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## Under Attack: The Metaphoric Threat of Asylum Seekers in Public-Political Discourses\*

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### Summary

The relatively recent move towards a deliberative account of democracy has implications for the use of metaphors in public-political discourses. This paper examines the extent to which the use of such metaphors during discussions in the political sphere about asylum seekers is compatible with the desire of deliberative democrats to ensure that debates on public policy issues are both open and reasonable. The argument advanced here is that the use of metaphors deforms political debate about asylum, and that deliberative democracy needs to take greater account of such linguistic 'hurdles'.<sup>1</sup>

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### Introduction

Democratic theory has moved away from models of elite competition (Schumpeter 1976:284-5) to recognise the deliberative aspect of democratic theory and practice in which citizens debate and deliberate, whilst “parliaments democratically decide” (Habermas 1995:851). For deliberative democrats, it is therefore of crucial importance that their ideals of reasonable, rational and honest debates are approximated to in the public-political sphere. The extent to which British debates about asylum correspond to this ideal is the subject of this paper.

This paper has evolved from a desire to see a more responsible and constructive discussion about asylum seekers and the asylum system in British public-political debates – that is, those which take place between politicians, and in some cases between journalists. There is an apparent desire on the part of many political actors and journalists to engage in a more honest and open debate on this topic, and the issues surrounding it. For example, in the run-up to the 2005 General Election the candidate for Dumfries and Galloway, Peter Duncan, stated that: “We will not be distracted from taking on immigration and asylum. There's nothing racist about limits - it's common sense” (BBC, 2005), whilst Michael Howard, talking about the wider issue of immigration more generally, stated during the same election campaign: “So it is not racist to talk about controlling immigration - far from it. It is plain common sense.”<sup>2</sup> Despite this, the current debate about asylum is overwhelmingly defined by inaccurate and panicked statements about the manner in which the system is being abused and the threat those who seek asylum pose British natives.

This paper will focus on one particular element of this discourse, namely the use of metaphors. The paper draws upon the empirical findings of existing work in this area, and builds on this to assess how a better quality of debate about asylum might be achieved in political and journalistic circles (rather than simply demonstrating the inherent flaws in the existing debate). In order to do so, the paper draws upon the key tenets of deliberative democracy theory, as well as upon Lakoff and Johnson’s seminal text *Metaphors We Live By*. However, the paper begins with a brief overview of the development of asylum legislation, in order to put the issues discussed later into some context.

### Asylum in the United Kingdom

The present political and public focus on asylum as an issue of great importance has its origins in the 1970s and 1980s, when it first began in earnest to gain such

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<sup>2</sup> Speech at Party Headquarters, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2005, available at [http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj\\_id=119004](http://www.conservatives.com/tile.do?def=news.story.page&obj_id=119004)

attention (Gibney 2004:121. See also Schuster and Solomos 2004). Until the early 1990s, asylum law had developed in a piecemeal and ad hoc fashion, reacting to the concerns of the time.

The first major restriction on immigration was introduced in 1905 with the Aliens Act, which was largely a reaction to the arrival of a number of (mainly Jewish) people from Germany, Russia and Poland (Stevens 2004: 34). The legislation which followed – such as the Alien Restrictions Act 1914, and the Aliens Restrictions (Amendment) Act 1919 – was primarily concerned with restricting the right to immigration in the United Kingdom more generally, although refugees and asylum seekers were naturally also affected (particularly during the First and Second World Wars). This approach led Simpson to comment in 1939:

“The strictly enforced restrictive and selective policy of immigration which she [Great Britain] has pursued since the war – particularly the emphasis placed on the admission only of aliens with economic resources adequate for their establishment – has kept the number of admissions to figures that have little significance in the total number of post-war refugees.” (Simpson (1939) in Stevens 2004: 67)

