'Boat People' and Discursive Bordering: Australian Parliamentary Discourses on Asylum Seekers, 1977-2013

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Résumé de l'article

Cet article s'appuie sur une analyse de contenu de transcriptions de débats parlementaires australiens sur les demandeurs d'asile arrivés par bateau lors de trois périodes historiques: 1977–1979, 1999–2001 et 2011–2013. Nous analysons la fréquence et cooccurrence des termes afin d'identifier des tendances dans l'utilisation spécifique de l'expression « boat people ». Nous identifions ensuite comment le terme est déployé dans les débats parlementaires à travers le temps et discutons du rapport entre ces utilisations et les politiques publiques et pratiques gouvernementales. Nous en arrivons à la conclusion que des formes de traçage discursif de frontières ont amplifié les représentations des demandeurs d'asile comme une menace sécuritaire devant être contrôlée à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du territoire souverain de l'Australie. L'étendue des réponses politiques ou législatives à l'arrivée des bateaux est limitée par la pauvreté du langage politique, corroborant ainsi les arguments conceptuels récents autour de la sécurisation et de l'extra-territorialisation de la frontière contemporaine.

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JOHN VAN KOOY, LIAM MAGEE, AND SHANTHI ROBERTSON

Abstract

This article draws upon content analysis of Australian parliamentary transcripts to examine debates about asylum seekers who arrived by boat in three historical periods: 1977–1979, 1999–2001, and 2011–2013. We analyze term frequency and co-occurrence to identify patterns in specific usage of the phrase "boat people." We then identify how the term is variously deployed in Parliament and discuss the relationship between these uses and government policy and practice. We conclude that forms of "discursive bordering" have amplified representations of asylum seekers as security threats to be controlled within and outside Australia's sovereign territory. The scope of policy or legislative responses to boat arrivals is limited by a poverty of political language, thus corroborating recent conceptual arguments about the securitization and extra-territorialization of the contemporary border.

Résumé

Cet article s'appuie sur une analyse de contenu de transcriptions de débats parlementaires australiens sur les demandeurs d'asile arrivés par bateau lors de trois périodes historiques : 1977–1979, 1999–2001 et 2011–2013. Nous analysons la fréquence et cooccurrence des termes afin d'identifier des tendances dans l'utilisation spécifique de l'expression « boat people ». Nous identifions ensuite comment le terme est déployé dans les débats parlementaires à travers le temps et discutons du rapport entre ces utilisations et les politiques publiques et pratiques gouvernementales. Nous en arrivons à la conclusion que des formes de traçage discursif de frontières ont amplifié les représentations des demandeurs d'asile comme une menace sécuritaire devant être contrôlée à l'intérieur et à l'extérieur du territoire souverain de l'Australie. L'étendue des réponses politiques ou législatives à l'arrivée des bateaux est limitée par la pauvreté du langage politique, corroborant ainsi les arguments conceptuels récents autour de la sécurisation et de l'extra-territorialisation de la frontière contemporaine.

Introduction

The arrival of boats carrying primarily Vietnamese refugees in the mid-1970s began a decades-long public debate about Australia's humanitarian obligations, management of its coastline borders, and the impacts of irregular and "unauthorized" immigration. Relative to Australia's overall immigration intake, small numbers of boat arrivals have been the source of disproportionate public anxiety and media attention. In pursuit of political capital and electoral gains, politicians have sought to either subdue or stoke these tensions by shaping, through careful selection and association of linguistic terms, how their constituencies respond to the arrival of "boat people." Performance of these language games is staged across a variety of forums, including Australia's upper and lower houses of Parliament. Without thoroughly determining migration policy and practice, such games provide a scaffolding for policy consequences well beyond territorial borders.

While Australia's refugee intake has always been small in comparison to other receiving contexts globally, its evolving configuration of all three elements—policy, practice, and language—presents an extreme and illustrative case study of discursive bordering. Condemned by global institutions, human rights organizations, and local activists, Australia's contemporary asylum policies have nonetheless been heralded by politicians in Europe in recent years as possible solutions to the European "refugee crisis"—a successful experiment in the exercise of what Jakubowicz (2016, pp. 162–163) has termed "ethnocratic power," conducted in "the North in the South." Australia's role as an incubator of repressive border policy development and implementation has seen it variously externalize its borders to block asylum routes, employ third-party regional settlement agreements, and privatize detention regimes—all strategies now considered or adopted by other receiving countries (Martins & Strange, 2019; Little & Vaughan-Williams, 2017). Given their seminal role and global significance, it is important to understand the antecedents and genealogies of Australia's current asylum regime, together with the discursive histories of "border work" that have produced them.

Both in Australia and internationally, the term "boat people" has often been an important signifier in critical analyses of the role of discourse in shaping normative understandings of forced migration in settler contexts and the subsequent "Othering" of asylum seekers. Much of this literature has focused on qualitative analysis of media discourse within discrete periods of time, often centring on critical incidents or specific groups of asylum seekers (Lueck et al., 2015; McKay et al., 2011). In this article, we instead adopt a longitudinal frame, analyzing in quantitative and qualitative terms the evolution of Australian parliamentary discourse over three distinct waves of boat arrivals spanning three-and-a-half decades. Focusing on formal political discourse is significant, we argue, because of the recognised institutional authority of Parliament, which permits politicians' use of classifying schemes, concepts, and definitions to structure, project, and legitimate particular representations of reality (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

National borders are the sites where governments enact the "spectacle" of immigration enforcement, deterrence, and detention, allaying public fears while reasserting territorial claims to an international audience (De Genova, 2013). The deployment of classificatory distinctions and associations in the Australian Parliament indicate significant performances of "border work" that occur far from territorial boundaries. We argue that usage of the label "boat people" in the houses of Parliament creates, reinforces, and popularizes certain understandings of immigration dynamics that evolve and sediment over time. Situated within assertions of (il)legality or (in)authenticity, the term "boat people" reflects a narrow presentation of policy options that have already been determined—an attempt to set the boundaries of policy action and reform. Examining how politicians across party lines use language in different time periods can help to delineate the wider epistemic character of these discourses and identify alternative discourses that may have been ruled out.

