

*The politics of representation: A discursive analysis of  
refugee advocacy in the Australian parliament*

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<i>Abstract</i>	v
<i>Declaration</i>	viii
<i>Publications</i>	ix
<b>Book chapters</b>	ix
<b>Peer reviewed journal articles</b>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Preface</i>	1
<b>Thesis overview</b>	7
<i>Chapter 1: The ‘Tampa crisis’, immigration, refugees and asylum seekers in Australia</i>	10
<b>Immigration in Australia: White Australia, multiculturalism, Hanson and Howard</b>	13
<b>Refugees and asylum seekers: pre-2001</b>	15
<b>Refugees and asylum seekers: 2001</b>	18
<b>Refugees and asylum seekers: post-2001</b>	20
<b>The refugee advocacy movement</b>	21
<b>Discursive research on asylum seekers</b>	23
Self, party and nation as compassionate, humanitarian and generous	23
Asylum seekers as illegal	25
Asylum seekers as deviant	26
‘Genuine’ and ‘bogus’/ ‘good’ and ‘bad’ asylum seekers	27
<b>Summary</b>	29
<i>Chapter 2: Method and Data</i>	30
<b>Examining the local pragmatics of the conversational context</b>	36
<b>Examining global patterns in collective sense-making and understanding</b>	37
<b>Interpretative repertoires, subject positions, rhetoric and argument, ideology and structure</b>	39
Interpretative repertoires	39
Subject positions	40
Rhetoric and argument	41
Ideology	42
The structure of the text – discursive devices, linguistic strategies and organisation	44
<b>The data</b>	46
Data collection	46
An issue of terminology: ‘pro’- and ‘anti’-asylum seeker accounts	48
Data analysis	49
<b>Summary</b>	53
<i>Chapter 3: Accounting for the arrival of on-shore asylum seekers</i>	54
<b>Asylum seeking as an attraction to soft laws and as a personal choice</b>	54

Previous research	54
The Australian parliamentary debates	59
<b>Advocates' accounts of asylum seeking: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>70</b>
Asylum seeking as compelled by persecution	73
Asylum seeking as compelled by Australia's laws and policies	81
Asylum seeking as an international issue	89
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>96</b>
<b><i>Chapter 4: Rights and humanitarianism in the asylum seeker debates</i></b>	<b>98</b>
<b>Previous research on rights and humanitarianism discourses</b>	<b>99</b>
Rights discourses in judicial decisions	99
Humanitarianism and anti-asylum seeker discourse	101
Human rights, humanitarianism and pro-asylum seeker discourse	102
<b>Constructions of rights and humanitarianism in liberal philosophy</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Universal moral equality, communitarianism and absolute sovereignty in the Australian parliament: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>108</b>
"Human rights are universal": Universal moral equality	108
"These people are not citizens": Conditional rights	111
"We have the right to decide who comes here": Hobbesian absolute sovereignty	114
Challenging absolute sovereignty	119
Summary	122
<b>Humanitarianism in the Australian parliament: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>123</b>
A 'reasonable' humanitarianism	124
A 'bureaucratic' humanitarianism	128
Humanitarianism and the 'greatest need'	131
An other-centred humanitarianism	134
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>142</b>
<b><i>Chapter 5: Constructing the nation and the national interest</i></b>	<b>144</b>
<b>Previous research on national discourses and asylum seekers</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>Critiques of 'inclusive' nationalism</b>	<b>153</b>
<b>Constructions of Australia in anti-asylum seeker speeches: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>156</b>
Australia as a physical, bounded space	156
Australia under threat	158
<b>Constructions of Australia in advocates' speeches: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>162</b>
A nation with a tarnished image	163
A nation of the 'fair go'	172
A multicultural nation of immigrants	178
Australia is less generous than other nations	183
This is not the Australian way	189
Accepting asylum seekers is in the national interest	194
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>196</b>
<b><i>Chapter 6: Refugee advocates' constructions of racism</i></b>	<b>200</b>

