

UK media coverage of Asylum Seekers and Refugees

By Forward Maisokwadzo

Speech given on 14 June 2004 as part of Refugee Week

In the last year, you could have read articles in our tabloid newspapers blaming asylum seekers for terrorism, for TB, AIDS and SARS, for failing schools, for failing hospitals; you could have read articles blaming them for falling house prices, or for rising house prices. They were responsible for the problem of road accidents. They were blamed for dwindling fish stocks in our rivers and for the declining numbers of swans on the river Lea. The *Daily Star* even blamed asylum seekers for missing donkeys.

If asylum seekers did not exist, they would have to be invented. When every major and minor problem of the day can be blamed on a small number of outsiders, who make up a tiny fraction of the population and expend a tiny fraction of the public purse, then genuine democracy has collapsed. I want to put it to you that the so-called asylum problem is nothing really to do with asylum seekers. It is a failure of democracy.

Ten years ago, the term 'asylum seeker' would have been regarded as a technical legal term, not part of the everyday language of Britain. But during the nineties, the phrase gradually entered popular usage. At first, it was synonymous with the word 'refugee', which at the time still had connotations of people fleeing well-known tragedies, such as the Holocaust or the Vietnam war. Then, as the decade continued, asylum seeking became progressively criminalised. By the end of the nineties, refugees discovered trying to enter Britain would be described by the media - even the BBC - as 'suspected asylum seekers', as if to seek asylum was itself a criminal offence. By this time, 'asylum seeker' had become little more than a term of abuse, equivalent in meaning to the phrase 'illegal immigrant'. And these two phrases came to be used interchangeably by the tabloid media, along with 51 others, according to the research done by Article 19.

Over the last ten years, the asylum seeker has entered the tabloid stage as a new stock character with a set role in the daily performance. The fact that the refugee will find it difficult to speak for herself, not least because of the fear that it will affect her asylum claim, means that she can become a screen on to which all manner of evils can be projected, without fear of contradiction. Asylum seeker stories have become a staple of the tabloid diet, with a front page story almost once a week and inside stories almost every day. Among the tabloids, the variation between different titles is minimal: the *Mail's* viciousness stands out; the *Mirror* is sometimes more generous. (i) But it is the uniformity of the characterisation that is striking, the lack of dissident voices or opposing viewpoints. Almost without exception, asylum stories feed into the mythology of suspicion and deterrence: they can't be trusted; we need tighter controls.

It was in Dover in 1999 that we first saw how newspapers could exploit the asylum issue in such a dramatic way. From 1996, around 750 asylum-seekers, mainly Roma refugees fleeing persecution in Slovakia and the Czech Republic, had been housed in Dover. Their total number made up 0.4 per cent of the local population, but local newspapers, particularly the *Dover Express* and the *Folkestone Express*, both edited at the time by Nick Hudson (a former editor of the *Sunday Sport*) referred to thousands of asylum seekers flooding the area and running down the welfare state. Asylum seekers were described as 'bootleggers' and 'scum of the earth', 'targeting our beloved coastline'. Finally he called on his readers to clear the 'backdraft of a nation's human sewage'. (ii)

When fighting broke out between asylum seekers and local youths at a fairground in August 1999, the asylum issue hit the national newspapers in a way it had never done before. The *Daily Mail* published its own 'investigation into Britain's immigration crisis' headed 'The good life on asylum alley'. (iii) Dover was presented as a town under siege, swamped by hordes of foreigners, who were, as the *Mail* put it, 'playing the asylum appeals process'. According to

the reports, a threshold of tolerance had been crossed: a violent reaction was the natural and understandable response.

The government's solution was to implement a national dispersal programme which would 'spread the burden' across the UK. The argument was that lower numbers of asylum seekers in any one place would ease their integration. The Home Office first suggested that an acceptable number of asylum seekers was one for every 200 local residents. Then it was upped to one for every 500. (iv) It was a return to the 'numbers game' agenda of the late 1960s. By talking of 'quotas by locality', the implication was that it was the supposedly large numbers of asylum seekers arriving that were to blame for the violence, rather than the stigmatising logic of the government's own asylum system. The 'dispersal' solution, therefore, rather than solve the problem of anti-refugee hostility, led to the Dover experience being repeated across the country, as asylum seekers were sent out to deprived parts of northern cities where accommodation was cheapest. It was an arrangement that set the mould for a vicious circle of resentment, in which we are still locked today.

