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**Images of Sangatte: Political representations of
asylum seeking in France and the UK**

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Abstract

This paper analyses how politicians in the UK and France have represented asylum seeking. The Sangatte reception centre in north-east

1. Introduction

Research in the 1990s often highlighted, explicitly or by implication, the role of the media in forming public perceptions of asylum seekers in Europe (Coleman, 1995; Kaye, 1998; Le Lohé, 1992). These studies invariably started with the concern that the media was misrepresenting refugees or asylum seekers, as well as the scale of the 'asylum problem', and underlined fears that the media was to some degree responsible for a growing public intolerance that occasionally found its expression in violent attacks against asylum seekers (see, for example, Brosius & Eps, 1995; Krell *et al.*, 1996).

The question of responsibility becomes more problematic, however, when the media is understood to shape government policy on immigration and asylum matters as a result of its influence over public opinion. If, as Rosello (1998) suggests, the process of policy-making begins to reflect how newspapers and television portray immigrants, then the media not only plays a key role in framing the news, but also the political agenda. Framing, in this sense, is not a passive act but involves selecting material and then

This paper builds on these research findings with reference to the Sangatte reception centre in north-east France, and applies ideas about framing language to a discourse analysis of political texts that discussed the centre. The focus on political texts alone does not, however, indicate that UK and French politicians had complete autonomy to set the terms of the debates about the centre. Indeed, as will be explored more fully in the next section, democratic politicians are ultimately accountable to their electorate. And whilst public opinion is certainly shaped by the media, whose coverage of events surrounding the Sangatte reception centre seemed at times ubiquitous, politicians as policymakers remain in the unique and privileged position to be able to influence public opinion through advocating and voting on policy reforms.

the lowest common denominator (see, for example, ECRE, 2001: 21).

The following section will discuss the development of more restrictive asylum and immigration policies in Europe, using the cases of France and the UK to explore the extent to which civil society can be considered to influence changes to these policies. This discussion will then be linked to ideas about framing language as described above before proceeding to address the methodology used in my own research about Sangatte in light of these conclusions.

2. Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

Sciortino (2000: 224) argues that the politics of immigration, instead of being understood within the political economy tradition where policies respond to the basic interests of society, should be considered as a 'free-floating issue'. Proposed changes to immigration (including asylum) policy⁵, he suggests, will not threaten 'underlying societal interests' (*ibid.*: 220), unlike proposals to reform economic policy or the welfare

undocumented immigrants), and to appeal a negative asylum decision (the second Pasqua law effectively removed the right of appeal). It would be misleading though to attribute public demonstrations against these laws to restrictions on asylum alone, given that the laws did not only deal with asylum seekers, but also affected the rights of French citizens and resident foreigners.

In fact, asylum policies have not been widely discussed in France as a distinct issue from the politics of immigration (Delouvin, 2000). The consequence of this, at least until the 1998 Chevènement law introduced the concepts of territorial and constitutional asylum into French law⁸, was to treat asylum seeking as a part of immigration policy rather than from a human rights perspective (Collyer, 1998). Furthermore, a form of 'clandestine asylum' (*asile au noir*) has persisted in France because of the country's strict asylum policies as detailed above and because it has not recognised 'non-state' persecution as grounds for full refugee status under the 1951 Geneva Convention (Brachet, 1997). People afraid that they will not be granted refugee status have often remained without official permission or *sans papiers*, adding to the numbers officially 'tolerated' in France. As a signatory country to the European Convention on Human Rights, France is unable to forcibly return many of these people because this could expose them to torture, inhuman or degrading treatment in the countries from which they fled (Collyer, 1998).

The strength of feeling against the Pasqua laws related moreover to proposals to end automatic citiz

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card' would win them votes, the situation in France has been complicated by the success of an anti-immigrant political party, the *Front National* (FN) under the leadership of Jean-Marie Le Pen.

Since winning the municipal elections in Dreux near Paris in 1983, the FN has caused and taken advantage of growing feelings of insecurity in France (Feldblum, 1999). Le Pen's second place with 17 percent of the national votes in the first round of the 2002 presidential elections again reminded mainstream political parties that the politics of immigration mattered.¹² Some commentators believe that the FN's success has forced the mainstream parties of the right to address the issue of immigration in an attempt to win back support from the FN (Hollifield, 2000). Although both the Pasqua and Debré laws can be seen in this light, it is also felt that political parties have been reluctant to explicitly promote the rights of asylum seekers in particular for fear of losing electoral support (Collyer, 1998). Indeed, the preliminary findings of this research do indicate that, before the presidential and parliamentary elections in April/May and June 2002 respectively, the governing Socialist Party were wary of discussing the plight of the residents in the reception centre at Sangatte, asserting that there was nothing they could do since the immigrants did not want to claim asylum in France, but in the UK.