The Alien Act 1905 remained the only statute which legislated for the protection or otherwise of asylum seekers until the enactment of the Asylum and Immigration Act 1993. Prior to this, interest in, and concern about the issue of asylum increased during the 1970s and 1980s for three primary reasons. Firstly, during those decades, the number of asylum seekers annually entering the United Kingdom grew from a few hundred to approximately 5000, and they increasingly originated from a wide range of countries. These changes attracted much media and public attention, despite asylum applications in Britain remaining well below the levels experienced in other European states (Gibney 2004: 121). Secondly, the economic down-turn in the 1970s led to the benefits or otherwise of immigrants generally (including asylum seekers), being questioned. Asylum seekers were increasingly perceived as having undesirable effects on the economy and social welfare provisions, and the genuineness of their claims also came into question (Gibney 2004: 122). Finally, New Commonwealth immigration during the 1970s resulted in “legislative measures whittl[ing] away the entrance possibilities of Commonwealth citizens,” and with that “other avenues of undesirable non-resident entrance and, in particular, asylum entrance, came under increasing governmental and public scrutiny” (Gibney 2004: 122). Britain therefore moved towards using “legislative and administrative measures to block the arrival of claimants” (Gibney 2004:122).

This process of blocking the arrival of potential asylum seekers continues to this day, as evidenced by the nature of the “unprecedented” flurry of legislative activity on the part of the New Labour government (Stevens 2004: i). To date, this activity has produced the Immigration and Asylum Act 1999; the Anti-Terrorism, Crime and Security Act 2001; the Nationality, Immigration & Asylum Act 2002; the Asylum and Immigration Act 2004; the Nationality Act 2006; and the UK Borders

Bill. The main focus of each of these has been on deterrence measures reducing the right to appeal for asylum seekers; reducing their housing and social benefits; imposing carrier liability; and increasing the detention of asylum seekers in various forms. The apparent hope of the government is that such restrictive policies will lead to a reduction in asylum applications, despite evidence suggesting benefits for example are not significant 'pull' factors for asylum seekers:

“The range of destinations offered to most [asylum seekers] is very limited, either because of the intervention of agents or because asylum seekers do not have the resources to travel to many countries. However, within this limited range of options, many asylum seekers are active decision-makers. They are guided more by agents, the presence or absence of family and friends, language, and perceived cultural affinities than by scrutiny of asylum policies or rational evaluation of the welfare benefits on offer.” (Robinson and Segrott 2002: 63. For further useful discussions see Gilbert and Koser 2006 and Day and White 2002)

There is a widespread belief amongst commentators that whilst states claim such deterrence measures are necessary in order to ensure asylum can still be offered to 'genuine' refugees, a number of other motivations – such as the desire to save money, or to reassert state legitimacy – are in fact driving them (see for example Cylne 2005; Malloch and Stanley 2005; and Hassan 2000). Indeed, the Joint Committee on Human Rights recently examined evidence from a number of human rights and refugee organisations, and concluded that: “We have been persuaded by the evidence that the Government has indeed been practising a deliberate policy of destitution of this highly vulnerable group.” (Joint Committee on Human Rights 2007: 41)

Despite the speed with which new asylum legislation has been enacted by the New Labour government, their response to the issue appears to remain unsatisfactory and inadequate in the eyes of the British public. Asylum, and immigration as a whole, were consistently highlighted as issues of public concern prior to the General Election 2005, on one occasion ranking as the most important issues to the electorate (although the health and education systems consistently remain a top priority) (*Financial Times* MORI Election poll, February 24<sup>th</sup> 2005). Such interest and concern might initially appear justified in view of a recent marked increase in the number of asylum applications to the United Kingdom, certainly compared to the 1980s. Applications for asylum in the United Kingdom peaked at 84,130 (excluding dependents) in 2002, having risen from 32,500 over the preceding five year period. However, by 2006 the figure had dropped to 23,610 (Home Office, 2007:1), representing the lowest level since in the United Kingdom since 1989 (UNHCR, 2007:4). In spite of this decline, politicians and journalists have continued to highlight asylum as an area of public concern. The manner in which such concerns are expressed, and more specifically the language which is adopted by politicians and journalists when discussing asylum, is arguably at odds with the key tenets of deliberative democracy, to which attention now turns.