In this article, we combine quantitative content analysis of word frequencies with qualitative discourse analysis to understand how borders are performed through official language (Rumford, 2006), and how such performances transform or remain static as governments, public attitudes, and migration patterns change. We begin by briefly discussing previous research on representations of boat people in Australian media, parliamentary, and public discourse. We then discuss three periods of increased boat arrivals to Australia over the past 40 years and describe our methods for analyzing the parliamentary debates that followed. We present findings before concluding with suggestions for further research and action.

Discursive Bordering: Parliamentary Debates, Public Opinion, and Policy Framings

As political theorists and discourse analysis scholars have long argued, political and parliamentary discourse enacts games of language and power (Bourdieu, 1991; Wittgenstein, 2009; Wodak, 1999). Language "tokens," rhetorical tropes, and metaphorical schemes used in parliamentary debates can be viewed as effecting game moves, strategies, and gambits deployed to secure public opinion and leverage political advantage (Bächtiger et al., 2008). In Australia, elected representatives have constructed and formalized classifying labels for migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, making

these socially constructed categories palatable to the wider public while also deploying them to attack political adversaries and help win elections (Leach, 2003; Rowe & O'Brien, 2014; Stevens, 2012). As Rowe and O'Brien (2014) suggest, parliamentary representations of people seeking asylum who arrive by boat have the potential to influence policy directions. Language games thus function as forms of "border work"—that is, as critical elements of the processes and relationships through which state borders are produced, interpreted, and contested (Reeves, 2014). Other parts include policy formulation, media representation, negotiation with other states, and, not least, the physical securitization of borders and management of migrant bodies.

Previous studies have demonstrated how binary representations of boat arrivals—particularly the use of qualifiers such as "legal" or "legitimate" versus "illegal" or "illegitimate"—shape public opinion and influence Australian government policy through the qualitative analysis of media discourse (Betts, 2001; Corlett, 2000; Goot & Watson, 2011; McKay et al., 2011). Pickering (2001), for example, argued that distinctions made between "legal" refugees and "illegal" boat people in newspaper articles served to justify draconian state responses, such as putting international treaties on hold and closing immigration routes. Media representations of asylum seekers in Australia are dominated by such stark contrasts, and suggestions of softening offshore processing and detention policies have solicited savage responses from sections of the press (Cameron, 2013; McKay et al., 2011). Letters published in national newspapers have reflected opinions of asylum seekers as "parasites," "leeches," and the "greatest peril imaginable" (Corlett, 2000).

Public reactions to boat arrivals have ranged from a compassionate "cosmopolitan sensibility" that considers Australia an inclusive nation, to exasperation, fear, and outright hostility (Haslam & Pederson, 2007). A 2010 Australian Election Study poll found that 55% of respondents thought boats carrying asylum seekers should be turned back (Goot & Watson, 2011). Public anxieties about boat people and unauthorized immigration reverberate back through parliamentary chambers, becoming entangled with policy responses from both government and opposition parties (Every & Augoustinos, 2008). Bureaucratic terminology can similarly both reflect and infect public and political debates, as in the 2013 invention of the term "illegal maritime arrivals" by then Immigration Minister Scott Morrison during Operation Sovereign Borders, to arguably dehumanizing ends (Robertson, 2019). As we show below, however, for over

40 years the use of "boat people" has remained a persistent frame of reference and a signifier capable of bearing subtle associative shifts and doing politically expedient work. Unlike the binary qualifiers often explored in media analyses or the consciously dehumanizing bureaucratic language of more recent immigration regimes, "boat people" has been a term that has moved across both humanitarian and securitized approaches to asylum seeking and across governments from both sides of the political spectrum.

We acknowledge the interdependency of different sources in the evolution of discourse on asylum seekers. However, by focusing on parliamentary debate over an extended period of time, we offer a counterweight to analyses that have favoured relatively time-bound, "snapshot" analyses of media discourse or public opinion. Through a temporal analysis of political language, we illustrate the explicit and covert roles that language plays in refugee policy debates alongside geopolitical conditions, partisan ideologies, and migration patterns. In doing so, we point toward how rhetorical strategies might be used to explore possibilities for more humane and equitable immigration policy.

Continuity and Change in Public and Parliamentary Response: Three Waves of Boat Arrivals, 1977–2013

As shown in Figure 1, three historical "waves" of boat arrivals can be observed from 1977–1979, 1999–2001, and 2009–2013—with respective peaks in 1977, 2001, and 2013. In each of these periods, the increases in boat arrivals met with corresponding surges in media attention and parliamentary debate. To allow for comparable three-year time periods, we have reduced 2009–2013 to 2011–2013 in our analysis.

Following the introduction of the term "boat people" to the Australian political vernacular in 1976, each wave of boat arrivals coincided with new patterns and discordances in parliamentary debates. In addition, Australian federal elections in December 1977, November 2001, and September 2013 occasioned intense public debate on Australian immigration policies and correspond to high-profile migration-related events and policy episodes.