<b>The new racism</b>	<b>201</b>
External rationales for negative views	203
Blaming the victim	203
Economic arguments	204
Re-defining racism	205
Racism as violence	206
Racism as equity	206
Racism as honesty	207
Racism as over-sensitivity	207
Liberal arguments for ‘illiberal’ ends	208
<b>Race discourse and asylum seekers</b>	<b>210</b>
Constructing asylum seekers as a criminally deviant Other	210
Constructing asylum seekers as a racial and religious Other	212
Constructing asylum seekers as culturally Other	213
<b>Constructions of racism in anti-racist talk and texts</b>	<b>215</b>
<b>Constructions of racism in advocates’ parliamentary speeches: Analysis and discussion</b>	<b>217</b>
Constructing categorical generalisations as racist	217
Constructing the unequal treatment of asylum seekers and other immigrants as racist	223
Constructing talk-about-the-nation as racist	228
Constructing cultural-difference-talk as racist	231
Constructing the cause of racism: politicians and the media	235
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>240</b>
<b><i>Chapter 7: Conclusion</i></b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Summary of the analytic chapters</b>	<b>243</b>
<b>Implications of this research</b>	<b>251</b>
For research on the language of contemporary racism	251
For refugee advocacy and anti-racism	252
<b><i>References</i></b>	<b>260</b>

## *Abstract*

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In recent years an extensive body of discursive research has accumulated on race, immigration and asylum seeker debates in western liberal democracies. This work has primarily focussed on oppressive discourses that are employed to exclude and marginalise minority groups. Comparatively, however, there has been significantly less research on anti-racist and pro-asylum seeker accounts in these debates, despite the potential of such work to provide a greater understanding of contemporary race and immigration discourse, and to contribute to the development of anti-racism and refugee advocacy.

The present thesis adds to the further analysis of exclusionary discourse and asylum seeking, and examines this in the as yet unexplored context of the Australian parliament, but its primary focus is on refugee advocates' accounts. Using critical discursive social psychology (Wetherell, 1998), this thesis examines Hansard transcripts of speeches made in the Australian parliament on the new restrictions against asylum seekers introduced in 2001. Analysis focuses on the interpretative repertoires that proscribe and deny responsibility for asylum seekers, and those that are used to construct 'the nation' and 'racism'. These repertoires are explored with a view to tracing their intellectual history, the subject positions for asylum seekers and Australia/ns they make possible, and the rhetorical tools and strategies used in building them.

It was found that those supporting the new legislation positioned asylum seekers as having made a personal choice to come to Australia, and presented the legislation as: a rational, practical response to the emotionally-driven, unreasonable demands of humanitarianism; as the necessary defence of sovereign rights, the

national space and Australian citizens from the incursions of asylum seekers; and as non-racist. These discourses reproduced the liberal valorisation of reasonableness and rationality, the liberal concepts of sovereign and citizens' rights and individualism, and utilised new racist strategies to present their position as 'not racist'.

On the other side of the debate, advocates criticised the legislation as a violation of: the duty of care owed to those who have been persecuted; human rights and the liberal principle to assist those in need; and of Australia's national values. Advocates also worked up some aspects of the new laws and the debate on this issue as racist. These repertoires drew upon the liberal discourses of internationalism, human rights, humanitarianism, multiculturalism, equality and egalitarianism.

Although these advocacy discourses have considerable cultural currency, they were constrained and marginalised by the hegemonic representations of asylum seekers as 'bogus' and 'illegal', of humanitarianism (as refugee advocates understand it) as dangerous, and of the new legislation as an assertion of threatened sovereign rights. In addition, some of these discourses, such as multiculturalism and a construction of racism as 'generated by politicians', functioned to minimise and deny racism.

On the basis of this analysis, I conclude that the study of anti-racist and pro-refugee discourse contributes to a broader understanding of the language of contemporary debates about race, ethnicity and immigration as a dynamic, argumentative dialogue, and to critical evaluations of the discourses used in these contexts. However, I also argue that discourse analysis may not offer the requisite tools for developing, as well as critiquing, anti-racist and refugee advocacy

discourses. I also suggest that there may be sites of resistance other than political discourse where change to refugee policies may be better effected.

## *Declaration*

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This work contains no material which has been accepted for the reward of any other degree or diploma in any other university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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## *Publications*

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Work in this thesis has been published elsewhere:

### **Book chapters**

Augoustinos, M. and Every, D. (in press). Contemporary racist discourse: Taboos against racism and racist accusations. In Ann Weatherall, Bernadette Watson and Cindy Gallois (Eds.) *Language, Discourse and Social Psychology*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan.

