

Mind your language: the semantics of asylum

by Stephen Moss

Our confusion over the language of asylum reflects our confusion over the issue itself.

In its report last Saturday¹ of William Hague's² speech on asylum policy, the *Times* referred to 'asylum seekers' in its first paragraph; 'immigrants' in its second; and 'refugees' in its third. The terms appeared to be used interchangeably.

The *Guardian* library has resolved the conundrum to its own satisfaction. Everyone gets put into a file called 'refugees', with the exception of high-profile individuals in well-publicised

seeker, and the media quickly latched on to the change of nomenclature. Significantly, it will enter the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary later in the year. The term 'asylum seeker' was first used in the *American Political Science Review* in 1959 and was a cold war creation: most asylum seekers were political dissidents from the Soviet Union. Refugees were quite different: people displaced in large numbers by war or famine. 'Refugee' is a word

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cases who are seeking political asylum in the UK. The library has decided that the term 'asylum seeker' is bogus, rather than the bona fides of the claimant. Refugee organisations have drawn the same conclusion. There has been no obvious rush to rename themselves: the Asylum Seeker Council would not have quite the same ring to it.

'Asylum seeker' is a term that gained currency in the 90s. In 1990 references in the *Guardian* to 'refugees' outnumbered references to 'asylum seekers' by 10 to one. Last year it was less than two to one. This year the ratio is even closer. In 1999, across all papers, the ratio was six to one in favour of refugees. In 2000, references to refugees halved, while references to asylum seekers doubled.

It is not easy to identify when the change occurred, though two stories in the *Guardian* on women displaced by the war in ex-Yugoslavia suggested a change in usage in the first half of the 90s. The unquestioned 'refugee' of 1993 had become the 'asylum seeker' of 1994. Flight, in the latter case from Sarajevo, was no longer sufficient for a person to qualify for refugee status; bureaucratic unease about growing numbers claiming to be refugees had produced the new category of asylum

that evokes immediate sympathy; 'asylum seeker' is a colder, more bureaucratic term, and it is convenient for the Home Office that the latter is now increasingly favoured.

The term is abused on all sides. Those on the right no longer even have to use the word 'bogus'; their tone suggests that they consider all asylum seekers bogus. But some of those entering the UK are also to blame for bringing the term into disrepute: many people who are clearly on the move for economic reasons claim to be asylum seekers. The latter are really 'illegal immigrants', though that is a horribly Powellite³ term redolent of fear and xenophobia that should also be consigned to history. The linguistic solution is perhaps to phase out both 'asylum seeker' and 'illegal immigrant', and use only 'refugee' and 'migrant'. So farewell, 'asylum seeker'. Is it too late for the OED to rescind its decision to give the term its seal of approval?

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This article appeared in the *Guardian* on 22 May 2001 and also in *Welcome to Britain: A special investigation into asylum and immigration*, published by the *Guardian* in June 2001 which presents a wide range of reports first published as



part of a three day series in the *Guardian* from 20-23 May. Thirty *Guardian* writers investigate the issue of asylum, focusing on aspects such as the humiliation of living on vouchers, the truth about trafficking, the history of Britain's immigration policy, the impact on developing countries of the brain drain and the reality of life inside Britain's most notorious asylum detention centre. 100pp. £4.50 (£5.00 incl p&p). To order a copy of *Welcome to Britain*, telephone +44 (0)870 727 4155 or write to: The *Guardian*, 119 Farringdon Road, London EC1R, UK.

1. May 2001.
2. Previous leader of the UK Conservative Party.
3. Enoch Powell - former Conservative Party member of parliament (and minister) who in 1968 condemned multiracial immigration into the UK.

Next issue of FMR includes feature on development-induced displacement and resettlement

For the last four years, a team of specialists has been busy with a research project on development-induced displacement and resettlement (DIDR), under the auspices of the Refugee Studies Centre and funded by DFID. Development undertakings involve the displacement or resettlement of some 10 million people per year, usually with negative consequences. The RSC project is geared towards improving outcomes in such situations and making policy recommendations in this regard.

Issue 12 of *Forced Migration Review* will include a feature on DIDR, including an article on the RSC project as a whole.