## Deliberative Democracy

According to Benhabib complex democracies have since World War Two attempted to secure three public goods: legitimacy, economic welfare and a sense of collective identity (Benhabib 1996:67). In ensuring legitimacy democracies tend to have as their ultimate ideal universal suffrage, and the ability of the electorate and politicians to express their opinions freely:

“The fundamental idea of democratic legitimacy is that the authorization to exercise state power must arise from the collective decisions of the members of a society who are governed by that power. More precisely...it arises from the discussions and decisions of members, as made within and expressed through social and political institutions designed to acknowledge their collective authority.” (Cohen 1996: 95)

In many democracies this legitimacy is said to be achieved through the electorate's verdict on open discussion of the political issues at hand. The position which wins most votes is – in theory – taken forward. Aggregate decision-making therefore reflects the preference of the majority of the people. However, whilst universal suffrage might allow citizens to pass judgement on the political attractiveness of individual political parties, there is no necessary connection between the use of a vote and what the voter actually desires (or indeed what the voter actually understands of the main political issues of the day). Deliberative democrats therefore argue that universal suffrage, and the aggregate decision making which flows from it, does not alone make for an ideal democratic structure. What is additionally required is a particular form of debate about the issues at hand, on the basis of which the electorate can make an informed decision about whose arguments are most convincing. For a citizen to fully participate in the decision-making process of any given issue, “one must participate in *authentic* deliberation, not simply express one's preferences” (Young 2004: 224). For this reason deliberative democrats are primarily concerned with increasing participation in, and understanding of, the political process through “informed debate, the public use of reason and the impartial pursuit of truth” (Held 2006: 232). The hope is that by increasing the quantity and quality of knowledge available to the electorate, “the one-sidedness and partiality of certain viewpoints which may fail to represent the interests of the many might be exposed” (Held 2006: 232). In order to achieve this transformation, arguments should be ones which “the participant sincerely believes should be adopted by all other participants sharing her commitment to the public good” (Schroeder 2002: 107). Whilst the deliberative model allows political actors the opportunity to protect some of their private preferences, those actors must “engage with one another about how to balance these under circumstances of inclusive equality” (Young 2004: 230). Such equality necessitates that the strength of the actor's argument, as opposed to his or her “wealth, social status, ability to mobilize electoral assets, or capacity to provide rewards to other participants in the process,” (Schroeder 2002: 104) should be key.

Through a combination of these factors, arguments will hopefully be tested more thoroughly and advanced in a more reasoned manner (Held 2006: 238).

'Reasonable' or 'rational' political argument can be defined as that which is informed, not short sighted and not self-interested (Held 2006: 232). The majority of deliberative democrats state that many ways of communicating can be accepted, provided they induce reflection, are non-coercive and are "capable of connecting the particular experience of an individual, group, or category with some general principle" (Dryzek 2004: 250. On the issue of coerciveness, see Mansbridge 1996). The ultimate aim is not to reach a consensus; rather, the aim is to ensure that any agreement reached takes into account as many relevant opinions as possible, with those opinions being presented in a 'reasonable' manner.

The difficulty is that the tools and tricks politicians – and others – use in order to manipulate their target audience around to their way of thinking present significant obstacles to achieving this form of political debate. One such tool is the use of metaphors, to which attention now turns.

## Metaphors

Metaphors might traditionally be thought of as belonging to the world of poetry and literature, but their importance in the domain of politics ought not to be underestimated. Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal text *Metaphors We Live By*, argued that metaphors have significant consequences for our understanding of the world as a whole and are used more commonly in everyday life than might initially be appreciated. Indeed, existing research has demonstrated that politicians use metaphors when discussing a variety of issues, including the Euro (Musolf 2004), foreign policy (Chilton and Lakoff 1995), the search for WMD in Iraq (Billig and MacMillan 2005), and the Iraq war more generally (Lule 2004).