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## *Preface*

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Recent years have seen the accumulation of an extensive body of discursive research on race, immigration and asylum seeker debates in western liberal democracies, including The Netherlands (van Dijk, 1984, 1987, 1991, 1992, 1993, 1997; Verkuyten 1997, 1998, 2001, 2005), Belgium (Blommaert & Verschueren, 1998), Austria (Wodak & Matouschek, 1993), Spain (Rojo, 2000; Rojo & van Dijk, 1997), South Africa (Seidel, 1988), the UK (Billig, 1988; Billig, Condor, Edwards, Gane, Middleton & Radley, 1988; Condor, 1988, 2000; Condor, Abell, Figgou, Gibson & Stevenson, in press; Lynn & Lea, 2003; Reeves, 1983), the US (Mehan, 1997; Santa Ana, 1999; Thiesmeyer, 1995), Greece (Figgou, 2002; Figgou & Condor, forthcoming), New Zealand (Abel, 1996; McCreanor, 1993a, 1993b, 1993c; Nairn & McCreanor, 1990, 1991; Praat, 1998; Tilbury, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1992) and Australia (Augoustinos, 2001; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every, 2005; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Rapley, 1999; Augoustinos, Tuffin & Sale, 1999; Clyne, 1995, 2001; LeCouteur, 2001; LeCouteur & Augoustinos, 2001; LeCouteur, Rapley & Augoustinos, 2001; Rapley, 1998, 2001; O'Doherty, 2001; Saxton, 2003).

Collectively, this research has detailed several pervasive features of contemporary racist discourse, often referred to as 'new' racism. Unlike 'old-fashioned' racism, which was premised on notions of biological difference and racial superiority, new racism in contrast is subtle and covert talk that adopts an ostensibly anti-racist stance whilst articulating views that are exclusionary and oppressive in their effects. Although both new and old-fashioned racism arguably have the same consequences for minorities by justifying and legitimating inequality, new racism discourse employs different discursive resources and strategies to achieve this.

Particularly ubiquitous are strategies to present talk as ‘not racist’. As part of this, speakers frequently use denials (in variations of the common formula ‘I’m not racist but...’) and attenuate, eliminate or substitute racial categories for categories of class, culture and nation, omit and de-emphasise racial explanations and avoid racial evaluations and prescriptions (Reeves, 1983). New racist discourses also formulate racism in diverse, multiple and flexible ways that work to position the speaker as ‘not racist’ (Augoustinos, Tuffin, & Rapley, 1999; Billig, 1991; Verkuyten, 1998). Other significant features of new racism include the use of liberal values such as equality (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) not to criticise racism but to articulate racist views (Billig et al., 1988), and the presentation of the exclusion of minority groups as justifiable, rational and legitimate (Rapley, 2001).

As part of this analytic focus on the way oppression and exclusion are discursively reproduced, a number of researchers have examined talk and texts about asylum seekers. This research focus has developed to examine the increasingly exclusionary stance being taken against asylum seekers in western nations, including Australia, which has in the previous decade introduced more restrictive legislation against people seeking asylum by boat. In the debates in Australia and other countries, asylum seekers are presented as ‘illegals’, ‘criminals’, ‘terrorists’, ‘disease-carriers’ and ‘economic migrants’, and accused of taking advantage of welfare and taking ‘our’ jobs (Hier & Greenberg, 2002; Jones, 2000; Lynn & Lea, 2003; Mehan, 1997; O’Doherty, 2001; Pickering, 2001; Rojo, 2000; Saxton, 2003; van der Valk, 2000). They are constructed as a threat to national borders and sovereignty, to the immigration system, to the physical and economic health of the recipient nation and to moral values (Pickering, 2001). Their arrival is consistently worked up as a violation of national sovereignty and a recipient country’s right to

control immigration and preserve its 'unique culture' (O'Doherty, 2001; Pickering, 2001; Saxton, 2003).

Recent debates on the rights and entitlements of asylum seekers have therefore emerged as a rich source of data for examining contemporary immigration discourses. Many sites of this discourse remain to be explored, particularly that of political discourse in the Australian context. Given this, the present thesis may well have followed in this research tradition, and added to the growing body of research on discourses of exclusion as they pertain to unauthorised arrivals seeking asylum in Australia.

However, there is another aspect to contemporary debates on race, immigration and asylum seekers that has so far received less attention, and that is anti-racist and refugee advocacy discourse. The question of how people challenge the exclusion of minority groups such as asylum seekers is perhaps particularly salient given the swing towards more conservative politics in western liberal democracies, and the increasingly vociferous debates about Indigenous issues, immigration and asylum seeking in these countries.