The arrival of boats in the 1970s carrying refugees from Indochina—an ethnically and culturally distinct minority group (mostly Vietnamese) seeking humanitarian protection and long-term resettlement support—represented one of the first major challenges to Australia's immigration regime since the dismantling of the White Australia policy architecture (see Figure 1).[1] From April 1976 to August 1981,

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1. The White Australia policy describes a continuum of 20th-century immigration restrictions, beginning with Australia's federation in 1901, that sought to curtail the entry of non-white/non-European immigrants and had largely bipartisan support until the end of the Second World War. While these policies were progressively dismantled between the early 1940s and the early 1970s,

Figure 1. Boat Arrivals to Australia with Peaks, by Calendar Year
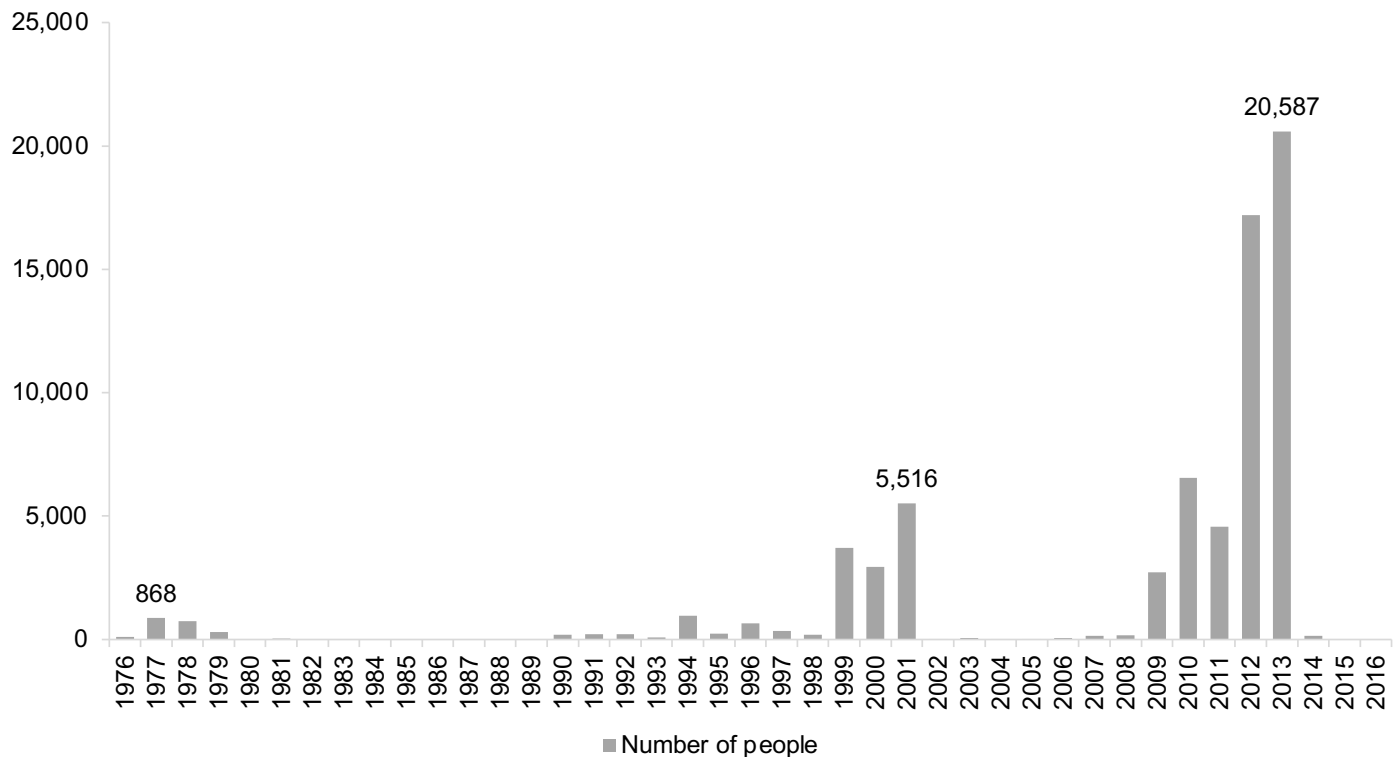
Source. Philips (2017)

some 2,059 refugees landed by boat on Australia's northern shores (Philips, 2017). Images of refugees desperately seeking asylum in leaky boats followed the visceral impact of the extensively televised U.S. war in Vietnam. Boat arrivals were one of the issues that dominated the news in the lead up to the December 1977 federal election (Betts, 2001).

After the re-election of the federal Liberal Party and Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser in 1977, the annual refugee intake was increased to 10,000 people, while aircraft and naval patrols were reinforced along Australia's northern coast to deter "unauthorized" boat arrivals. Despite public resistance to increased refugee resettlement, political debates were marked by relative compassion and sympathy, demonstrating bipartisan recognition of the deteriorating situation in Vietnam, and of Australia's international humanitarian obligations (Stevens, 2012).

More people arrived by boat to seek asylum in Australia between 1999 and February 2000 than in the years following

the U.S. war in Vietnam, prompting renewed public attention (Corlett, 2000). Betts (2001, p. 45) highlights how public receptivity to boat people changed following this increase:

> In the late 1970s many people could have thought that to turn the boats around would be to condemn innocent and desperate people to death by drowning. [In 2001] a person offering this response could think, "Let the people smugglers take them back to Indonesia."