According to Lakoff and Johnson, the importance of metaphors lies in their ability to use "one highly structured and clearly delineated concept to structure another" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 61. See further Chilton 2004). This enables us to understand complex issues through the use of familiar terms to describe them. For example, the 'rational argument as war' metaphor, where statements such as 'your claims are indefensible' and 'he attacked every weak point in my argument' might be made (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 4), "allows us to conceptualize what a rational argument is in terms of something that we understand more readily, namely, physical conflict" (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 61). These familiar terms, which often take the form of images, have "normative force" which is derived from "certain purposes and values, certain normative images, which have long been powerful in our culture" (Schoen 1993: 147). Therefore:

"Metaphor draws on the unconscious emotional association of words, the values of which are rooted in cultural knowledge. For this reason it potentially has a highly persuasive force because of its activation of both

conscious and unconscious resources to influence our intellectual and emotional response, both directly – through describing and analysing political issues – and indirectly by influencing how we feel about things” (Charteris-Black 2005: 30)

It is because of their connection to the pre-conceived images we have (that is, images with which we associate particular emotions), that metaphors have great potential to influence how we think and feel about particular political issues. Moreover, the familiarity of these terms and images means that politicians can more readily communicate their ‘version’ of a complicated or controversial issue in order to encourage the ‘receiver’ of their ‘version’ to think about that issue in a particular way.

There is an increasing amount of literature examining the manner in which asylum seekers and immigrants are portrayed by both politicians and by the media (see for example Nickels 2007; Charteris-Black 2006; Baker and McEnery 2005; Lynn and Lea 2003; Saxton 2003; Coole 2002; Buchanan 2001; d’Haenens and de Lange 2001; El Refaie 2001; Kaye 2001 and 1994; Mollard 2001; Speers 2001; Van Dijk 2000). More specifically, recent literature has examined the manner in which politicians and journalists emphasise their messages about asylum through the use of metaphors (for useful discussions see Klocker and Dunn 2003; Slattery 2003; El Raefae 2001; Greenberg and Heir 2001; Kaye 1998 and 2001; Pickering 2001). This existing research has demonstrated quite clearly how metaphors can depict asylum seekers as threatening or as ‘different’. For example, it is not uncommon to encounter terms such as ‘waves’, ‘floods’ and ‘flow’ being used by both journalists and politicians to describe the arrival of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom (or indeed elsewhere). Buchanan noted the frequency of the use of such ‘liquid metaphors’ in her examination of media representations of the closure of the Sangatte refugee camp in France, and the subsequent arrival in the UK of its former inhabitants (2001:5), whilst Mollard’s examination of Scottish news media portrayals of the arrival of asylum seekers in the country discovered that metaphoric terms such as ‘flood’, ‘deluge’ and ‘influx’ were regularly used as metaphors for said arrival (2001:10). The use of metaphors of water and other liquids in discussions about asylum creates a powerful image of the country being overcome by waves of people, and its use in the United Kingdom could lead to the belief that Britain and its resources are in some way under threat from asylum seekers. According to Santa Ana, who discovered a similar use of water metaphors in Californian public discourse about immigrants, such metaphors do not make reference “to any aspect of the humanity of the immigrants, except to allude to ethnicity and race” (Santa Ana 2002: 73). Individuals are thus “lost in the mass sense of these volume terms” (Santa Ana 2002: 73). Similarly, O’Brien’s research into the use of metaphors in the early immigration restriction debate in the United States led him to state that the term ‘flood’ was “likely to be used in conjunction with the threat to American character that was posed by the overwhelming rush of immigrants” (O’Brien 2003: 40-41). This metaphor therefore has the potential effect of implying a greater need for “safeguards and controls, and more powerful human

agency to control the water” (Santa Ana 2002: 75. For another useful discussion of this issue, see Baker and McEnery 2005). The concern is that, rather than engaging in a reasoned discussion about the number of asylum seekers entering the United Kingdom, politicians and journalists are engaged in a debate which is premised on the assumption there are too many asylum applications in the United Kingdom, and that we ought to fear those attempting to gain asylum.