Of particular interest, given the research on new racism, is how, or indeed whether, anti-racist and advocacy discourses engage with its subtle and slippery strategies. As demonstrated above, there now exists a substantial body of work examining strategies for presenting talk as 'not racist'. However, as Condor, Abell, Figgou, Gibson and Stevenson (2005) note, the success of such strategies depends in part upon their subsequent reception by other parties to the interaction. Despite this, there has been considerably less focus on how speakers make talk and actions accountable, rather than not accountable, as racist.

A focus on anti-racism and refugee advocacy is also warranted in light of concerns that anti-racist discourse has failed to adapt to new racism and is less effective as a result. Researchers such as van Dijk (1992) suggest that new racism is difficult to identify and often goes unremarked, whilst Wetherell and Potter (1992) argue that anti-racist campaigns that rely on an ‘old-fashioned’ definition of racism as the expression of a belief in biological superiority, or the use of overt and negative racial language, risk becoming obsolete:

Even relatively blatant fascist propaganda and blatant advocates of racism (such as Le Pen in France) have learnt to modify their discourse so that on some occasions racism can occur without biological categorisation and the more familiar paraphernalia of ‘advanced’ and ‘primitive’, ‘negative’ and ‘positive’, ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ distinctions. Given this flexibility of the enemy, and the way debates move on, it seems sensible not to commit oneself to one exclusive characterisation of racist claims. There is a danger of being silenced when racist discourse continues to oppress but no longer meets the main characteristics of social scientific definitions of racism (Wetherell & Potter, 1992, pp. 71-2).

There is a strong sense here, and, according to Figgou (2002), throughout the literature on new racism, that social actors are not skilled in identifying and challenging this talk as racist, or that they are employing outmoded understandings of racism that fail to make new racism morally accountable. It may be the case, however, that it is the relative absence of research on anti-racist discourses that has led to the assumption that new racism is not readily identified or challenged. In light of these concerns, it would be useful to examine anti-racist talk and texts to have a better understanding of new racism in an argumentative context, examining both how it is expressed and how it is (or is not) challenged.

Analysis of anti-racist discourse is also of interest in light of concerns that ‘liberal’ discourses commonly employed in anti-racist contexts are potentially complicit with the inequality they purport to challenge. This was raised as an issue in

the research of Henriques (1984), Wetherell and Potter (1993) LeCouteur (2001) and LeCouteur and Augoustinos (2001), which explores the social and political implications of constructing racism as an individual, psychological problem. Collectively, they found that such individualisation reproduces the unequal status quo by focussing on changing the attitudes of a ‘few rotten apples’ (Henriques, 1984) rather than more significant and far-reaching changes to social and institutional practices. The discourse of multiculturalism, which is often worked up as an anti-racist position, has also been the focus of critiques of the effectiveness of ‘liberal’ discourses for anti-racism. According to Hage (1998) and Stratton (1998), this ‘liberal’ discourse reproduces white dominance by constraining diversity to the cultural, rather than political and economic, spheres and by positioning whites in the superior position of the ‘tolerant acceptors’ of the Other.

A further issue for anti-racism and refugee advocacy discourses is the difficulty of mounting successful challenges to the hegemonic representation (the ‘standard story’) of asylum seekers as the enemy Other (Nairn & McCreanor, 1990; McCreanor, 1993c). According to Nairn and McCreanor (1990) arguments countering the standard story are more difficult to work up and risk rejection, often simply by their unfamiliarity. The discourses of individualism and multiculturalism/tolerance, although potentially complicit with the status quo, may be employed in anti-racist and advocacy discourses because they too represent a standard (though more marginalised) story that is familiar to western audiences. This raises the question of whether these discourses, despite their problems, may still be useful for anti-racism and refugee advocacy.

Each of these issues – identifying new racism, complicity, and challenging the standard story – are important for developing anti-racist and refugee advocacy

discourses that are persuasive, yet which also respond to the shifting nature of discourses of exclusion and engage with the potential problems of some ‘liberal’ discourses. Indeed, in developing ways to combat racism, social exclusion and inequality, analysis of anti-racist talk and text is arguably as important as developing an understanding of how racist practices are justified and legitimated.

