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# 'Bringing order to the border': liberal and illiberal fantasies of border control in the English channel

Lucy Mayblin<sup>a</sup>, Joe Turner<sup>b</sup>, Thom Davies<sup>c</sup>, Tesfalem Yemane<sup>d</sup> and Arshad Isakjee<sup>d</sup>

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the advancement of fantasy policy solutions to irregular migration, drawing on the case study of the UK/French border. In 2018 people began to cross the English Channel in significant numbers to seek asylum. This led to much commentary and a raft of new legislation seeking to criminalise people crossing the Channel and end rights to seek asylum in the UK. In this article, we explore the interaction between two sets of fantasies that are advanced by politicians and mainstream political parties in the UK. That is: the liberal technocratic fantasy – that this phenomenon can be efficiently 'fixed' through interventions in policing and multilateral cooperation with neighbouring EU states; and the illiberal fantasy that extreme and performative punishments can solve it. These fantasies intersect and break at different points in time, and involve many of the same policy solutions which are represented in different terms. Importantly, both of these fantasies reproduce racialised and colonial logics and ultimately serve border imperialism.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Asylum; borders; channel; irregular migration; refugees

## Introduction

Like many borderzones around the world, the stretch of water between England and France has become a site of violent segregation over recent decades (Tyerman 2021). The steady development of bordering and policing of the Channel, and the fortification of the port of Calais since the 1980s has created a situation in which some of the people wanting to cross this border cannot do so safely or 'regularly'. There are two movements occurring in tandem: regular journeys which are encouraged, enabled and lauded; and irregular journeys which are discouraged, disabled and represented as a threatening, invasive crisis. Increasing fortification and bordering to prevent the movement of this latter group does not stop it, but instead produces smuggling, irregular journeys, danger and death (see Mayblin et al., *forthcoming*).

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While stowing away in lorries was a common approach to enter the UK irregularly from the late 1990s, in 2018, people began to cross the English Channel to seek asylum in small boats. 299 people crossed that year (Home Office 2022), later rising to 45,755 in 2022 (Walsh and Cuius 2023). While not historically unprecedented, these recent small boat crossings have been presented as a national ‘crisis’ in the UK, and a range of voices have sought to explain how this crisis can be solved. The Conservative government initially responded to small boat crossings by advancing a dehumanising rhetoric of criminalisation, punishment and offshoring which drew strongly on the broader ideological repertoire of the far right, evoking explicitly racist and colonial fantasies (Davies et al. 2021). Here we refer to this as the ‘illiberal fantasy’. They materialised this fantasy through laws which are doomed to fail in stopping the boats – criminalising small boat crossings, ending the right to apply for asylum for spontaneous arrivals, and brokering a deal with Rwanda to deport people seeking asylum to the central African state (Gowler, Butchard, and McKinney 2022).

Critics, and notably the Labour opposition party, have been damning in their assessment of this policy agenda. If/when in power, they have argued that they will not oversee an asylum system in ‘chaos’ and small boat crossings increasing year on year. Instead, they advance a liberal technocratic fantasy that irregular migration can be efficiently ‘fixed’ through orderly and rational policymaking. In summing up Labour’s position on the small boats ‘crisis’ the opposition leader, Keir Starmer, promised to ‘bring order to the border’ (Shipman 2023). At first glance, these fantasies seem different. The latter would be less cruel, less overtly discriminatory, and draws from a broader liberal humanitarian discourse. However, they result in many of the same policy proposals and practices of bordering. As we will argue, this is because they are linked by a common set of logics centred on exclusionary borders, in which those to be excluded or expelled are abstracted from historical and contemporary mechanisms of displacement.

While this article focuses on a particular borderzone – the English Channel – our analysis contributes to broader scholarly discussions of borders, movement and contemporary racism. It seems likely that the discursive repertoires and policy framings found in the UK will likely resonate in other international contexts. In contributing to understanding these discursive repertoires and border politics, we advance the concept of the policy fantasy (first proposed in Davies et al. 2021) in the context of immigration regimes. The idea of the policy fantasy draws on Sum and Jessop’s (Jessop 2013; Sum and Jessop 2013) work on policy imaginaries. An imaginary is a ‘semiotic ensemble (without tightly defined boundaries) that frames individual subjects’ lived experience of an inordinately complex world and/or guides collective calculation about that world’ (Jessop 2013, 4). An imaginary is selected from the large range of possible interpretations of an issue, and policy made on its basis. We conceptualise the particular imaginaries selected in our research as ‘fantasies’. That is, not *only* selected imaginaries from a range of possibilities, but imaginaries that invoke a mythical representation of social reality which is untethered from what is occurring. This has clear resonance with established approaches in discourse analysis, but by emphasising the role of *fantasy* here we aim to understand how semiotic ensembles can lead to wholly imagined and hoped-for solutions which can never be achieved.

Exploring the role of fantasy emphasises two important points: firstly, the role of libidinal and desiring mechanisms within political discourse (e.g. the desire for punishment

and ‘revenge’, or the desire for a return to ‘order’) (Berlant 1991), and secondly, the fantastical relates to how these discourses create relatively coherent narrations of solutions, yet fail to respond to the structural complexity of the phenomenon (on fantasy and discourse see Glynos 2021). The solutions discussed here cannot achieve their stated aims, because they rely on an overarching fantasy that total border control is possible, and that more bordering is the solution to phenomena created by bordering. Relatedly, they fail to interrogate the structural reasons why people move to claim asylum and reproduce a system which Harsha Walia (2013) calls border imperialism.