Another dehumanising metaphor is that of war. The use of metaphors of war has historical precedent in the United Kingdom: the arrival of a number of Jewish people to the United Kingdom in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and early 20<sup>th</sup> Century was reportedly greeted by Sir Howard Vincent, MP for Sheffield, with the claim that immigrants were arriving “in battalions and taking the bread out of the mouths [...] of English wives and children” (*London Evening News* 9<sup>th</sup> May 1891). However, they remain in modern use by politicians and journalists: Buchanan for example found that ‘legions of young men’ and ‘ranks of migrants’ were described as arriving in the United Kingdom from Sangatte (2001:7 and 13), whilst in the Australian context Prime Minister Howard stated in 2001: ‘I don’t want to use the term ‘invaded’ ...but the shores of this country would be thick with asylum seekers, thick with asylum seekers’ (Klocker and Dunn 2003:84). Such metaphors are used to construct relations between asylum seekers and the government (and the people they represent), as conflictual and potentially violent, thus legitimising practices of exclusion from national borders (Saxton 2003: 113). The use of such metaphors “promotes the need to repel whatever is hostile or threatening”, whilst the debate becomes “...narrowed and flattened into the framework of nationhood – alternative voices become voices against the nation, while the nation remains an uncontested concept” (Pickering 2001: 174-5). This process in turn can enhance the standing of the politicians invoking such metaphors by solidifying national identity and uniting the electorate behind its political leaders and their policies (Slattery 2003: 103).

## Conclusion

This brief overview of how metaphors have been found to be used in discussions about the asylum ‘problem’ demonstrates the difficulty deliberative democrats face in ensuring the rational debate which they so desire comes into being. Even if metaphoric terms are not used frequently, they are still potentially problematic. The occasional use of such terms is potentially sufficient to jeopardise the aims of deliberative democracy, particularly when their use occurs in discussions about an area which is of such public concern, and which garners much media attention. The use of such metaphors during discussions of any sort is detrimental to these aims in several respects.

Firstly, the use of metaphors by at least some politicians and journalists leads to a debate which is underpinned by both unreasonable arguments and by emotional language. Deliberative democrats aim to create a debate which is rational, respectful and oriented towards achieving an agreement which can be publicly defended on reasonable grounds. Emotionally charged discussions, during which metaphors



which are designed to generate images of dangerous situations are used, are surely less able to achieve such a debate and such an outcome than discussions in which metaphors are not utilised. One could argue that the extent to which the use of terms such as ‘flood’ in asylum discussions is reasonable depends upon how many asylum seekers one perceives the United Kingdom as having the ability to accommodate. However, the term is not used by politicians or journalists in order to rationalise the debate, or to put any figures quoted into context. Instead, it is used to draw a connection between the ‘receiver’s’ pre-conceived image of a flood, and those claiming asylum in the United Kingdom. This phenomenon is made even more interesting when one takes into account the assertion by some politicians and journalists that their comments on the issue of asylum are predicated on ‘common sense’. However, if one assumes an opinion based on ‘common sense’ is one which is clear and has an obvious conclusion, discussions which draw upon emotionally charged metaphors cannot legitimately be described as such. Through the use of such metaphors politicians and journalists are arguably hiding the other, less obvious, conclusions which could be reached about the current state of asylum in the United Kingdom. This not only harms the ‘common sense’ discussions which they supposedly wish to engage in; it also harms the potential advancement towards a more deliberative democracy.

Secondly, the metaphors are used by politicians to frame arguments along politically helpful lines. This is an important issue on which there has been much media, public and political focus, and which could be potentially helpful or damaging to the political prospects of individual parties. The earlier discussion of asylum legislation demonstrated the public dissatisfaction which apparently remains with the government’s response to an issue which is widely regarded (rightly or wrongly), as a ‘problem’. The use of metaphors in this field is not only potentially detrimental to relations between asylum seekers and host communities, but could also be used to legitimise increasingly punitive legislation which is harmful not only to asylum seekers, but also to Britain’s reputation in the international field. Schoen has argued that politicians construct certain situations and issues as problematic, with “the way in which we set social problems determin[ing] both the kinds of purposes and values we seek to realize, and the directions in which we seek solutions” (Schoen 1993: 150). Thus, politicians might frame the public policy issue of asylum in such a way as to point towards particular solutions which they regard themselves, or their party, as being in a position to deliver. Indeed, Saxton has argued that metaphors portraying asylum seekers as ‘problematic’ and ‘threatening’ helped to justify and legitimise oppressive national practices in Australia following the ‘children overboard’ incident in 2001 (Saxton 2003: 118 See Clyne 2005 for further discussion of this issue).<sup>3</sup> In the British context Lynn and Lea have stated:

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<sup>3</sup> In October 2001 it was alleged by Australian politicians and journalists that asylum seekers attempting to reach Australian shores had thrown their children overboard, in order to force the Australian navy to rescue them. In actual fact, the children were jumping from the boat because it was sinking. A Senate Inquiry subsequently found that there was some awareness on the part of politicians that this was the case, yet they continued to claim the asylum seekers were throwing the children in a manipulative act.