You will all have your own examples of negative stereotyping of asylum seekers in the press. Here are mine. From the *Mail* we have had headlines such as 'Brutal crimes of the asylum seekers', which claimed that asylum-seekers were having a 'devastating impact' on crime in London and that the government's 'open door' policy must be ended. (v) Another article, under the headline 'Suburbia's little Somalia', described how Somali asylum seekers who had settled in 'affluent, middle-class Ealing... thousands of miles away from the dusty plains of East Africa' were bringing down the neighbourhood with drugs and crime. (vi) In the *News of the World* we have had 'Hand out UK: how many refugees are living in YOUR town?' This piece featured a detailed map of Britain, listing by council the exact number of asylum seekers in each area and warning readers of the cost to their local services and to the 'British taxpayer'. The article effectively gives a green light to every local racist. Another *News of the World* piece which complained of 'luxury pads' for asylum seekers on the Beaumont Leys estate here in Leicester, led to local gangs breaking into the homes and destroying them, even before refugees had moved in. (vii)

In an article last year from the *News of the World* entitled 'Britain's £1bn asylum bill...' we were told that 'Housing asylum seekers in Britain will cost the taxpayer more than £1 billion this year. That's £33 for every one of the nation's 30 million taxpayers. It's enough to but up to TEN 450-bed new hospitals or pay off the combined £200 million debt of the NHS five times over. It could also pay for 50,000 new teachers, 40,000 beat police officers or 80 secondary schools.' The scapegoating is clear.

Then there are the tabloid columnists. The Simon Heffers, the Richard Littlejohns, the Peter Hitchens, the Stephen Glovers.

Each week they sing the same refrain: England has become 'a soft touch'. Other European countries take advantage of our tolerance, by dumping their refugees on our shores. The innate tolerance of the English has now been pushed to its limits. We need to 'raise the drawbridge', end the 'open-door policy', lock them up and deport them. Failure to do so is an abandonment by the political elite of the first duty of government - to protect the people from outside invasion. The unspoken conclusion is racist violence on the streets. Since the government has failed to provide protection, the people will drive out the enemy themselves.

Listen to Simon Heffer in the *Mail*. He writes in February 2001, with a general election anticipated, why we should get rid of Tony Blair. Unless we do so, he says, the country will become home to '14 million illegal immigrants, few of whom speak a word of English'. (viii) You might say he is just a mad columnist who nobody takes seriously. But four weeks later, his view is echoed by William Hague when he infamously says that under Blair, Britain will become a 'foreign land'. Of course, Hague doesn't win. But spin doctors tell the government that asylum is an issue on which they are perceived as weak. The day after the election, David Blunkett becomes Home Secretary and the first thing he does is put himself on the front page of the *Sun* telling its readers he will 'blitz asylum cheats'.

For the tabloids, to attack asylum seekers is just common sense. As Simon Heffer puts it, we have to stick up for 'our own people'. It is not perceived as part of a racist programme but, at worst, a xenophobic one. The difference is crucial: whereas racism denotes a social process of exclusion based on colour or cultural difference, xenophobia suggests a natural psychological reaction against 'strangers'. The first is an indictment of a social system, the second taken to be a normal part of human nature. Hence it appears that those who propound the view that too many are coming are not racists to be cast out of the political mainstream - they are merely fearful of the impact that large numbers of new arrivals will have on the nation, and that is considered a legitimate political viewpoint. As such, xenophobia provides an alibi for racism.

But if this is just a natural fear of strangers, why does it not take all strangers to be equally strange? When whites from Australia, South Africa or Zimbabwe come to Britain, they do not produce the same fears as those who are marked out by their skin colour, accent or dress as being of a 'lesser breed'. The whole language of 'bogus' and 'illegal' is simply not applied to the large numbers of Australians working without proper documents in London.