In presenting this analysis, the article develops existing work on the representation and mediation of people crossing the Channel. For example, Parker et al. (2022) have studied the interpretive repertoires used to describe small boat crossings which ‘obscure the need for safe and legal migration routes to the UK’ (2022, 348). While not contesting these findings, we see these dominant interpretive repertoires as part of broader, historically emergent imaginaries which often work to reproduce vested elite interests. Humanitarian calls for ‘safe and legal routes’, then, can be folded into technocratic fantasies without undermining the logic of bordering. What is significant to us is that these dominant fantasies leave unquestioned the material conditions that lead to forced migration. Their value lies precisely in the advancement of a fantasy ‘solution’, from which political value can be extracted, but which itself can only sow the seeds of a future ‘crisis’ to which new ‘solutions’ will have to be found. Whilst other more radical positions exist (such as ‘No Borders’ and border abolition), we are interested in how dominant positions reinforce the existing status quo and further limit the space for just and sustainable policies to gain political ground.

## Methods

This article is part of a larger ESRC-funded project exploring UK government, NGO and migrant responses to small boat Channel crossings. The focus here is on government policies, connected discursive resources (e.g. produced by think tanks), and contestatory outputs such as those produced by the opposition party and affiliated actors. Empirically, our analysis draws on a corpus of 345 texts over the period 1962–2023 on bordering in the Channel, but most texts directly focus on responses to small boat crossings since 2018. The texts include publicly available and digitalised government policy proposals and announcements, think tank reports, parliamentary debates, acts of parliament, select committee minutes and reports, speeches, party manifestos, cabinet memos and letters, and international agreements. This corpus of documents was gathered through relevant keyword searches<sup>1</sup> in digital archives: Hansard (House of Commons/Lords debates/Select Committee minutes and reports), the House of Commons library, official government department and political party websites, the National Archives Cabinet Papers collection, Conservative and Labour linked think tank archives, and through tracing the intertextuality of key policy documents and government white papers.

The texts were coded according to their key themes, forms of representation, main actors and agents, their social and historical context as well as the social and political interests they are aligned to. In approaching the coding of the texts, we emphasised different modalities of analysis, drawn from Shilliam’s (2021) approach to *intratextual*

(the internal logic of a text), *intertextual* (the relation to other texts) and *interlocutory* analysis (the wider social and historical context of the text). This draws on materialist analysis of discourse which emphasises how discourse is a stabilised system of dominant meaning that emerges in particular historical moments, underpinned by systems of power and class interests (Sum and Jessop 2013). Here, discourse is more than utterances and language but instead that which conditions *what is doable and thinkable* within a particular hegemonic social order.

## Fortifying the channel borderzone

While cross Channel collaboration on stopping irregular migration had been occurring since the 1960s, the opening of the Channel Tunnel in 1994 was a key moment in efforts to control and prevent movement (see Mayblin et al., [forthcoming](#); Sheptycki 1998). Following the opening of the tunnel, some irregular migrants attempted to walk or ride on trains transiting through it. Strong fortification of the entrance diverted journeys away from the tunnel and for more than two decades illegalised Channel crossers tended to stow away in heavy goods vehicles (Bolt 2016). The frequency of these journeys fluctuated over time, and by 2015 the border inspectorate reported that lorry arrivals were three times higher than the previous year, in part because of the Syrian civil war (Bolt 2016). This coincided with the so-called ‘Calais migrant crisis’, and the establishment of ‘the jungle’ informal camp (see Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017). The establishment of the camp became an increasing source of political embarrassment on both sides of the Channel, resulting in the construction of new border infrastructure designed to make it impossible to access the port facilities. This included barbed wire topped fences, CO<sub>2</sub> detectors for lorries, sniffer dogs, secure lorry parks, x-ray machines for vehicles to drive through, and the construction of ‘natural’ barriers such as man-made lakes. Much of this was paid for by the UK government, and implemented by private contractors (see Mayblin et al., [forthcoming](#)).

By 2018, border control measures had made ‘lorry drops’ increasingly risky and unlikely to succeed. In response, people seeking to cross irregularly and smugglers adapted their approach, and that year people began to cross the English Channel in small boats for the first time in several decades. As Brambilla and Jones (2020, 297) explain, securing borders ‘does not stop people from moving but it does funnel them into more dangerous routes and force them to rely on smugglers’. The use of small boats intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with less freight moving across the Channel and smugglers demanding higher prices for clandestine movement in lorries. Importantly, this new maritime route was more visible, which created a media and political spectacle that culminated in calls from politicians to ‘stop the boats’ (Sunak) and ‘bring order to the border’ (Starmer). Before discussing the two key fantasies that have been advanced in response to small boat Channel crossings, we introduce our theoretical framework.

## Colonial fantasies and neoliberal racism

To understand how the two fantasies of border control both differ and reproduce each other, we draw upon Mondon and Winter’s (2020) dialectical analysis of illiberal and liberal racism. This pays attention to how European colonial and imperial projects

have entailed a mix of liberal and illiberal modes of governing. That is, explicit understandings of racial hierarchy, manifested in actions such as gratuitous violence, manufactured famines and forced encampment; and at the same time, a civilising mission, the idea of the white man's burden, the emergence of humanitarianism and the development of bureaucratic ways of charting, monitoring and managing populations in liberal and technical ways. Mondon and Winter show how these systems of rule and the racial and spatial segregation of who is considered properly liberal and modern, and who is deemed 'other', have continued to shape the contemporary world. Recognising this history allows us to see how liberal bordering has a dialectical relationship to illiberal bordering, and how both are organised through and organise racism(s).

