‘Boat people’ and borders: changing political debate on asylum seekers

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‘The first were five young men who arrived in Darwin from Vietnam in a small wooden boat in April 1976. They had been two months at sea, travelled 3,500 kilometres, and had found their way to us with the aid of a page torn from a school atlas’

(Betts 2001:34)
Disproportionate emphasis on boat arrivals

- 69,605 boat arrivals since 1976
- From 2004-05 to 2014-15:
  - 80,000+ resettled refugees
  - 1m permanent migrants
  - 2.5m temporary migrants
- Budget emphasis 2016-17:
  - $3.05bn contract for ‘garrison support and welfare services’ at offshore processing centres in Nauru and Manus Is.
  - $264m for settlement services (for refugees and other migrants)

Sources: Phillips 2017; ABS 2017; Australian Government 2017a, 2017b; ANAO 2017
Overview

• Why look at political language about ‘boat people’?
• The research and methods
• How are ‘boat people’ discussed in parliament? What are the features of the debate in each ‘wave’?
• Discussion and conclusions
Why look at political language about ‘boat people’?
‘Spectacle’ of border security

- Governments use physical displays of border enforcement to calm public fears about unplanned immigration, reassert territory (De Genova 2013)
Language is a tool for doing ‘border work’

• Language and branding used as strategies to project border security (Mazzadro and Neilson 2013)

• Changes in official language can signify policy priorities:
  • E.g. changing official term from ‘irregular’ to ‘illegal maritime arrivals’
  • E.g. Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs → Immigration and Citizenship → Immigration and Border Protection
Words as ‘tokens’ in political ‘power games’

- Language, rhetoric, metaphors used against political adversaries to secure public opinion and support for ideas (Bächtiger et al. 2008)

- Examples:
  - “Stop the boats” (Liberal Party election slogan)
  - “No way: you will not make Australia home” (advertising campaign)
“We will not allow illegal boat arrivals to either determine Australia’s immigration programme, or undermine the Australian people’s confidence in the programme”
NO WAY
YOU WILL NOT MAKE AUSTRALIA HOME
The research

‘Boat people’ and discursive bordering: Australian parliamentary discourses on asylum seekers, 1977-2013
Research methods

- Analysis of transcripts from parliament (Hansard)
- Searched term “boat people” and extracted paragraphs
- Consolidated words
- Examined frequencies and looked for patterns
- Research questions (Bacchi 2009):
  - What similarities and differences exist across the three periods? What new terms are introduced, and which terms disappear?
  - How is ‘problem’ of ‘boat people’ represented? How are ‘boat people’ subjectively constructed?
  - What are the potential effects in terms of policy options created (or prevented)?
Three ‘waves’ of boat arrivals, 1977-2013

Source: Phillips 2017

W1
868

W2
5,516

W3
20,587

Source: Phillips 2017
Increasing debate and a larger vocabulary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Approx. sitting rate to calendar days</th>
<th>References to ‘boat people’</th>
<th>Unique words in same para as ‘boat people’</th>
<th>Total word count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Senate</td>
<td>House of Reps</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 1: 1977-1979</td>
<td>0.18</td>
<td>0.21</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 2: 1999-2001</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>0.20</td>
<td>85 (+39%)</td>
<td>1,156 (+33%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wave 3: 2011-2013</td>
<td>0.15</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>158 (+86%)</td>
<td>1,978 (+71%)</td>
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Frequency rankings show focus of debates

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<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>refuge</td>
<td>illegal</td>
<td>countries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>countries</td>
<td>countries</td>
<td>refuge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>arrival</td>
<td>arrival</td>
<td>policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>situation</td>
<td>immigrants</td>
<td>labor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>problem</td>
<td>refugee</td>
<td>arrivals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>immigrant</td>
<td>committee</td>
<td>boatloads</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>vietnamese</td>
<td>political</td>
<td>participants</td>
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<td>vietnam</td>
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<td>status</td>
<td>concern</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>question</td>
<td>figure</td>
<td>process</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Emerging and disappearing terms

• Becoming synonymous with crime: ‘Illegal’ more frequent in W2 and W3 (not mentioned in W1)
• Australia’s territory: ‘Offshore’ and ‘border’ used more frequently in W3 (absent: ‘settle’, ‘welcome’, ‘live’)
• Political and partisan: ‘Labor’ and ‘Coalition’ much more frequent in W3 (do not feature in W1 or much in W2)
• ‘Immigrant’ disappears in W3: hardening of definitions and categories for boat arrivals
W1 (1977-79): Establishing facts, practical responses

- Relatively uncomplicated and procedural terms
- Practical matters: numbers, how ‘boat people’ will be accommodated
- ‘Refuge’ (including ‘refugee/s’) is dominant term
- No specific emphasis on borders
- No dispute of validity of asylum claims
- Some dissension which prefaces future debate: ‘flood’, welfare magnet, national security risks, crime, ‘offshore processing base’

- More legalistic and politically partisan
- Protecting Australia’s borders against criminal activity becomes key theme: e.g. debates on Border Protection Legislation Bill
- Other (now common) phrases appear: ‘playing by the rules’, ‘sneaking through the system’, ‘jumping the queue’, ‘exploiting loopholes’
- Criticism of public figures encouraging ‘welcoming’ dispositions
- ‘Boat people’ a product of commercial people-smuggling
- Narrows policy options open to Government: deterrence and punishment

- Build political capital by looking ‘tough’ on asylum seekers (or damage an opposition’s political capital by making them look weak)
- ‘Labor’ is in top 5, ‘Coalition’ in top 25 words used
- ‘Boat people’ used to directly confront and attack political adversaries in parliament
- Direct, sustained involvement of PM and Opposition Leader
- Accusations of mismanagement of the issue- leads to introduction of words like ‘solution’ and ‘deal’, reflecting a need to look in control
- Coalition election messages of ‘stopping boats’ and prosecuting ‘operation sovereign borders’ is a further shift
Discussion

- ‘Boat people’ a signifier of increased arrivals, growing political issues, and changing government language
- From turn of century, parliamentarians criminalise ‘boat people’ and they become something to be stopped at the border
- Future governments are judged by measures of making borders more ‘secure’ for our ‘protection’
- Forced migration is complex, with consequences are not easily managed
- Language can ‘produce, disseminate and defend’ (Bacchi 2009) classifications and solutions, but narrow framing leads to poverty of effective options which can backfire (e.g. Manus payout)
Conclusion: room for alternatives?

- Terms absent: ethics, care, reception, welcome, partnerships, region, collaboration, transparency, data, information, conflict, war, poverty
- Discussing ‘asylum by boat’ (Higgins 2017) in other terms creates space for alternatives:
  - Stronger regional collaboration based on protecting people at risk, efficiently processing asylum claims, transparently sharing migration data
  - Technical and financial support to agencies who are ‘first responders’ in countries of origin (redirecting resources currently allocated to offshore operations)
  - Receiving boats with well-trained public officials, medical professionals and culturally-competent social workers; rather than outsourcing duty of care
  - Ensuring onshore asylum seekers have same rights and entitlements regardless of mode of arrival
Thank you. Questions?

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-- 2017b, ‘Social Services Portfolio, Portfolio Budget Statements 2016-17, Budget related paper No. 1.15a.


Bacchi, C 2009, *Analysing Policy: What’s the problem represented to be?*, Pearson Education: NSW.