The Liberal government under Prime Minister John Howard adopted a hard-line stance at the turn of the century, combining offshore detention and processing of asylum seekers on small island states with high-profile military and naval operations. Refugees and people seeking asylum were especially prominent in media and public discourse after the MV *Tampa* incident—a tense standoff in Australian coastal waters in which the Special Air Service boarded and returned a vessel carrying over 400 asylum seekers to Nauru

the formal "end" of the White Australia policy is usually attributed to Gough Whitlam's Labor government in 1973, with the introduction of non-discriminatory migrant selection processes and multicultural settlement policy. For detailed context of the political history of Australian immigration, see Jupp (2002) or Markus (2001). For comprehensive analysis of the White Australia policy, see Tavan (2005) or Brawley (1995).

(Saxton, 2003). Many of the boat arrivals during this period were from Iraq and Afghanistan; Corlett (2000, p. 31) has argued that moves to intercept and detain boats symbolized public anxiety about demographic change, and the fear of "invasion" and "mass immigration out of control."

Seeking re-election in November 2001, Liberal ministers dramatically inflated the asylum-seeker issue as a threat to Australian sovereignty, prompting concern from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Pugh, 2004). Reflecting a much more restrictive policy disposition and the heightened anxieties about global terrorism in the immediate aftermath of 9/11, during election campaigning Howard famously declared, "We will decide who comes to this country and the circumstances in which they come" (Liberal Party, 2001).

Media and parliamentary attention to asylum seekers spiked again during a third wave of boat arrivals, beginning in 2009. Following the sinking of an Indonesian ship carrying 49 asylum seekers off the northwest coast of Australia in April, newspaper articles were dominated by concerns about "waves" and "floods" of refugees, terrorism, and threats to national security (McKay et al., 2011). In 2010, 45% of respondents to a national opinion poll thought Australia was dealing with "huge numbers" of "boat people." While the number of boat arrivals in 2010 reached 6,555—the highest annual number in Australia's history at the time—it remained small in comparison to the net permanent immigration figure of around 172,000 people and over one million temporary visa holders in the country by the end of 2011 (Philips & Simon-Davies, 2017).

As numbers of boat arrivals continued to increase through 2010 and 2011, the federal government under Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard reopened offshore "processing centres" and moved to return people who had their asylum claims rejected to their countries of origin—notably Afghanistan (Philips, 2017). Despite considerable debate, the two major political parties agreed in broad terms that "boat people" constituted a border security problem first and foremost (Rowe & O'Brien, 2014).

Methodology

Prior studies have applied critical discourse analysis to parliamentary debates about asylum seekers and refugees (see, for example, Every & Augoustinos, 2008). Such studies, however, have centred on specific contemporary "flashpoints" in the asylum-seeker debate such as the 2001 Tampa incident. While we follow a similar approach in studying transcripts of Australian parliamentary proceedings retrieved from the Hansard record to examine terms employed in debates about asylum seeking and unauthorized immigration, our analysis seeks to explore continuities and shifts in discourse over a more extended period, to explore how political discourse has evolved as public attitudes, geo-political concerns, and

forced migration patterns have transformed. We thus analyze transcripts containing the term "boat people" across the three periods discussed above.

Our analysis combines quantitative content analysis with qualitative discourse analysis. The quantitative analysis explores parliamentary discussions of boat people through word frequency analysis of correlated terms. Hansard is the "report of the proceedings of the Australian Parliament and its committees" and includes both upper and lower houses (Parliament of Australia, n.d.). Using the Hansard search function of the Parliament of Australia website, we searched for transcripts containing the phrase "boat people" across all available categories: Senate; House of Representatives; Main Committee; Joint Committees; Estimates; and All Other Committees. We downloaded the resulting matched documents in xml format and extracted only those paragraphs mentioning "boat people" into a text corpus. This corpus was simplified by consolidating word stems and removing common English stop words (extended to include terms common to parliamentary discourse, such as "minister," "government," "matter," and "Australia"). We then generated word frequencies in table formats and looked for patterns in the text across the three chosen periods, along with changes in the relative frequency of terms. While Parliament is far from the only site that generates political discourse on boat people, Hansard presents a strong source for a rigorous and longitudinal analysis, as it presents an accessible, standardized, and consistent corpus across the periods of concern.

Rather than code the textual data or attempt to estimate policy positions from the words in our corpus (as in dictionary-based coding methods or "scoring" procedures; see Laver et al., 2003) we examine the word frequencies that are generated from the reference texts to identify how words that are co-located with "boat people" serve to frame policy debate.

For the qualitative analysis, we interpreted both the word frequencies and selected quotes from the Hansard excerpts through the lens of Bacchi's (2009) "What's the problem represented to be?" (wpr) method. Our qualitative analysis adapts Bacchi's wpr questions, asking: What is the "problem" represented to be? What is left unproblematic—where are the silences? What effects are produced by this representation of the "problem"? Drawing on Foucauldian post-structuralism, Bacchi (2012) argues that the purpose of interrogating "problematisations" using such questions is to "dismantle" discursive objects and show how they have come to be "true" and "real." The strategic point of doing so is to disrupt the status of terms used by those who govern so that we may open up relations of ruling for scrutiny and create "room to manoeuvre" on dominant policy positions.

Following this approach, we first identify problems implied in the correlation of terms with "boat people" in

Table 1. References to "Boat People" in Each Period, and Percentage of Those References in House of Representatives

Wave	Period	References to "boat people"	References in House of Representatives (%)
First	1977–1979	68	39.7
Second	1999–2001	123	28.5
Third	2011–2013	196	67.9

the text corpus. We then explore the binaries, concepts, and categories that support the problem representation. We situate these results within a historical reading of the three periods to illustrate ways that parliamentary discourse co-produces—alongside media and other discursive channels—the political moniker of the "boat person" across time. This analysis allows us to explore the varied ways in which asylum seekers were constituted in the debate during these three critical periods.