Or consider the recent scaremongering over Europe's Roma communities, some of whom will shortly have the right to migrate to Britain for work. That so much attention focused on Gypsies rather than any other group of eastern Europeans - such as impoverished Polish farmers - suggests a racial agenda. Then we have the *Daily Express* printing on its front page that '1.6 million gypsies are ready to flood in' and showing a map of Europe headed 'The Great Invasion 2004' with red arrows, straight out of Dad's Army, tearing across Europe to Britain. It is the language and imagery of the Second World War deployed, without any apparent irony, against one of Hitler's greatest victims, the Roma Gypsies of eastern Europe. An editorial accuses them of coming to Britain to 'leech' on us, i.e. to suck our blood. It is a metaphor Hitler would have been comfortable with.

The result of this kind of daily barrage of disinformation in the newspapers is that, according to a poll by Mori recently, race and immigration are now perceived as the third most important political issue facing Britain, ahead of defence, crime and the economy. Only health and education are seen as more important.

Even Scotland Yard has stated publicly that negative newspaper articles lead directly to an increase in violence against asylum seekers. This is the human cost of a newspaper industry that systematically refuses to take responsibility for its actions, responsibility for its part in popularising what is really a new kind of racism.

'Racism does not stay still. It changes shape with changes in the economy, the social structure, the system and, above all, the challenges, the resistances to that system,' (A. Sivanandan).

Today, we are seeing a new racism emerge that springs, I would suggest, from the revolutionary changes in the global economy. Advances in information technology have provided the opportunity for economic globalisation, a process led by trans-national corporations. Not only can industrial production be freely relocated to wherever labour is cheapest but even services can uproot themselves - as shown by the growing exodus of call-centre jobs to Asia. The old concept of the nation-state which, at least in principle, aimed at securing the highest welfare for the national community, has given way to a concept of the state aimed at maximising market opportunities for individuals.

Globalisation itself is eroding the boundaries of national sovereignty, by encouraging free trade across borders, through the forced migration of large numbers of people around the world and through the threat of military intervention against those who oppose the dictates of Washington.

But there is little understanding of what drives these changes and still less opportunity to intervene in them. As power has shifted to the global level, democracy has withered within national boundaries. Which means that globalisation is experienced as an alien force over

which we have no control. And immigrants, as the most obvious manifestation of the new global forces, are easy targets. In the hothouse of powerlessness, a new racism is sprouting.

It is a racism based on insecurity, anger and hysteria. It finds support in the suburbs or the countryside as easily as in the inner city. Its main focus is the new migrants to Britain - whether asylum seekers, workers from eastern Europe or workers from outside the West. And Muslims in particular come in for particular hatred. It is a racism that regards these groups as responsible for the erosion of the welfare state, even though there would not be a welfare state without them. It regards the loss of national sovereignty as somehow the fault of these groups, even though they too have been victims of globalisation. And it regards these groups as culturally inferior, having nothing to contribute to the world of political or cultural value.

The most powerful outlet for these views has been the popular press.

How do we challenge this? We know that organisations like PressWise and Article 19 have been concerned about this issue over the last few years. There have been demands for the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) to publish 'soft guidelines' for journalists on using the correct language, to be more careful in their sourcing of statistics and for the media to ask refugees and asylum seekers for their opinions more often.

Journalists ought to pride themselves on accuracy in the use of words and numbers. That accuracy is flouted so easily when writing about asylum and immigration reveals a lack of professionalism. That journalists apparently accept at face value the highly selective statistics released by the Home Office is a dereliction of journalistic duty. Why has no journalist ever managed to find out from the Home Office the number of asylum applicants at any one time who are under eighteen years of age, for example? Or, for that matter, the number who are women? As legislation is passing through parliament to radically reduce the right of appeal, why has no journalist been able to find out from the Home Office how many of its initial decisions are eventually overturned on appeal? These are all statistics which we don't know because the Home Office doesn't want us to know and because most journalists have been too busy trying to demonise asylum seekers, rather than ask the most basic questions about the asylum process.

