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'Political Economy of Bibby Stockholm' in Adsensory Urban Migration, Newcastle Upon Tyne:
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Postcolonial Feminist Investigation, Adsensory Cultural-Economy and Bibby Stockholm Migrant
Barge



July 2023, Bibby Stockholm Barge Vessel Leaving Falmouth Harbour. Photographer © Pamela Odih

The UK Parliament Hansard (2023) record of the earliest incidents in 2023 of a House of Commons debate on Asylum Seeker Accommodation, references a speech by MP Richard Drax (South Dorset, Conservative) that was debated on Wednesday 26th April 2023. One gains as an initial close reading of the MP's speech, a sense of the existence of other texts that are being alluded to, defended and wrestled. Primary to the intertextuality that appears a source of cognitive dissonance, pertains to the Government's Illegal Migration Bill that originated in the House of Commons, Session 2022-23. Indeed, the speech commences with indication of the conflictual positionalities that characterised support, among conservatives for the government's Illegal Migration Bill. The MP prefaces their critique with an impromptu incantation: "Stop the boats-stop the boats!". The speech progresses into a vehement denunciation, not of the government's intention to transport illegal migrants to Rwanda. Rather it espouses a localised protectionism, principally endorsing off-shoring illegal migration processing, but fervently opposed to an off-shored processing anchored in the MP's

constituency. Expressed more colourfully by the MP as thus: “It is apt because I wholly support the illegal Migration Bill and its intent, and it is ironic because before there is any chance of *illegal migrants beings* sent to Rwanda or anywhere else, they are being dumped on a barge in my constituency”. Conscience of the prejudicial inference, the MP moderates their annoyance by then stating: “To be fair – and I try my utmost to be fair – the situation is completely out of control and tens of thousands of illegal migrants have to go somewhere”. The MP proceeds with their chiding, as thus: “where they go needs careful thought. Consultation, preparation and execution. I regret to say that, in our case, none of these things has been taken into account – not one”. Of particular stated concern is the short notice and limited consultation, whereby the Home Office is alleged to have given precedence to initially approaching Portland port, with the commercial opportunity. Discussions between these parties were conducted privately, purportedly circumventing the protocol of consultation with statutory authorities.

The MP for South Dorset contends that they were approached on 21st March [2023] “to say that a barge for 500 migrants will be placed in the port”. Similar procedure was applied, by Home Office officials, to the chief executive of Dorset Council. What seems to have incensed the MP for South Dorset was the dearth of additional support extended by the Home Office; expressed indignantly as thus: “We were not told who will provide the healthcare, what extra funding will be available for the police, what responsibilities Dorset Council will have for the migrants, or what consideration has been given to the effect that such an influx of young men might have on a sensitive seaside resort – I could go on and on”. The MP, as it is recorded in Hansard (2023) accuses the Home Office of approaching the health authorities and the law enforcement agencies only after the decision had been made; and in so doing further aggravated their disapproval. As the MP expresses it “None of these organisations supports the plan, and they have repeatedly made that very clear to Home Office officials, as I have to the Minister and the Home Secretary”.

In September 2023, while at the Gloucester History Festival, I attended an event in which the former Prime Minister Theresa May (2016 -2019) was being interviewed by the BBC radio host Vernon Harwood. Given that Theresa May MP, was from 2010 – 2016, the secretary of state for the Home Department, I was particularly interested in her views of the use of migrant barge vessels to host asylum seeking refugee migrants. Thus, when the interviewer kindly opened up the questions to the audience I waited patiently to be selected. The following is a transcription of my audience question and Theresa May’s very informative response.

FORMER PRIME MINISTER THERESA MAY IN CONVERSATION: **THE ABUSE OF POWER**

Gloucester History Festival

Location: Blackfriars Priory, Ladybellegate St, Gloucester GL1 2HN

Date and Time: September 17, 2023 2:00 pm - 3:00 pm

Pamela Odih:

Hi Pam Odih, Goldsmiths University. My question is in relation to migration policy, given your recent reconception of the “hostile environment”, Home Office Conservative government

policy, what is your opinion about the present use of barge vessels to house asylum seeking migrants?

Theresa May:

Well, I look the government is faced with a difficult situation in that they have a large number of asylum seekers to accommodate. There's a lot of concerns in parts of the country about the use of hotel accommodation.

Not in the sense of, the Holiday Inn in Maidenhead is in my constituency is, has been taken over by contractors to house asylum seekers for example. But in some places, it's meant that business, Wedding businesses and so forth have found it very difficult to continue.

So, it's having an impact on a number of places. So, the government is looking for alternatives in order to do that. The real answer of course is to find a way of reducing the asylum backlog and dealing with asylum cases quickly so that people are not having to be put up in accommodation so long. But this is not a problem that's occurred just now, it's occurred on my predecessor, predecessors. It occurred when I was in the Home Office, we had a significant backlog we had to deal with. But if you can get a system; the idea is if you can get a system, that is fair but is working smoothly, you're able to deal with cases in a timely, then that's better for everybody frankly and the government wouldn't have to be making these sorts of decisions.

Writing up this interview, on 23rd June 2024, while in Falmouth in proximity to the Pendennis Shipyard where the Bibby Stockholm migrant barge vessel had been refurbished, my thoughts are acutely drawn to the issue of migration. Indeed, as we accelerate toward the forthcoming General Election the issue of immigration and the legacy of the Hostile Environment will continue to perplex migration policy across the United Kingdom's political spectrum.

References

Hansard (2023); UK Parliament Hansard. Available at: <https://hansard.parliament.uk>