Content Analysis of Parliamentary Hansard

After the introduction of the term into Parliament in 1977, "boat people" features with increasing prominence in subsequent years, reflecting its normalisation within both political and wider public discourse. Table 1 illustrates this rising usage, alongside the proportion of references in the House of Representatives relative to Parliament overall.

The second period represents an 80.9% increase in references to "boat people" over the first period, while the third period shows a 59.3% increase in references to "boat people" over the second period. Given a slight overall decline in parliamentary sitting time,[2] these findings indicate that not only does the term "boat people" figure more prominently, but more parliamentary time is spent discussing associated issues. This trend rises sharply during the third wave. Indicating its accentuated role to policy, references to "boat people" are both more numerous and far more likely to be mentioned in House of Representatives debates.

Table 2. Term Ranking, by Period and Overall

Term	Wave 1	Wave 2	Wave 3	Overall
Countries	2	4	1	1
Refugee	1	5	2	2
Immigrant	6	2	22	3
Problem	4	6	35	4
Process	28	39	13	5
Vietnamese	7	82	36	6
Australians	18	94	28	7
Cost	78	28	42	8
World	67	49	34	9
Political	75	12	65	10
Illegal	159	1	7	11
Contribute	32	47	95	12
Visa	137	10	48	13
Concern	16	11	190	14
Deal	198	30	14	15
United	46	22	178	16
Department	114	21	116	17
Fact	33	170	51	18
Stop	145	84	29	19
Recent	76	26	177	20
Area	15	55	216	21
Live	167	65	58	22
Indonesia	112	46	134	23
Place	176	101	18	24
Better	108	153	55	25

Term Frequencies

The 25 most highly ranked terms common to all three periods are shown in Table 2, along with the relative ranks in each of the three periods. Unsurprisingly, geographical terms ("countries," "world," "area," "place," as well as individual country and people names) feature prominently. Terms

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2. We calculated the ratio of parliamentary sitting days to calendar days for the upper house (Senate) and the lower house (House of Representatives) in each period. The Senate sitting rate is approximately 18% of days during 1977–1979, 20% of days during 1999–2001, and 15% of days during 2011–2013. The House of Representatives sitting rates are 21, 20, and 17% of days respectively.

Table 3. Positive Changes in Relative Frequency

Term	Periods 2–1	Term	Periods 3–1	Term	Periods 3–2
Illegal	1.88	Policies	0.80	Labor	0.79
Immigrant	0.59	Labor	0.80	Countries	0.45
Visa	0.36	Illegal	0.56	Boatloads	0.43
Figure	0.34	Work	0.51	Solution	0.42
Work	0.26	Deal	0.45	Coalition	0.38
Legislation	0.23	Malaysia	0.42	Signatories	0.36
Access	0.22	Offshore	0.35	Tax	0.35
Centre	0.22	Place	0.33	Offshore	0.35
Media	0.19	Border	0.33	Border	0.35
Address	0.19	Opposite	0.32	Process	0.33
Political	0.19	Send	0.29	Asylum	0.33
Department	0.17	Process	0.22	Protect	0.32
Lot	0.17	Lost	0.20	Deal	0.28
Yesterday	0.17	Announced	0.20	Send	0.28
Deal	0.16	Change	0.20	Place	0.27
Solve	0.14	Stop	0.19	Work	0.26
Arrival	0.13	Pay	0.17	Announced	0.25
Initial	0.13	Let	0.16	Refugee	0.22
Queue	0.12	Budget	0.16	Lost	0.22
Course	0.12	Times	0.15	Billion	0.21

associated with refugees and humanitarian policy such as "refugee," "problem," "contribute," and "concern" are comparatively highly ranked in the first period, while a mix of economic, legal, and procedural terms ("illegal," "political," "cost," "process," "visa," "stop," "deal") become more prominent in periods two and three. Whereas "illegal" is a remote concern in the first period, it becomes a key discursive token in the subsequent two periods, where it is often attached to "immigrant": in the first period, the joint term "illegal immigrant" is mentioned only 8 times, while in the second period it is referenced 179 times.

Changes in Relative Frequency of Terms

To analyze changes of common terms, we subtracted their relative frequencies: period one from period two, period one from period three, and period two from period three. Tables 3 and 4 show the top 20 positive and negative changes for each set of differences between frequencies. Table 3 confirms the shift in language from humanitarianism to proceduralism noted above: terms such as "illegal," "political," "visa," "centre," "access," and "legislation" feature more prominently in period two. The third period introduces terms of a more complex border-management infrastructure—"offshore," "solution," "border," "policies," and "asylum"—and includes a large number of terms related to the financing of that industry, including "deal," "tax," "billion," "budget," and "pay." These changes are large, relative to both preceding periods.