In a similar way, we ought to be able to appeal to journalists' professionalism in asking them to report the stories of refugees themselves, which are human interest stories par excellence. In fact, that does happen nowadays on many local newspapers.

No doubt there are some areas where this kind of appeal for accuracy and professionalism can make a difference. But, unfortunately, they will have no impact on the tabloid newspapers which dominate this debate: the *Sun*, the *Mail* and the *Express*. The racism of these newspapers is not the result of carelessness or lack of thought. It is a deliberate and systematic campaign of hate which no amount of liberal pleading will unhinge.

At a recent NUJ conference, a black journalist, who had previously worked at the *Daily Mail*, spoke of the culture of racism in the *Mail's* office, which included, he alleges, shouting 'wogs' at the TV screen when black athletes appeared. '*The Daily Mail* is a culture that seeps with deep racism, and it's not just at the *Mail* but throughout the tabloid press', he told delegates. In many other kinds of organisation - both public and private - this kind of institutional racism has been identified and challenged. Yet the newspaper industry remains largely untouched by these changes, free to perpetuate racism without any kind of accountability, except to shareholders. The newspapers remain a bastion of privilege. Editors with enormous power are virtually unknown figures. They don't have to explain themselves or justify what they do. That has to end.

The dilemma for liberals is that their request for 'balance' can be ignored if a newspaper so chooses. And yet liberals are unwilling to do anything more than 'request', for fear of offending a sacred cow - freedom of the press. The result is that nothing changes and press-fuelled racist violence against asylum seekers continues.

But the 'press freedom' that was fought for in previous centuries, and which political refugees themselves are especially likely to value, is not the freedom of large corporations to be involved in the industrialised production of racism for profit. The racist coverage of asylum seekers in the press is a failure of democracy, not its flourishing. Hate can never be compatible with democracy, for hate destroys everything but itself. And in the poisonous atmosphere created by the right-wing press, only pseudo-democrats, like the BNP, can prosper.

Of course, censorship is not the solution. After all, the media are part of a circular process, which also includes the state and public opinion. But we must campaign for more than just 'guidelines'. The editors of the tabloids should have to explain to a public inquiry how they can justify their coverage. The Press Complaints Commission must take a much stronger stand, issuing a public censure of those newspapers which systematically distort and mislead in their coverage of an entire group of people. The recent efforts of the NUJ chapel at the Daily *Express* to protest against their own newspapers coverage is to be welcomed. Whether they get the support from the PCC that they are asking for remains to be seen. The *Express's* editor, Peter Hill, is himself one of the sixteen members of the PCC.

No doubt the editors of tabloid newspapers will protest their right to freedom of expression if pressure were put on them in the way I am suggesting. Yet they themselves have no qualms in calling for an individual, such as Abu Hamza, to be expelled from the country, for no crime but that he 'preaches hate'. If only they followed their own advice.

Endnotes

(i) The best-selling daily newspaper in Britain is the *Sun*, which is part of Rupert Murdoch's News International media conglomerate. News International also publishes the best-selling Sunday paper, the *News of the World*. In recent years the *Mail* has overtaken the *Mirror* (a traditionally Labour Party-supporting tabloid) to become the second best-selling newspaper. The *Mail* has been controlled by the Rothermere family since its support for Oswald Moseley's fascists in the 1930s.

(ii) See 'Learning the lessons of Dover', Campaign Against Racism and Fascism (October/November 1999), pp. 3-5.

(iii) 'The good life on asylum alley', *Daily Mail* (6 October 1998)

(iv) G. Hinsliff, 'Asylum help "may worsen the crisis"', *Daily Mail* (25 August 1999)

(v) D. Williams, 'Brutal crimes of the asylum seekers', *Daily Mail* (30 November 1998)

(vi) J. Goodwin, 'Suburbia's little Somalia', *Daily Mail* (12 January 1999)

(vii) N. Dowling, 'New raids on city's homes for refugees', *Leicester Mercury* (6 June 2001)

(viii) S. Heffer, 'Welcome to Blairitania', *Daily Mail* (9 February 2001)