Whilst illiberal and liberal racisms share much in common, illiberal racism is closer to a 'common sense' understanding of racism; the belief that certain populations have fixed and hierarchically organised cultural, social and biological features which are inferior to white Europeans. After the Holocaust, the explicit use of illiberal racism has been marked as irrational and antithetical to hegemonic liberalism, with liberals deploring biological racism and celebrating cultural differences. Racism in the late twentieth century became associated with explicit, and individualised forms of illiberal racism, and with extreme right and (neo)fascism. However, Mondon and Winter (2020) argue that the contemporary far-right has successfully mainstreamed many elements of illiberal racism, through a fixation on anti-immigrationism, islamophobia and xeno-racism, which appears superficially 'colour blind' but articulates a similar vision of fixed cultures where the mixing of different populations is a threat to the continuity of European and Anglo American nation-states. Liberal racism, meanwhile, has both a complementary and superficially oppositional relationship to illiberal racism. Liberalism is often viewed as a rejection of political extremes and as the guarantor of democracy, the rule of law and individual rights. In this way, liberalism is often defined against the social threat posed by illiberal and reactionary racism (Bell 2014). Liberalism maintains a 'sensible' status quo, characterised by technocratic rule and neoliberal hegemony. Nevertheless, liberal technocratic attempts to appear 'post-racial' come up against the material implications of state structures and imperial capitalist exploitation, which remain highly racialised and indebted to colonial modalities of dehumanisation.

Liberal racism, then, operates on several fronts. First, it entails the active denial of structural racism. Liberal anti-racism focuses on the interpersonal relations of people, for example, racist violence, hate speech and microaggressions (Kundnani 2023). While important, what this ignores is the historical role of liberal states in projects of colonialism and enslavement. And today, the way that the structural inequalities of imperial capitalism (through debt, land dispossession, hyper-exploitation, global supply chains), and the functioning of nation-states (through policing, borders and prison systems), reproduce divisions of human value and push certain populations towards harm, suffering and premature death (Gilmore 2007). If racism is only illiberal, interpersonal or fascistic, this allows these systems to continue, or even to appear legitimate, and separate from racism (Kundnani 2023). But whilst liberalism is universal in the abstract, this has always relied upon active contradictions and crossovers with illiberalism.

Thus, whilst illiberal and liberal racism might at first seem distinct, they are actively complementary. Liberals have criminalised forms of illiberal racism (e.g. banning hate



speech) but what Mondon and Winter (2020) argue, is that these racism are relational. Liberalism provides the historical and economic conditions for illiberal racism to emerge and is strengthened by material inequalities organised through hegemonic (neo)-liberalism. Equally, illiberal racism is legitimated and mainstreamed through liberal racism (whilst rhetorically working in opposition) because liberal conceptions of the nation-state, protection of borders, citizenship and the unequal global racialised division of labour allow for illiberal racism to hold explanatory and political power (Kundnani 2023). In the UK, for example, both liberal and illiberal approaches to immigration agree that borders must work to create a population of workers who are predisposed to market discipline. Whilst the far right poses this in deeply nationalist and white supremacist terms of cultural and racial purity, liberals focus on the border working as a filter that must accept those worthy of economic inclusion, and expel those who cannot conform or threaten the social order. In this way, the liberal defence of nation-state, hierarchies of citizenship and imperial capitalism reproduce the conditions under which the far right's claim to exceptional violence against racialized others is justified.

Both illiberal and technocratic fantasies of the border are, then, complementary, and remain tied to a similar vision of the nation-state and a colonial vision of the world order. The liberal technocratic fantasy works to actively hide these connections by appearing managerial and politically neutral, whilst the illiberal fantasy works to promote the idea that the solutions they pose are 'radical', in the name of 'the people' and work against the 'liberal establishment'. But they both rely upon modalities of racism as justifications for bordering. Whilst these fantasies are dialectical, there is value in analysing them on their own terms (given their prominence and rhetorical opposition), which we do in the next section. Following this, we show how they rely upon an interconnected set of political and ideological assumptions.

Table 1 shows the key features of the fantasies identified through our textual analysis.

In the next two sections, we describe the illiberal racist and liberal technocratic fantasies identified in our discourse analysis to show how apparently opposing understandings of what is happening and what should be done in response, are in fact complexly related.

**Table 1.** Features of the two fantasies.

	Illiberal racist fantasy	Liberal technocratic fantasy
<b>Problem</b>	Invasion by illegal immigrants	Poor governance of immigration
<b>Consequences</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Racial threat               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Cultural threat</li> <li>◦ Sexual and gendered threat</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Exploitation of women, children and vulnerable people</li> <li>• Waste of taxpayer money</li> <li>• Criminality, particularly smuggling gangs and trafficking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Chaos and crisis</li> <li>• Exploitation of women, children and vulnerable people</li> <li>• Waste of taxpayer money because of inefficiency</li> <li>• Criminality, particularly smuggling gangs and trafficking</li> </ul>
<b>Solutions</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Visible/spectacular violent border control</li> <li>• Rebel against the 'liberal establishment'</li> <li>• Circumvent or abolish human rights law</li> <li>• End asylum</li> <li>• Expulsion and offshoring</li> <li>• Effective crime fighting</li> <li>• Working with international partners in the Global South</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Good governance</li> <li>• Efficient asylum processing system</li> <li>• Resettlement schemes</li> <li>• Working with international partners in Europe</li> <li>• Externalisation, including deportation agreements</li> <li>• Effective crime fighting</li> <li>• 'Hard headed' humanitarianism</li> </ul>



## Illiberal racist fantasies of border control

The illiberal discourse, often forwarded by the Conservative government, was the more quantitatively dominant in the corpus of texts. This fantasy reflects the dehumanising logic of hierarchical humanity whereby some people's lives are explicitly worth less than others, and some people simply do not belong in the modern geography of Britain. Asylum seekers belong in an imagined colonial outside (Goldberg 2006, 332), are culturally 'alien' and should be returned to these uncivilised spaces of chaos, or containment (Mayblin 2017). People arriving 'illegally' on small boats are represented as a threat to the continuity of an explicitly whitened vision of Britishness, which is at existential risk from 'hordes' of displaced people arriving from the 'Third World'. Both the Conservative and Labour parties demonstrate illiberal racist positions in response to Channel crossings, but the illiberal position is predominantly developed by the Conservative Party and politically aligned think tanks.