Negative changes highlight the geographic specificity of arrivals in the late 1970s, with more references, relatively, to specific countries, people, and directions: "Vietnamese," "Thailand," "Darwin," "east," and "south." Again, the language of humanitarian obligation (such as "refugee") is prominent in the first period but virtually vanishes in later periods, while terms such as "receive" and "report"

Table 4. Negative Changes in Relative Frequency

Term	Period 2–1	Term	Period 3–1	Term	Period 3–2
Refugee	-2.96	Refugee	-2.75	Illegal	-1.31
Situation	-0.81	Situation	-0.88	Immigrant	-1.03
Vietnamese	-0.64	Problem	-0.84	Committed	-0.55
Status	-0.56	Status	-0.68	Concern	-0.39
Thailand	-0.52	Vietnam	-0.64	Problem	-0.38
Ethnic	-0.49	Vietnamese	-0.54	Figure	-0.35
Vietnam	-0.48	South	-0.47	Communities	-0.33
Problem	-0.46	Immigrant	-0.44	Measure	-0.31
Countries	-0.43	Receive	-0.41	Visa	-0.27
Report	-0.42	Report	-0.41	Head	-0.25
Affairs	-0.41	Area	-0.41	Chinese	-0.25
East	-0.39	Concern	-0.39	Political	-0.23
South	-0.38	Present	-0.30	Access	-0.23
Darwin	-0.37	East	-0.29	Period	-0.22
Receive	-0.36	Direct	-0.27	China	-0.21
Indochina	-0.31	Total	-0.27	United	-0.20
Refer	-0.30	Migrant	-0.26	Recent	-0.20
Present	-0.29	Statement	-0.26	Detained	-0.20
Australians	-0.28	Authorities	-0.26	Forward	-0.20
Area	-0.27	Asia	-0.26	Address	-0.20

emphasize the nation's perceived role in monitoring and accommodating refugees. Differences between periods two and three, though more minor, illustrate a subtle shift from legal and securitized to logistical and economic language—terms such as "illegal" and "detained" become less frequent.

Three Waves of Parliamentary Discourse

To examine shifts in the terms and content of the debate on boat people over time, in this section we situate the word-frequency data above within a critical qualitative analysis of the historical context and key debates in which the term "boat people" appears. We use illustrative quotes from Hansard across the three periods to contextualize the significance of word frequencies (the rankings of specific terms in each wave of data are noted in parentheses). In applying Bacchi's WPR questions, we can discern patterns in the evolution of concepts and "problems."

Wave One: Fraser Era (1977–1979)

During the period of government under conservative Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, debates centre on establishing facts and discussing practical responses to Indochinese refugees arriving by boat, such as orderly immigration processes and matters of housing or cultural integration. The problematization of boat people in this period largely reflects the Australian government's response to an emerging geopolitical situation. The U.S. war in Vietnam produced a regional crisis. Australia's relative proximity to the conflict zone, the bipartisan desire to distance parliamentary discourse from the White Australia policy era, and the Fraser government's own ideological support for those fleeing the perceived spread of communism meant there was little dispute of the validity of boat arrivals' claims to political asylum. Then Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs Michael MacKellar described those fleeing as Australia's "allies" (Peterie, 2016). Parliamentary discourse in this period consequently does

not portray boat people as a significant threat to Australia's sovereign borders, but takes an approach described by Stevens (2012) as more "pragmatic" than "inclusive."

The range of terms co-located with the use of "boat people" is limited during the Fraser era, with emphasis on parliamentarians gaining an understanding of the "problem" (ranking #4), the "situation" (#5), or the "status" (#9) of "affairs" (#10). The policy problem in question is one of information and institutional capacity. For example, in May 1978 one Labor Party senator in Opposition, noting the reported arrival of 3,000 boat people in the previous month, asks the immigration minister for the "actual number of refugees who have arrived in Australia to date," and for his comment on the pragmatic issue of their accommodation in hostels (Commonwealth, 1978b).

"Refugee" (#1) is the dominant term co-located with "boat people" during this period, indicating a conceptual link between boat arrivals and their pursuit of political asylum. Many passages refer to boat people as refugees synonymously, without establishing (or questioning) their legal migration status. During this period, references to boat people in Hansard could include those arriving by boat or those resettled from camps through the humanitarian program. The term's usage became much more fixed on actual boat arrivals in subsequent waves, reflecting starker discursive boundaries between supposedly "legitimate" and "illegitimate" modes of arrival. Other immigration terms during the Fraser era reflect a pragmatic appraisal of the situation, including "process" (#28), "accept" (#35), and "intake" (#45). Boat people are described as "immigrants" (#6) housed in refugee "camps" (#30).

Foreshadowing the trope of the "queue" in future political debate on asylum seekers and refugees, an interest in the maintenance of an "orderly process" also appears in this period. A Liberal senator in June 1979, for instance, argues that it was "inevitable" that some people would "attempt to bypass the [refugee] selection process," and that stronger approaches to "regularising" the outflow of people from Vietnam were needed (Commonwealth, 1979).

While Stevens (2012) found a general escalation of border enforcement rhetoric in Parliament and the media during the lead up to the 1977 federal election, we could find no emphasis on securing borders relating specifically to boat people in the Hansard extracts for this period. This is consistent with Peterie's (2016) arguments around the depoliticizing function of Fraser's silence on boat people during his campaign. Although it was standard procedure for boat arrivals to be temporarily detained in migrant centres while they were processed for residency, and there were additional facilities for detention of compliance cases like visa over-stayers (Philips & Spinks, 2013), offshore detention and naval operations repelling boats were not widely discussed as policy responses. This gap in the Hansard fragments suggests that asylum seekers arriving by boat were not yet being problematized as a security threat—at least not explicitly in parliamentary discourse.

One particular speech fragment from May 1978 does, however, articulate concerns about the boat arrival "problem" in terms that would become more salient in later years. An MP for the National Country Party argues that there is an "absolute certainty" of early boat arrivals representing the "beginning of a flood" from Vietnam (Commonwealth, 1978a). The minister asserts that "welfare relief" acts as an incentive for people to leave Southeast Asia, then links boat people to national security risks, illicit drugs, and exotic diseases, before proposing the establishment of an "offshore base" on which refugees can be vetted and processed. The passage pre-empts future political positions based on establishing a pejorative link between asylum seeking, transnational organized crime, and people smuggling (Cameron, 2013).

