a risky strategy, but in fact a good way of preventing extremists doing well. Criticism of the Conservative Party is undermined as the policy is presented as a moral one that will fight against undesirable extremists. What is unusual about this extract is that where the other members using this argument to justify the harsh treatment of asylum seekers and immigrants on the grounds of preventing extremists tend to come from politicians and pressure groups opposed to immigration, the speaker here is a news presenter who would be expected to remain neutral in this debate.

This next extract is taken from a debate on the news programme, Newsnight, on the same day as the above extracts. Here the Conservative MP Grieve is speaking up on behalf of the policy announced by Michael Howard earlier that day and also argues that if the main political parties do not address immigration then the extremist parties will.

Extract Six: Newsnight BBC2 24/01/2005

1. Paxman well you know these figures that've produced er for example (.)
2. the number FIVE million new immigrants over the next thirty
3. (.) thirty years (.) you know that doesn't mean anything (.) na
4. twenty years ago there was a net OUTFLOW of migrants in
5. this country
6. Grieve well I (.) I have to say (.) Jeremy (.) I think I disagree with

7. you about that (.) the evidence is that as a result of globalisation
8. (.) and above all the deteriorating situation in a lot of third world
9. countries .hhh there is mass movement of peoples
10. Grieve [.hhh I- but I I think (.) I I see very
11. Paxman [and that's going to continue indefinitely
12. Grieve little sign myself that that is going to (.) stop (.) (P/OK) and it
13. DOES present a REALLY serious challenge because an the same
14. time as immigration can be beneficial which I have no doubt
15. about .hhh (P/alright) the rate of immigration (.) is crucial .hhh
16. and one of the key points that have been made by even left
17. wing think tanks: is that the current rate of immigration at the
18. moment is not
19. sustainable [and that's a serious political issue that we really do
20. Paxman [ok well I
21. Grieve have to address .hhh if we don't address it (.) it will be hijacked
22. by the very extrem[ist parties that I don't want to see anywhere
23. Paxman [uhm
24. Grieve (.) in British (.) government (.) or British politics

Grieve states that we must address the issue of asylum or extremist parties will instead. Here, this two-part structure, 'if not a, then b', is used to bolster the grounds on which the Conservative's are justifying their (harsh) policy on immigration so that part A 'if we are not harsh on asylum seekers' is used to make part B 'extremists may hijack the issue' (line 21/22) sound like a credible outcome. This allows Conservative policies to be seen as both reasonable compared to extremists (Billig, 1988; van Dijk, 1993), who by definition are not reasonable, and as a way of preventing extremists from doing well, thereby doing a service to British people.

The final extract, taken from a televised debate, demonstrates that this argument is not restricted to political figures but is also used by members of the general public.

Extract Seven: Asylum: Face the Nation. BBC1. 23/07/03

1. Ommar and Rich Salanky erm er points out that erm as some one
2. of the er from the ethnic minorities he's worried about how (.) a
3. liberal (.) asylum policy could be (.) could be er exploited he
4. says "why do so many people seek asylum in the UK? It's
5. because we're a soft touch and it will play into the hand of the
6. British National Party"

In this extract a caller to an asylum debate programme argues that leniency towards asylum seekers will benefit the BNP. The comment is introduced by the presenter Ommar, who makes salient the caller's ethnic minority status. This invoking of minority group members in the use of anti-asylum arguments again suggests that this is not a racist issue and that it has wide support (Goodman, 2007). Ommar suggests that Salanky is 'worried' (line 2) (which has the same rhetorical effect as 'concern') suggesting that the response is reasonable and proportionate to the problem. Ommar then refers to the potential of the 'liberal' (line 3) asylum system being 'exploited' (line 3) which implies that the policy should be tougher.

The caller, Salanky, is then directly quoted as asking the rhetorical question ‘why do so many people seek asylum in the UK?’ (line 4). Salanky immediately answers his question with the reply that the UK is a ‘soft touch’ (line 5). Furthermore, he argues that being a soft touch will help the BNP. Therefore, he suggests that the UK must be tough on asylum seekers which will stop ‘playing into the hands’ (line 5) of the BNP.