“Exaggeration, distortion and a heavy reliance upon stereotypes provide the context in which politicians, legislators and law-enforcement agencies tighten social and legal controls. Meanwhile, refugees and ‘asylum seekers’ who as a group lack significant ‘speaking rights’ or ‘voice’ are more easily oppressed, discredited and stigmatised.” (Lynn and Lea 2003: 447. See also Charteris-Black 2006))

Whilst such ‘problem framing’ on the part of politicians might be politically advantageous (rather like knowing the solution to a puzzle before you have attempted to solve it), it goes against the openness and respect deliberative democrats hold dear. In order to achieve such openness and respect the opinions of others need to be taken into account, and attempts need to be made to incorporate such opinions into any solutions arising from the discussions. The use of metaphors detracts substantially from the ability of participants in any discussion to take account of the views of others – by using such metaphors, they are attempting to win the debate through using emotionally coercive measures.

Finally, such framing could lead to at least some of those in receipt of the metaphors basing their opinions, and perhaps subsequent actions, on false or misunderstood grounds. Metaphors can have a galvanizing effect on those who receive them, and in the case of metaphors relating to asylum there is a very real danger that such an effect could have implications for the safety and welfare of those claiming asylum. Those influenced by the metaphors could voice their disillusionment with the efforts made by the main political parties to curb the asylum ‘problem’ by voting for, or joining, fringe right-wing parties such as the British Nationalist Party. Moreover, we may see more attacks on asylum seekers, such as those recently experienced in Scotland, particularly in light of the Government’s strategy of dispersing asylum seekers around the country under the National Asylum Dispersal Scheme.<sup>4</sup> The concern that those who are galvanized into action by these metaphors (arguably on false grounds), will resort to violence as an outlet, was recently highlighted by the Joint Committee on Human Rights:

“We are concerned about the negative impact of hostile reporting and in particular the effects that it can have on individual asylum seekers and the potential it has to influence the decision making of officials and Government policy. We are also concerned about the possibility of a link between hostile reporting by the media and physical attacks on asylum seekers.” (Joint Committee on Human Rights’ Tenth Report of Session *The Treatment of Asylum Seekers* (2007) HC 60-1, 101)

Solutions to the problems metaphors pose are seemingly few and far between. Some commentators have settled for rebutting metaphors in such a way that their original meaning is inverted. Santa Ana for example argued that an “insurgent metaphor” is

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<sup>4</sup> <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6292747.stm>>

needed to challenge the conventional metaphors we have become accustomed to seeing and using (Santa Ana 2002: 296). He proposed using metaphors in a more constructive manner to counter the way in which they have traditionally been used, such as “in the American Southwest, the immigrant stream makes the desert bloom” (Santa Ana 2002: 298) and “immigration is the lifeblood of the California economy” (Santa Ana 2002: 299). Accordingly, for him, “the silver lining of today’s political metaphors [...] is that alternative metaphors can be marshalled in the struggle for more encompassing visions of the nation that do not marginalize white people.” (Santa Ana 2002: 295). Lakoff similarly argued that if liberals in America are to counter the dominance of right-wing rhetoric (a dominance which he argued is aided by the use of metaphors by those on the political right), liberals must “get over their view that all thought is literal and that straight forward rational literal debate on an issue is always possible” (Lakoff 1996: 387). However, whilst it might be possible to adopt ‘positive’ metaphors to counter the more ‘negative’ metaphors used in discussions about asylum seekers, such an approach would do little to engender a more open, honest dialogue free of the emotional encumbrances of metaphors. Indeed, Lakoff and Johnson themselves acknowledged that “even the overt contradiction or rebuttal of a ‘biased’ scenario still highlights it and promotes its use in the public debate” (Lakoff and Johnson 1980: 60).