Wave Two: Howard Era (1999–2001)

In the years 1999–2001 of John Howard's conservative coalition government, asylum seekers who arrive by boat are discursively constructed as the product of a commercial venture—"people smuggling"—which becomes almost the singular focus of policy debate. The identity or origins of boat arrivals seem to be of less concern than their mode of travel (especially their passage through Indonesia before boarding vessels bound for Australia). Compared with the Fraser era, parliamentarians in the Howard era frequently demonstrate skepticism toward the legitimacy and authenticity of asylum claims.

The quantitative lexical patterns during the Howard era reflect a turn in the problematization of asylum seeking by boat. "Illegal" becomes the most frequently used term, where it had scarcely been used from 1977–1979. Similarly, the procedural word "visa" (#10) enters the lexicon. Parliamentary discourse becomes preoccupied with "arrivals" (#3), while welcoming words of "accept" and "intake" virtually disappear, replaced by terms of invasiveness and security such as "smuggled" (#20), "detention" (#38), and "detained" (#40). References to illicit people smuggling in direct connection with boat people indicates shifting attention to offshore legal concerns, rather than onshore reception or integration.

Border protection, criminality, and illegality became significant policy themes in the Howard era, with a Border Protection Legislation Amendment Bill introduced and debated in Parliament in late 1999. In one of the readings of the bill, a member of the Labor Opposition claims that Australia (among other countries) is being targeted by a highly

sophisticated ring of people smugglers operating a multibillion-dollar global enterprise (Commonwealth, 1999a).

Phrases used in reference to people arriving by boat include "playing by the rules," "sneaking through the system," "jumping the queue," and "exploiting loopholes." This language extends the Fraser-era regional concerns with orderly processing of refugees into a far more comprehensive discursive construction: that of a global humanitarian system that some people are allegedly contravening or exploiting. The proposed response through instruments such as the Border Protection Bill is to stop the people-smuggling trade through systemic disincentives. Opposition members appear somewhat divided on the bill; one Labor senator in November 1999 attempts to keep open the policy possibility of bilateral negotiations and highlights the inflammatory potential of publicly issuing statements suggesting that "we are about to be flooded with refugees" (Commonwealth, 1999b).

As Betts (2001) argues, social conservatives from both sides of politics took the opportunity presented by the boats issue to attack perceived "political correctness." Though in federal Opposition, one Labor Party senator argued that showing "caffe latte compassion" to boat people would be akin to weakness (Commonwealth, 2001). There was also criticism of public figures thought to be encouraging illegal immigration to Australia via their welcoming dispositions towards boat people. Corlett (2000, p. 29) describes these linguistic techniques as comprising a "rhetoric of dismissal," which simplistically constructs "the marginalised as undeserving, often threatening people who are deliberately exploiting the generosity of the nation, especially its taxpayers."

Wave Three: Gillard Era (2011–2013)

The Hansard dataset from 2011 to 2013 is more verbally dense and complex than the previous two periods, characterized by increased political partisanship on the boats issue. Amid record numbers of boat arrivals, debate centres on policy legitimacy and effectiveness in achieving "border security" for the "protection" of the Australian public. The boat people problem becomes a linguistic tool used by parliamentary adversaries to gain advantage in electoral politics.

Accordingly, both the representation of the boats issue and its discursive effects on policy indicate a shift towards politico-bureaucratic concerns. "Illegal," while still a prominent term, falls to a ranking of seventh, with even sharper declines in relative usage of the terms "detained" (#426) and "smuggler" (#54). In place of these are the increasing

incidences of action-oriented terms like "deal" (#14), "solution" (#17), and "stop" (#29), highlighted by discussion of policy proposals (the "Malaysian Solution") and electoral campaign slogans ("Stop the Boats").

Partisan differences also appear more pronounced. Whereas in the Fraser and Howard years political party names were scarcely mentioned, in the Gillard era "Labor" appears in the top five words, while "Coalition" (a reference to the electoral partnership between the federal Liberal and National Parties) appears at #19. Party "policies" (#3) are also more prominent in the debate. Where in the past, detailed immigration statements or questions were commonly posed by senators or "backbenchers,"[3] a feature of this increase in partisan language is the direct and sustained involvement of the prime minister and leader of the Opposition. For example, the leader of the Opposition confronts the prime minister in September 2011, asserting,

> If you had any respect for the welfare of our country, if you had any respect for the safety of boat people and if you had any concern to preserve good relations with our neighbours you would go back to the [Liberal/National Coalition] policy that worked. (Commonwealth, 2011)

Throughout the three-year period, the Coalition continues to accuse the Labor government of mismanagement of the asylum-seeker/boats issue. The primary evidence cited by Opposition parliamentarians is the sharp increase in the number of boat arrivals. In one example, a Liberal senator argues that the "wilful dismantling" of "proven border protection policies" led to the arrival of 389 boats carrying 22,718 asylum seekers (Commonwealth, 2012).

Contesting the federal election in September 2013, both major political parties increased their public commitments to being "tough" on people who seek asylum by boat and reinforcing offshore processing policies, culminating in the Opposition's election campaign promise to prevent all asylum-seeker vessels from arriving in Australia ("Operation Sovereign Borders") (Johnson & Wanna, 2015). While the problematization of boat people as a security and illegal immigration problem is not considerably adjusted during this period, the increase in boat arrivals becomes a useful means of attacking political adversaries for electoral advantage, thus hardening the boundaries of policy debate.