In this section I have shown how speakers suggest that the asylum system must be made more harsh on the grounds of preventing extremist parties, and the BNP in particular, from gaining support due to their harder line on the issue. Many of these extracts have shown the conditional structure ‘if not a, then b’, or: if we are not tough on asylum seekers then the extremists will gain support and electoral success, which has the effect of making the success of the BNP appear to be the likely outcome of a ‘lax’ or non-tough approach to asylum seekers. The irony of this strategy is that it relies on the threat posed by extremist parties, and their more harsh policies on asylum seekers, to justify a move towards a position that more closely reflects the position of these extremists. In short, the argument here is that we must be more like the BNP to stop the BNP from gaining political success. This is a circular argument.

Concluding remarks

I have identified two arguments that are used to justify the harsh treatment of asylum seekers on the grounds of supporting good social relations in the UK. The first is to be tough on asylum seekers on the grounds of protecting social cohesion. Here we see Labour politicians arguing that their harsh policies are designed to maintain good community relations and we also see opponents of the government’s policy claiming that damage is being done to society because of a lack of toughness in the system. The second argument sees a tough stance on asylum seekers justified as a way of preventing the far right from gaining support. Here we see opponents of asylum claiming that if mainstream politicians do not act harshly enough against asylum seekers then the undesirable far right will become more prominent.

No speakers, however, offer an in-depth explanation of the meaning of damaged social cohesion, or any implications to cohesion beyond an increase of support for extremist parties. This ambiguity may be useful, as it prevents a deeper discussion into the issue (Speer, 2005: 167) which could potentially shed light on the problematic use of ‘damage to social cohesion’ in this context. Certainly no members in these extracts mention the type of racism, prejudice and violence that asylum seekers continue to experience on a day-to-day basis (Hubbard, 2005; Lynn and Lea, 2003; 2005).

Throughout these members’ arguments race relation are presented as finely balanced, so much so that with too much asylum they may well collapse. This argument is therefore based upon the assumption that British society is badly integrated and that race relations are characterised by racism being hidden under the surface of society with far right extremist parties waiting to emerge at any point. This seems to suggest that many pro-asylum groups are accurate in their claims that scare tactics are used in arguments against asylum seekers (Refugee Council, 2005b). It may also explain why no members using

these arguments elaborate on what is meant by poor social cohesion, because these arguments rely upon the racist assumption (built up in these extracts as common knowledge) that different groups cannot live side by side in Britain. Perhaps more problematic for people making these arguments is that they implicitly criticise those people they are aimed at, for it is the British public who are deemed to be unable to live alongside asylum seekers from abroad and who are implicitly being accused of racism (see Goodman, forthcoming).

This means that these members are actually justifying prejudice on the grounds of existing prejudice, in what appears to be a case of blaming the victim. Using existing prejudice to justify further prejudice may be a common feature of prejudicial talk. Clarke, Kitzinger and Potter (2004) show how in arguments against gay and lesbian parents, speakers justified prejudicial arguments on the grounds of the (existing) prejudice the children may receive for having non-heterosexual parents. Figgou and Condor also show how ‘The mere fact that some people might genuinely believe the stereotype [in this case about Albanians], and hence genuinely believe themselves to be in danger [from Albanians], was seen as justification enough for their discriminatory actions’ (2006: 239) towards Albanians.

Augoustinos et al show that there are ‘discursive resources that justify social inequities between groups in ways that present the speaker as fair, just and egalitarian, but in so doing, also legitimate the maintenance and reproduction of these inequities’ (2005: 318). Not only do the discourses identified here justify inequality while presenting the speaker as egalitarian, but these discourses achieve this feat precisely on the grounds of supporting good community relations. Far from preventing needy people from receiving the help we could give them, preventing asylum seekers from accessing Britain is constructed as protecting the social fabric of the country. Members use social cohesion to justify and legitimise prejudicial policies while appearing to be doing exactly the opposite.

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