Key themes within this fantasy which appear in our corpus of texts are shown in Table.1 above, each code is referred to below by the number of mentions (x) across the number of texts (t).

### 'Foreign' invasion

Channel crossings are regularly presented by Conservative MPs, the Conservative government and right-wing think tanks using the militarised language of 'invasion' (3x 3t) or as 'encroaching' (2x 2t), 'storming' (1x), 'penetrating' (1x), or 'breaking in to' (1x) Britain. MP Philip Hollobone (2019a, 2019b) argued in parliamentary debates on 'Illegal seaborne migration':

There is [also] a security risk. The No. 1 priority of Her Majesty's Government is to defend this nation. We do not know who those people are, where they come from or what their intentions are, and that activity needs to be stopped ... We must be able to defend our coastline from illegal immigration.

This militarised description of Channel crossers as a foreign enemy is widely used across far-right groups and parties in presenting people seeking asylum as a force that needs to be violently expelled. Dehumanising language using naturalist metaphors describes people on the move as 'hurricane(s)' (1x), 'surges' (2x 2t), 'tidal waves' (1x) 'flows' (4x 3t) and 'great rivers' (all used by Conservative politicians). In representing people moving across the Channel to claim asylum as a threat to the security and integrity of the border, and as an existential threat to the nation (27x 10t), they present Channel crossings as a national emergency (1x) that demands exceptional solutions, including the suspension of rights and rule of law (Sunak 2023), as well as the appointment in 2020 of an ex-marine to the new Home Office role of 'Clandestine Channel Threat Commander'. This of course relates to questions of sovereignty (64x 40t), so central to public discourses around Brexit, and the nationalist fervour around the fortified 'Island Nation'. For example, Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick argued, 'The English Channel was once a barrier more impenetrable than any wall – a 'silver sea' in which these islands were set ... it is [now] a gateway for those in search of better economic prospects' (Jenrick 2023a, 2023b ).

All people crossing the Channel are here represented as 'illegal' (112x 49t), as well as posing cultural, racialised and sexualised threats. Here, the white nation is imagined as

being in a fight for survival. Whilst there is a rhetorical gesture to the idealised figure of the ‘genuine refugee’, because the illegal migrant is a ‘criminal’ (65x 40t), this works to essentially make all people claiming asylum by this route not only ‘undeserving’ but criminals who need to be punished (50x 19t). This is a key tactic used in the Conservatives’ justification of making all asylum claims inadmissible if they come by irregular/criminalised routes. The responses are then presented as a binary choice between draconian policies of incarceration and expulsion (via the Nationality and Borders Act, Illegal Migration Act and the Rwanda Plan) vs. open borders. The latter is described as leading to the arrival of massive but indeterminate numbers of climate refugees (51x 13t), and the breakdown of British society (23x 13t). In this way, the Conservative government narrative normalises much of the ideology of the far right.

### *Community tension and racialised-sexualised threats*

Imminent risks are often presented in the language of threats to ‘community cohesion’ (30x 15t an explanation inherited from New Labour and primarily associated with a deficit of Muslim integration) and public services (59x 36t) but in response to small boat crossings this narrative has been increasingly linked by the Conservatives to logics of catastrophic scarcity and anxiety around cultural difference. The Home Secretary Suella Braverman, for example, commented in a debate on the Illegal Migration Bill in 2023 that:

[it is] right to talk about the risks we face as a country that is harmonious, happy with itself and cohesive. If we do not deal with this problem, we will face serious problems of community tension and challenges to community cohesion. (Braverman 2023a)

‘Community tension’ here works as a short-hand to reference cultural differences which are deemed ‘at odds’ with ‘British Values’ (Ward 2023). In this specific case, Braverman’s statement came in the wake of violent anti-asylum seeker protests in which fascist groups such as Patriotic Alternative mobilised against asylum applicants being housed in hotels. Whilst the Home Office nominally condemned this violence, references to community tensions clearly place blame for such events on asylum applicants themselves and the ‘different cultural values’ they apparently carry with them. These sentiments were shared with the Nazi-sympathising leader of Patriotic Alternative when he announced that: ‘Suella Braverman has basically admitted multiculturalism has failed and that mass immigration is a threat to the West. This is a good thing’ (Savage 2023 ).

This narrative equally builds on the racialised discourse of the undeserving who ‘leech’ from the British welfare state. After decades of austerity, people seeking asylum are again (as they were under New Labour) presented as burdening ‘our NHS and our welfare state ... our local schools, our housing and public transport, [creating] unsustainable pressure to build on precious green spaces’ (Johnson 2022a, 2022b). In this way, crumbling public services, and the absence of good jobs and affordable housing are presented as the fault of Channel crossers, rather than decades of neoliberal government policy. The concerns of people needing to access basic subsistence and public services are thus routinely presented as evidence of the public’s desire to crack down on ‘illegal’ migrants (88x 26t) and anything else is portrayed as a ‘betrayal of the electorate’ (Braverman 2023a).

The framing of cultural threats to the nation and to public services is also wrapped up with a focus on who is crossing the Channel. Here, the illiberal narrative actively draws on historic tropes of racialised-sexualised danger. This is predominantly portrayed through the figure of the ‘single male’ ‘economic migrant’ who cannot be a true asylum seeker (60x 36t). That 70% of people crossing the Channel are men is frequently used as evidence that they are not refugees but instead fit young men who have ‘elbowed aside’ more ‘deserving’ refugees (i.e. women and children) (Patel 2021). MP Lee Anderson, then Chair of the Conservative Party asked in a debate on the Illegal Migration Bill whether the ‘Home Secretary [can] confirm that the Bill will indeed get rid of foreign rapists and murderers?’ (Anderson 2023). This fixation on the sexuality of negatively racialised men continues the hyper-sexualisation of black and brown masculinities advanced under colonialism.