Discussion and Conclusions

The seemingly innocuous term "boat people" has itself transgressed numerous discursive borders since its entry into

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3. Referring to members of Parliament who do not hold Cabinet positions or official posts within the government or Opposition. Backbenchers are physically seated in the rear sections of the house.

Australian public language in the 1970s. It gains its curious contemporary semantics in part since, in the era of cheap air travel, the method of passage is an anachronism. The naval voyage is integral to Australian national myths of colonization and settlement; yet today, migration by boat connotes contradictory figures of either the highly vulnerable or highly suspect migrant. The former is a cost for the country to bear; the latter seeks to exploit its resources—stealing jobs, importing criminality, and defrauding the already stretched welfare state. Unlike those travelling by plane, the "boat person" seeks to enter foreign sovereign territory "under the radar." These associations have become taken for granted in the public consciousness, such that dissenting policy positions are neutralized through repeated denial or condemnation (Muytjens & Ball, 2016).

Our analysis demonstrates how boat people have been problematized as a continued category of convenience and an equally convenient floating signifier over three periods of increased arrival—reflecting the expansion and reorientation of governmental language from concerns about humanitarianism in the 1970s to legality and securitization in the 1990s, and to regional solutions and their respective costs in the 2010s. Notwithstanding important regional distinctions, the integration of these discourses into a wider governmental language of securitization, privatization, logistics, and "solutions" appears common to the work undertaken by many nation states. The new global rhetoric of "border control and migration management," emphasizing the "freedom of movement of its subjects" alongside "tough but humane" regulations, might be, as Mezzadra and Neilson (2013) argue, largely a "dream of a smooth governance of migration." Yet this rhetoric functions in an uneasy conjunction with the complicated, chaotic, and frequently violent operations of borders, whether on land, sea, or in processing centres, to shore up sovereign power and ensure the continuance of a "sovereign machine of governmentality."

Given the small numbers of arrivals relative to other immigration categories, the political fascination with boat people in Australia gives the term disproportionate power in public policy debates. That asylum seekers could consistently rank among the top three issues discussed during parliamentary Question Time from 2010 to 2013, for instance (alongside Australia's public debt and taxation policies) (Rayner & Wanna, 2015), is testament to its contemporary prominence in the public sphere. Such prominence motivates and in turn is abetted by the economic and political capital the issue generates in media and parliamentary theatres, where it can function strategically as a wedge issue that can win election campaigns and reassert national sovereignty to the domestic public and regional neighbours. These political strategies are consistent with and indeed emblematic of how, in an age of intensified global flows, bordering practices have also evolved and intensified, as many states in the Global North and, increasingly, the Global South, seek to reassert performances of border sovereignty by scapegoating "unwanted" immigrant groups.

In Australia, despite an increasingly bipartisan approach to the border regime, dominant political strategies on asylum seekers such as offshore detention have not gone unchallenged. In September 2017, the federal government was ordered to pay nearly 2,000 former detainees of the Manus Island detention centre around A\$70 million (~US\$46 million at the time of writing) in compensation, rather than see a lengthy class action proceed in court. The largest human rights pay-out in Australia's history illustrates that while the dominant problematization of boat people continues to be reproduced according to new modes of governance and fashions of technocracy, policy will need to continue to comply with humanitarian principles.

Turning to Bacchi's concern with the gaps, silences, and effects produced by problem representation, our analysis points to a comparative poverty of language concerning boat arrivals. Despite showing sizable terminological shifts over time, we suggest that what is silenced in parliamentary discourse on asylum seeking is not its significance but its innate complexity. The gradual association of irregular boat arrivals with individual duplicity, transnational crime, and threats to "sovereign borders" masks the diversity of forced migration motives and pathways (see, for example, Betts, 2013; Castles, 2006). Discursive bordering also enables a form of migration governance by exclusion—a conscious "complexity reduction" that narrows the scope for alternative policy positions (Mayblin, 2019).

Discourses from outside the parliamentary sphere (not analyzed here) signal new pathways for policy determination. As Gosden (2006, p. 6) notes, the asylum-seeker and refugee-advocacy movement that has emerged since the early 2000s "challenges the political administrative logic exemplified in the theory and practice of the policy, and it does so in the name of the legitimising values of justice and human rights." Advocates, although a political minority, collectively contribute to a struggle to redefine national sentiment on asylum seekers towards a rhetoric of compassion and justice. Critical to these alternative discourses is the substitution of legal and humanitarian terms such as "asylum seekers" and "refugees" for "boat people." The removal of explicit references to the mode of arrival itself redirects attention to alternative theatres of action: claims processing and accommodation, for example.

Our analysis does not account directly for the impact of these activist discourses, which supply an expanded vocabulary of responses to asylum seeking—including

terms notably absent from the text corpus we studied, such as "ethics," "care," "reception," "fairness," "partnerships," "collaboration," "complexity," or "transparency." A more nuanced mainstream discourse could yield consideration of more effective and humane policy proposals that too often exist on the fringes of politics.

Finally, despite the relative constancy of the term "boat people" itself, our combination of quantitative content analysis with qualitative interrogation of key passages demonstrates shifts in migration discourse. We believe that this approach can be a pragmatic and efficient means of preparing evidence of both continuity and change in political trends, such that research on contentious issues like forced migration and border governance can remain critically engaged and relevant to policy, while opening up possibilities for more informed debate. Further work in a similar vein might consider different historical frames and a wider set of parliamentary and media data sources over which to compare change between discursive forms.

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