Some political sources have demonstrated that it is not entirely necessary for such metaphors to be used in order to put forward an opinion (albeit with arguably little political success). The author discovered during a search of the Liberal Democrat’s website that the party rarely used metaphors in relation to asylum seekers, and when they did they were used in a more ‘positive’ manner. For example, the following statement concerning the Government’s decision to drop proposals to deny asylum seekers access to judicial review was made by the Liberal Democrat MP Mark Oaten: “Faced with the prospect of a defeat in the Lords and a damning speech by Lord Irvine, the Government has removed this *grubby* measure” (16<sup>th</sup> March 2004).<sup>5</sup> In fact, the Liberal Democrats tended in public statements to avoid the use of metaphors of any kind, preferring instead to use impartial and factual language such as “We need an honest debate about asylum and immigration. That is why Michael Howard must spell out what he means in practice, and refute allegations that he is pandering to the racist vote” (24<sup>th</sup> January 2005);<sup>6</sup> and “Setting targets to reduce asylum applications is a meaningless exercise. The numbers seeking asylum should be based on the international situation not on the Government’s reaction to tabloid hysteria” (24<sup>th</sup> August 2004).<sup>7</sup> Such statements are clearly premised on more rational grounds than those preceding them, but they are arguably not enough to counter the effect of the use of metaphors by others. As Philo and Beattie have

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<sup>5</sup> Mark Oaten MP, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2004

<<http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/story.html?id=6316&navPage=news.html>>

<sup>6</sup> Mark Oaten MP, 24<sup>th</sup> January 2005

<http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/story.html?id=8101&navPage=news.html>

<sup>7</sup> Mark Oaten MP, 24<sup>th</sup> August 2004

<http://www.libdems.org.uk/news/story.html?id=7371&navPage=news.html>

argued in the context of media messages about migration more generally, such reasoned views are in the minority, and may be overwhelmed by the more negative coverage asylum seekers generally receive (Philo and Beattie 1999: 186).

Metaphors are therefore clearly problematic, particularly in light of the ideals of deliberative democracy. However, there is an acceptance amongst commentators that metaphors are so ingrained into patterns of speech – to the extent that those using them are not necessarily aware of the fact they are doing so – that we cannot legitimately expect their use to be eradicated (Batstone 2000). Perhaps therefore it should be accepted that deliberative democracy itself is a flawed vision, and that its aims are impossible to achieve in such a contested area. Some might regard doing so as jumping the gun somewhat, given that some political sources have demonstrated that it is not necessary for such metaphors to be used in order to put forward a strong opinion. However, as it currently stands deliberative democracy has a greater degree of idealism inherent to it than it is possible to maintain in the current political climate. Whilst the political acceptability of using particularly offensive language or words has changed over time, and could change again, the use of metaphors is much more ingrained in political discussions and arguments and as such it could be nigh on impossible to remove them. To expect people to refrain from using any form of metaphor in such discussions would arguably be going too far, not only because their use might often be subconscious, but also because it would restrict their freedom of expression to too great an extent.

Furthermore, for all they might deceive people and contribute to a misinformed electorate, there is something valuable about metaphors. They make our language more vibrant and interesting, and arguably make political statements more accessible to the electorate. Whilst it should be noted that many metaphors in this field are used to convey rather misleading messages about asylum, Santa Ana's 'insurgent metaphors' demonstrate that this need not always be the case. This is something which deliberative democracy currently fails to adequately address: whether it is desirable to sacrifice more colourful political deliberations in favour of achieving a more open and honest debate. If we accept that removing metaphors from our political speeches might necessitate losing something valuable, then we cannot accept deliberative democracy as it currently stands: its aims are simply too difficult to achieve in such a contested and debated area. Deliberative democrats therefore need to go back to the drawing board, and assess how a more honest debate might be achieved within the parameters of a metaphor-laden discussion.

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