In this vein, child asylum seekers are frequently depicted as suspicious and unchild-like (88x 37t), often described as ‘burly lads’ or ‘men’. The suspicion that male asylum applicants are pretending to be children has led to an orchestrated moral panic in which they are described as threatening foster families and ‘genuine children’. Then Immigration Minister Robert Jenrick (2023b) argued in 2023 that the ‘evil’ of ‘young adults ... posing as children, and ending up in our schools, in foster-care families and unaccompanied-minor hotels, living cheek by jowl with genuine children’, needed to be ‘stamped out’. This narrative of dangerous black and brown men directly legitimises and feeds off the mobilisation of far/extreme right groups who argue that ‘migrant men’ are ‘praying’ on young white girls in English towns. In this way, the very presence of young male asylum applicants is presented as a threat that directly draws on fears of inter-racial sex and miscegenation from within historic eugenics movements as well as contemporary far-right anxieties about the survival of the ‘white race’ (Siddiqui 2021).

### *Demography and climate change*

In contrast to this focus on single men, women and very young children seeking asylum have been presented as passive victims (18x 11t), but this is increasingly complicated by a refocus on the reproduction of ‘foreign women’ as breeders of racial difference and twinned with the catastrophic threat from future climate refugees. For example, in her speech to the rightwing think tank the AEI, then Home Secretary Suella Braverman argued that:

More than one in five births are to foreign-born mothers. Due to immigration and high birth rates among foreign-born mothers, English secondary schools will need to find an extra 213,000 places by 2026 compared to 2020. (Braverman 2023b)

The conspiracy theory of the great replacement and the coming ‘race war’ touted by white supremacists (Ekman 2022), sets the wider context for the presentation of Braverman’s demographic assertions. Immigration is presented as part of the ‘take over’ of British society in which migrants pose a biological and cultural threat to the continuity of whiteness and Britishness. ‘Liberal’ elites are said to have been complicit in this take-over by implementing soft borders (14x 7t) by undermining pronatalist policies for ‘native’ people and devaluing traditional motherhood (see Walker and Crerar 2023).

Whilst these logics have a longer lineage within imperial and colonial white supremacist projects, they have increasingly taken on a renewed intensity through the politics of endless scarcity and climate change (Stanley 2022). The reality of people moving to wealthier countries and being dispossessed by anthropogenic climatic events is collapsed into the fear that millions of people will move from Africa and Asia to overwhelm and destroy the social and ecological fabric of Britain (27x 18t), leading to conflict over limited resources. The Centre for Policy Studies in 2022, for example, proposed that ‘780 million people’ could access the UK asylum system (a number later quoted by the Home Secretary). Robert Jenrick in the same year, argued that whilst poverty, conflict and climate change were causing movement of people across the Channel:

Conservatives should not shy away from their belief that the nation has a right to preserve itself – and that the fundamental responsibility of the government in a democratic society is to further the interests of the inhabitants that constitute this national community over those outside it. (Jenrick 2023a, 2023b)

In this fantasy struggle for preservation, the only two options are presented as ‘open borders’ which will lead to the ‘end’ of Britain or the ramping up of border controls in the form of ‘lifeboat ethics’ (Potter 2011).

### *Evil smuggling gangs*

The specific framing of threats to the national fabric works in unison with the dominant focus on ‘criminal gangs’ being responsible for Channel crossings. In the illiberal fantasy, the criminality of people moving blurs into the representation of organised crime, criminal syndicates, and gangs which facilitate the movement of people on small boats (310x 109t). This is presented as a shadowy network of criminals across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa making money and exploiting vulnerable people. Smugglers are described in highly moralistic terms as ‘evil’, ‘vile’, ‘exploiters’, as the line between human trafficking and smuggling is constantly blurred (36x 15t). Importantly, people seeking asylum are themselves presented as criminals. Senior Tory ministers have claimed that Channel crossings have led to ‘heightened criminality’ (Adu and Sayal 2023), with Jenrick (2023a, 2023b) presenting asylum applicants as burglars ‘breaking into Britain’. This structures the further criminalisation of asylum by blurring the criminality of the smuggler with the act of moving to claim rights. This is directly manifest in the criminal prosecution of people who tiller small boats in the Channel based on anti-smuggling laws (240 people were arrested on this basis in 2022–23; Taylor 2024).

### *Illiberal ‘solutions’ and populism*

The illiberal problematization of Channel crossings advances a range of fantasy solutions, materialised in two immigration Acts in 2022 and 2023, and in parallel policies. The focus within these Acts has been two strategies: intensified bordering in Northern France, and spectacular punishments for those who breach the controls as a deterrence for future border transgressors (ending of the right to apply for asylum for those entering by an ‘irregular’ route, detention, deportation, offshoring, and mass criminalisation 127x 40t). The UK-Rwanda partnership was billed as the flagship deterrence policy to make it futile for people to try and enter the UK via crossing the Channel (72x 20t). The

Conservatives argued that not only would people who have crossed the Channel have their claims categorised as inadmissible, but the threat of being sent to Rwanda would act as a vital deterrence to others. Despite detailed research on the failure of deterrence as a policy solution (covered in the Home Office's own review 2020), this is viewed as a means of weeding out the threat of 'illegal' movement.