As yet, analyses of talk and texts about asylum seekers, including those that have given some attention to repertoires and rhetorical strategies used by refugee advocates, have not examined these issues. What previous work has been done however, raises some further interesting possibilities for research. Of particular interest is work exploring the ways members proscribe or deny a responsibility for asylum seekers: through explanations of asylum seeking; constructions of rights and humanitarianism; and constructions of the nation and the national interest. In each of these areas, there has been some previous work on the ways in which these discourses are developed by those introducing restrictive laws against asylum seekers, with a lesser exploration of their use by advocates. However, the patterns that have emerged in this research warrant further exploration, particularly given that the issues of rights, entitlements and responsibility are central in debates about asylum seekers.

This thesis then, contributes to the further analysis of exclusionary accounts employed in debates about asylum seekers, but its primary focus is on refugee advocates’ discourse in the as yet little explored context of the Australian parliament. Using critical discursive social psychology, I analyse speeches debating the immigration legislation introduced in Australia in 2001 for the ways in which they formulate asylum seekers and asylum seeking, their construction of rights and humanitarianism, their formulations of racism and their constructions of ‘Australia’

and the national interest. My second aim is to examine these with a view to exploring their ideological implications for challenging the exclusion of asylum seekers.

### **Thesis overview**

The first two chapters provide background to the data and outline the theoretical and methodological basis of the research. Chapter 1 is a review of the history of asylum seeking in Australia and the various political and public responses to this phenomenon. It places the texts and materials analysed in this study in an historical and social context. Chapter 2 outlines the methodology of critical social discursive psychology (Wetherell, 1998) that I use in this thesis, as well as the data collection and data analysis process.

Chapter 3, the first of the analytic chapters, presents an analysis of a central argumentative site in the asylum seeker debates: explanations for why asylum seekers are arriving in Australia. There has been little previous work on the ways in which anti-asylum seeker accounts represent the arrival of asylum seekers, and the ways in which advocates explain these arrivals, and challenge anti-asylum seeker accounts. Explanations for the arrival of boats carrying asylum seekers form the foundation for many pro- and anti-asylum seeker arguments and this chapter represents the first substantial exploration of these discourses.

In Chapter 4, I analyse constructions of rights and humanitarianism in pro- and anti-asylum seeker accounts. There has been some previous research on the deployment of human rights and humanitarian discourses by refugee advocates, however this has treated these concepts as homogeneous and static. A review of these concepts in liberal political theories on immigration, however, reveals that

ways of talking about rights and humanitarianism are not stable or fixed. Rather, liberalism provides a linguistic “kit bag” (Wetherell & Potter, 1992) of argumentative resources. In this chapter I explore the reproduction of these variable and conflicting constructions of rights and humanitarianism in pro- and anti-asylum seeker accounts.

In Chapter 5, I examine how both sides of the debate utilise constructions of ‘Australia’ and the national interest. It represents an exploration of as yet uncharted ground – whilst there have been numerous studies of how constructions of the nation may be used to advance exclusionary arguments, there has as yet been no similar focus on the ways in which they may be mobilised to challenge the exclusion of asylum seekers.

Chapter 6 takes up the issue of new racism but from the opposite perspective to most previous research on this topic. In this chapter I examine the appropriateness (or even existence of) challenges to these strategies in refugee advocates’ speeches. This chapter represents the first exploration of constructions of racism employed by refugee advocates in the Australian parliament, i.e. definitions of racism utilised not to present the new policies and one’s support for them as ‘not racist’, but to make the Government morally accountable for what are, arguably, racist practices and policies. The issue of whether these formulations of racism may be considered to be anti-racist in their effect is a central question for this chapter.

In Chapter 7, I consider the implications of examining anti-racist and pro-refugee discourse for future study on the language of contemporary racism, and for anti-racism and refugee advocacy discourses. I conclude that the study of anti-racist and pro-refugee discourses contributes to a broader understanding of the language of contemporary debates about race, ethnicity and immigration as a dynamic,

argumentative dialogue, and to critical evaluations of the discourses used in these contexts. However, as the main analytic point drawn from this research was that the discourses drawn upon by those in favour of or opposing the asylum seeker legislation did not exist on a level playing field, and that the discursive resources drawn upon by advocates were constrained and marginalised in these debates, I also reflect upon the utility of discourse analysis for making a contribution to refugee advocacy and anti-racism, and suggest that there may be sites of resistance other than political discourse that are more potent sites of change.