The logic of the Rwanda plan was set out by David Goodhart (2022) in a report by Policy Exchange: 'We must ensure that nobody who arrives here illegally will ever, under any circumstances, be allowed to settle in Britain'. This amounts to the abolition of the UK asylum regime, and the fantasy of the offshore remains a key part of this vision (69x 36t), with commentators such as Nick Timothy (former advisor to Theresa May) suggesting the need to implement the Rwanda Scheme 'at scale' along with agreements with at least two other third countries or British Overseas Territories (Timothy and Williams 2022, 8). The plan to destroy the connection between arrival and processing asylum claims has also necessitated the promise to detain asylum seekers *en masse* (76x 26t). Here, people seeking asylum can either be immobilised through security infrastructure in Northern France, or kept in prison-like conditions in the UK, whilst they await deportation flights to Rwanda, but they will not have their claims assessed by the UK state.

By appearing to find solutions to Channel crossings, these proposals also play into the symbolic narrative of protecting Britain, and offer a libidinal outlet for racist and nationalist desire by targeting minoritised people with authoritarian punishment. This is a common strategy used by the global revanchist right (Scott 2017). In this populist trope, the solutions offered by the Conservative government were presented as a rebellion against the 'liberal establishment' who, in this fantasy, want open borders (which is never mentioned in any text in the corpus as a policy solution). The liberal establishment includes 'activist lawyers' (17x 10t), and the less specific 'do gooders' (32x 22t), who are frustrating government attempts to 'stop the boats'. Here the liberal establishment is portrayed as anti-democratic and out of touch. For example, Sir John Hayes (MP) argued that 'it may be uncomfortable for the bourgeois liberal establishment, but polls show that the British people want tough action on illegal immigration. Indeed, polling last week showed that people support the principles of the [Illegal Migration] Bill' (Hayes 2023). Direct appeals to represent the 'true British people', over the liberal elite, become another mechanism through which far-right and illiberal racism is further normalised.

The 'liberal establishment' is also a useful shorthand for international human rights law which the Conservative Party have long wished to abolish (Rycroft 2008). The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) is viewed as a particular problem, alongside international law governing refugee rights. Excessive human rights laws are blamed for curtailing anti-immigration policies but this is increasingly taken further, to question the UN Refugee Convention. PM Rishi Sunak (2022), for example, described the global system as 'designed for a different era'. Circumventing or abolishing human rights law thus becomes part of the solution to respond to the arrival of 'illegals' (66x 23t; leaving ECHR 14x 6t). This plays into the wider imagination of the far right where international and legal norms are described as a global government or state, from which nations need to be emancipated (Caiani, Porta, and Wagemann 2012). Whilst calls to abolish human rights law have focussed on enabling offshoring to Rwanda, its wider promise is to enhance the power of the state over the rights of all residents and citizens in the UK, rolling back to a more limited 'British Bill of Rights'.

## Ordering the border: liberal technocratic fantasies of border control

If the illiberal racist fantasy is based on the protection of Britain from cultural and racialised threats which demand exceptional solutions, then the liberal technocratic fantasy sees the disorder of a racialised outside as something that can be ordered through rational and efficient interventions and multilateral agreements, ostensibly within the rule of law. Here, what is needed is good bureaucracy and expertise to tame the chaos of irregular migration, whilst making explicit distinctions between good/genuine refugees and economically beneficial migrants who can be managed, and bad ‘illegals’ and criminal gangs who threaten to overrun and subvert the system. The problem of Channel crossings according to the liberal technocratic fantasy is poor governance, manifested in an inefficient system (24x 15t). This fantasy is promoted most vocally by the Labour Party but is also a position shared by prominent think tanks, advisors and cross-party Home Affairs Committees.

Both those advancing an illiberal and a liberal fantasy of Channel crossings agree the asylum system is broken, but the responsibility for who broke it differs. Within the illiberal racist discourse, people arriving in small boats and human rights regimes broke the system, while the liberal technocratic discourse maintains that the fault lies with the poor management of the Conservative government. Within the liberal technocratic fantasy, the need for secure and managed borders is equally important but is often justified as needed to cut off support for far-right and extremist parties and the long-term stability of the liberal social order. In this vision, the hands of elites are tied so as to appeal to the more ‘base’ instincts of the electorate.

## *Against inflammatory rhetoric: towards a ‘kinder’ and more cost-effective border*

The technocratic fantasy is set up in direct opposition to the illiberal fantasy, with many commentators critiquing the government’s use of Channel crossers as ‘scapegoats’ for systematic policy failings. The focus of the Labour Party and affiliated think tanks is on criticising the government and ministers for their use of inflammatory language. The illiberal narrative is described as ‘scapegoating vulnerable people’(1x), dangerous for ‘community cohesion’ (3x 2t) and even ‘racist’ (1x). The Illegal Migration Bill was represented as a ‘gimmick’ (Starmer 2023), not *real* rational policymaking. Superficially, this advanced a more progressive approach to immigration, which was contradicted by the policy solutions proposed. This follows the wider liberal politics of anti-racism which reduces racism to explicit prejudice and ‘evil’ acts of physical violence whilst obscuring the structural dynamics of race and class.

In an influential report on how Labour should respond to Channel crossings, Thom Brooks (2023) argued that specific nationalities (such as Albanians) should not be ‘singled’ out as the causes of Channel crossings as this is unhelpful and inflammatory. Instead, what is needed is sensible and rational debate regarding how Channel crossings can be stopped. In this fantasy, the border itself is not the problem, instead, it is the cultural and moral language through which border regimes are discussed and implemented. In this vein, Labour’s ‘Five Point Plan’ on Channel crossings proposed a technocratic vision of efficiency and reliability which would restore ‘faith’ in the UK’s immigration system.



In this fantasy, chaos and crisis within the asylum system, the asylum assessment backlog, the expense of housing people in hotels, and low numbers of post-refusal deportations (26x 13t) were the root of the problem. As Labour leader Keir Starmer argued in the House of Commons in 2023:

There have been plenty of newspaper headlines about wave machines, prison ships and fantasy islands, but there has been no effective action. It is all designed to mask failure, to distract from a broken asylum system that cannot process claims, cannot return those with no right to be here, and cannot protect our borders. (Starmer 2022)

This inefficient system was presented as a waste of taxpayer money (17x 9t). For example, Dame Diana Johnson, Labour MP, explained in a Home Affairs Select Committee meeting on Channel Crossings in 2022:

The UK spends £1.5 billion a year on its asylum system. We house asylum seekers and refugees in hotels at a cost of nearly £5 million a day. We agree with the Home Secretary that the asylum system is broken and unsustainable, but we do not agree that it was those who sought safety by crossing the Channel who broke the system. (Johnson 2022a, 2022b)

This was also how the Labour party framed the UK–Rwanda partnership. Rather than critiquing the practice of offshoring, they focused on the management and costs of the plan (10x 6t) and the human rights record of the Rwandan government (9x 3t). As MP Stephen Kinnock (2023) argued:

They went to Kigali and paid £140 million for a press release, and 12 months later they have managed to send more Home Secretaries to Rwanda than they have asylum seekers ... a vast amount of taxpayers' money is being squandered on a profoundly unethical policy that is designed to fail on its own terms.

It is important to recognise here that it is not offshoring or immobilising people outside of the UK that is problematic in the liberal technocratic vision. Previous Labour governments established diplomatic negotiations for asylum processing in 'transit centres' beyond EU borders (in 2003) and in Tanzania (2004), although neither were successful. Instead, the Rwanda pact was problematic because it sat outside of international legal frameworks on refugees, and was unlikely to be cost-effective.

### *Criminal smugglers vs. good asylum seekers*

The governance failures critiqued in the technocratic fantasy were to blame for criminal smuggling networks operating lucrative routes across the Channel, which led to the loss of life (4x 3t). Linked closely to this, 'genuine' refugees could not find refuge (25x 14t). The problem with the illiberal model was thus a lack of systematic filtration which distinguished between 'genuine' and 'bogus' asylum seekers, the former being appropriate targets for inclusion and welcome. This argument was highly gendered, with women and children being the 'wrong' targets of border violence, detention and exclusion. The Borders and Nationality Act, and the Illegal Migration Act were therefore problematic in that they were indiscriminate. Equally, both genuine and ingenuine applicants were treated the same and continuously housed in hotels at the taxpayers' expense. Within the liberal critique, the Conservative government had failed at implementing both humanitarian and coercive aspects of the border regime. This was evidenced by



Labour's the drop in number of deportations under the Conservatives. In light of this, Shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper pledged to increase removals of refused asylum seekers and other migrant groups (such as foreign national criminals) if Labour won the 2024 election.

### *Technocratic solutions to bring order to the border*

The Five-Point Plan set out by Labour in 2023 narrated the solution to people crossing the Channel in small boats through the fantasy of good governance, ordered administration and multilateralism. Speeding up the processing of asylum claims was central to this plan (with the reforms New Labour made to the asylum system in 2001 being a regular point of reference), with a clear emphasis on distinguishing between those who 'have a right to be here' and those who *do not*. Deportation or 'return' agreements (19x 13t) were heralded as another solution, resting on the logic that the end of the UK's participation in the Dublin Regulation was pivotal to the movement of people across the Channel (as opposed to the inevitable consequence of security measures to stop lorry drops). This irregular mobility was understood as caused by the failure to renegotiate access to the Dublin Regulation which enabled deportations to EU states alongside the use of the EURODAC surveillance system (Brooks 2023, 22) 'This is because when the UK was part of a returns agreement with the EU, it could more easily return anyone travelling to the UK as an irregular migrant to the first safe EU country they entered'. Here, the EU, and especially France, were represented as central to any policy platform on the use of deportation as a deterrence, and part of the global management of secure borders (16x 10t). Balancing this focus on removals was the expansion of resettlement routes to manage the arrival of people in an orderly manner (Johnson 2022a, 2022b).

A key overlapping theme with the illiberal fantasy was the focus on tackling smuggling, with Starmer proposing that smuggling should be treated 'on par' with 'climate change, hostile foreign powers and terrorism' (McShane 2023). People seeking asylum were framed primarily as victims of criminal smuggling, rather than as criminals and illegals themselves (11x 9t) but the technocratic fantasy shared the familiar vision of international policing as the means of stopping irregular mobility. The emphasis here was on multilateral data sharing and supporting European partners to tackle 'smuggling gangs' through the expansion of the National Crime Agency (NCA) and a 'cross border police force'. As shadow Home Secretary Yvette Cooper explained:

Everyone should be pulling out all of the stops to try and prevent those dangerous boat crossings, but in order to do that, you have to say you would have a major expansion of the National Crime Agency to go after the gangs. (cited in Finan 2022)

Within the liberal technocratic fantasy, the existing institutions of the UK's immigration regime could be ramped up and repurposed to respond to small boat crossings. Importantly, this could be dealt with within the 'normal' procedures of state institutions. Policing is a key strategy for liberal technocrats because it relies on a commitment to the police as the correct enforcers of state coercion, which is viewed as depoliticised. This follows Starmer's own professional and ideological commitment to policing as 'justice' (as a former lawyer and Director of Public Prosecutions). In short, within this fantasy, costly and ineffective plans like deportations to Rwanda, or overtly racist rhetoric,

have no place in the fantasy to bring ‘order to the border’, because the existing tools of European and UK border policing are entirely capable of differentiating those ‘genuine’ refugees who can be processed, from those ‘bogus’ claimants who can be deported, and the smugglers who can be ‘smashed’.

### Bringing order to the border?

Neither set of ‘solutions’ above can succeed in stopping irregularised migration. There is no evidence globally that deterrence measures work (evidenced in the Home Office’s own 2020 report and see Crawley and Hagen-Zanker 2019). Border fortification does not stop movement, it diverts people to increasingly dangerous routes (Brambilla and Jones 2020). Smuggling is a business enabled by bordering, not the reverse, and smuggling is not straightforwardly solved by extra policing – evidence shows it is actually further professionalised (Global Initiative 2024). Labour’s focus on distinguishing between ‘genuine’ asylum seekers as victims vs. terroristic smugglers fails to recognise the blurred boundaries between people moving to claim asylum, and the practice of ‘smuggling’ (Taylor 2024). This is especially stark in light of the need to enable individual and collective movement and to acquire the funds needed to make such journeys. The intensification of the policing of smuggling is thus likely to lead to the further criminalisation of people on the move.

The dominant fantasies, discussed above, created a highly constrained space for imagining alternatives to the current order. The illiberal fantasy shored up an authoritarian and explicitly white nationalist vision of Britain, as a nation under threat from the colonial outside, from predatory single men, hyper-fertile foreign women, and racial enemies in disguise. As an electoral strategy, it fed a libidinal desire for the punishment of racialised others in the name of protecting the nation. However, because the liberal technocratic fantasy launched a defence of the status quo and the legitimacy of the state to utilise border violence (through deterrence, detention, deportation, policing) and to divide ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ asylum seekers, it enables many aspects of the illiberal position. The liberal fantasy reproduces the logic of border control based on the idea of a sovereign national people, which orders migration in deeply racialised and classed ways.

The technocratic liberal defence of borders and migration governance supports the nationalist and racialised division of the global labour regime, and a refugee system (in the Global North) that allows sanctuary for a tiny proportion of the world’s displaced. By not interrogating the historical and imperial connections that bring people to the UK, borders are presented as a legitimate and acceptable means of creating orderly movement, which is based on categorising people as worthy of inclusion whilst actively subjecting others to forced deportation and detention. In this way, the liberal technocratic fantasy is equally premised on ideas of human hierarchy which also structures the violent exceptionalism and racialised revanchism of the illiberal/far right. Both fantasies focused on the necessity to intensify the policing and prosecution of smugglers as ‘criminal gangs’ and even ‘terrorists’. Superficially, the liberal technocratic vision appears progressive in that it does not explicitly target specific minoritised groups, it avoids *outwardly* dehumanising rhetoric and vengeful mass punishments. But it fails to challenge any of the structural conditions that cause displacement and irregular migration and, moreover, works to legitimate and obscure racist border violence in the UK &

Northern France. Ultimately, there are some clear discursive and practical nuances across the fantasies, but very few structural differences.

Both fantasies rely on discredited principles of deterrence. The illiberal fantasy of sending people to Rwanda was superficially opposed to the liberal fantasy but Labour's Five Point Plan relied on securing deportation agreements with European partners. Here, the Labour Party obscured the violence of deportations and detention by focussing on multilateral agreements and promising to send people to (presumed safe) European states, rather than Rwanda (presumed dangerous). Whilst 'removals' in this guise were framed in a technocratic and legalistic language, they ultimately amount to the same forms of punishment. That is, psychological trauma, the slow violence of waiting for deportation, being forced into poverty, the pain of being incarcerated in detention centres, the destruction of intimate relationships, the isolation and alienation of being removed and displaced in another state, and the risk of later refoulement. Whilst couched in the terms of normal rather than exceptional politics, and enabled by the wider systems of liberal migration governance, this fantasy still amounts to a system of dehumanisation and embodied violence targeted at populations racialised by the UK border.

Both fantasies also worked to obscure and reproduce the broader raced and classed dynamics of mobility. Borders continue to work to limit access to the (ever eroding) rights and wealth afforded to British citizens through the inherited resources of the Empire, as they equally shape who can access the labour market and the material conditions people work under in an increasingly unequal world. This is why we continue to refer to these policy platforms as *fantasies* – they remain divorced from the material reality of how and why people move and the structures which shape and create the conditions of migration. In this context, both fantasies share a deeply colonial mapping of the world order and Britain's role in it. While the illiberal racist fantasy leans into performative violence, the liberal technocratic fantasy obscures the endemic violence and inequality enshrined in border regimes which is necessary to maintain the liberal nation-state. Both fantasies imagined immigration to lead to problems of 'community cohesion' and resource drain. In this way, both fantasies represent the nation-state as under threat from migration. From within this prism, they present the nation as a racialized entity of belonging, disconnected from its colonial and imperial history, and the imperial capitalist order.

We have described here the logics of two dominant policy fantasies that shape responses to people crossing the English Channel up to 2023. These positions are fantastical in that they relay a particular ideological depiction of what the problem of people crossing the Channel is, and a set of solutions to govern this problem. They remain divorced from the historical reality of patterns of mobility but foremost they are fantasies *because* they will not solve the challenges they purport to solve. Ultimately, the illiberal and liberal fantasies are overlapping, and not as distinct as their proponents claim. They do nothing to challenge the racialised global divisions of labour and inequality, resource extraction, exploitation, wars facilitated by British arms sales and military invasions, or the long-term displacement of millions through climate catastrophe. These are the actual realities which shape forced migration and displacement globally, and in seeking sustainable responses rather than fantasy solutions (in the UK and elsewhere), these realities have to be faced up to.

## Note

1. Example Keywords: 'Asylum', 'Refugee', 'Immigration', 'Borders', 'Security', 'Channel', 'Small Boats', 'Illegal Migration', 'Channel Tunnel' and 'Smuggling'.

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