In this way it is important to see political discussions about Sangatte as framed themselves by both the policy environment and by previous policy responses to immigration and asylum matters. Adopting this approach means that we understand 'truths' to be only performative (Crang, 1997); i.e. that politicians portrayed the 'reality' of Sangatte to fit the policy frames established by earlier legislation on asylum, and according to how key audiences expected Sangatte to be represented. In other words, fellow politicians or the electorate evaluated the 'truth' of what they heard by how well it

"hook[ed]" into normative ideas and common-sense notions [about asylum]' (Carabine, 2001: 269). If they disagreed with how Sangatte had been represented, then other counter-discourses emerged to

Network in the UK and France's *La Documentation Française*. Additional French press releases were obtained from the Ministry of the Interior's webpages. Whilst interviews with French politicians were available from *La Documentation Française*, with the exception of one with the French newspaper *Le Monde* accessed via its website, interviews with UK politicians were obtained online from the BBC's *Today* radio programme and from the newspaper *The Guardian*. The two speeches given by French politicians were again accessed via *La Documentation Française*.

By running a search within these webpages for the keyword 'Sangatte', the results highlighted parliamentary debates, press releases, interviews and political speeches relating to events or issues associated with the centre. Searching under quite broad criteria (only 'Sangatte') did return a considerable number of political texts. Because a significant amount of this material referred to Sangatte very briefly, it was important to select only those texts for analysis that contributed to shaping perceptions of Sangatte through promoting certain images of the centre and its residents. This does not indicate, however, that texts referring to Sangatte only in passing were considered less relevant. A dismissive remark by a politician about the centre often revealed, for example, a great deal about his or her feelings towards the immigrants there.

Closer reading of the selected material revealed three recurring themes in the debates about Sangatte in both countries. Politicians frequently discussed: (1) the migrants in the centre; (2) the centre itself and specifically its location near to the entrance of the Channel Tunnel between the UK and France; and (3) the increasing presence and influence of people smugglers in and around Sangatte. In order to identify more systematically how these discussions potentially shaped perceptions of Sangatte, these three themes were subsequently analysed with the aid of the computer software package, 'NUD-IST'. By representing any one or all of these themes in a particular way, it was felt that politicians could use a speech or interview to construct images of Sangatte

and promote a desired solution to problems associated with the centre. These themes were also considered to overlap to produce multiple but connected political representations of Sangatte. For example, the presence of organised people smugglers in Sangatte linked with security concerns about the location of the centre to emphasise how important its closure was.

The timeframe of the research was from March 2001 to December 2002. These dates encompassed the first parliamentary debates that discussed Sangatte through to the centre's final closure on 30 December 2002. Over this time period, there was a corresponding increase in political texts in line with the frequency of diplomatic negotiations about the centre. Accordingly, the timescale included key meetings between the UK and French political representatives, as well as the French parliamentary and presidential elections, which allowed the analysis to consider whether leading politicians changed the way they framed the issue of Sangatte to fit the political climate of the time (see Appendix 5). Bearing in mind how intractable the problems associated with centre initially appeared – closing Sangatte would again make immigrants homeless in the area whilst its location near the entrance to the Channel Tunnel continued to pose security concerns for the UK – it was interesting to see if French and UK politicians came to agree on common political frames to justify the closure of the centre at the end of December 2002.

Whilst the research conducted an analysis of political texts alone, other material was used to provide the research with a wider and more representative picture of Sangatte. For example, both the French Section of Amnesty International (AISF) and Le Gisti, an organisation working on behalf of immigrants in France, wrote reports¹³ cited in the bibliography about the centre. The Red Cross, in charge of running the centre, also asked the sociologist Smäin Laacher (2002) to write about the issues emerging from Sangatte. His report offered a detailed survey of the

¹³ Report written for Le Gisti by Violaine Carrère (2002).

characteristics and motives of the migrants in the centre.

All the material consulted in this research was in the original language, either in French or English. Translations into English of quotes taken from the French sources are the author's.

3. Findings

The findings will be organised into the following three sections: the concept of choice and asylum seeking; the impact of policy on asylum flows; and the reception of asylum seekers. These sections reflect the changing focus of discussions on Sangatte during the timeframe researched. The three 'NUD·IST' themes outlined at the end of the previous section, which were used to analyse how politicians constructed images of Sangatte, will be used to support the findings presented in each of these sections.

The Concept of Choice and Asylum Seeking (March 2001 – April 2002)

The time period studied here, from March 2001 to April 2002, begins with the first UK parliamentary debates about Sangatte through to the first round in the French presidential elections that would eventually unseat the Socialist government. During this period the French Socialist government and the UK Labour government met twice to discuss Sangatte. Meanwhile Eurotunnel, the British-French company that operated the Channel Tunnel, would launch two unsuccessful legal bids to close the reception centre. The backdrop to these events was the increasingly desperate, and sometimes fatal, attempts by some of the centre's residents to cross through the Channel Tunnel into the UK either on foot or by jumping on the trains entering the tunnel (Carrère, 2002).¹⁴

During 2001, parliamentary debates in the UK and France about Sangatte often explored why the centre's residents preferred to claim asylum in the UK. As one prominent Conservative politician in the UK explained after visiting the centre:

I asked that question of those whom I met at the Red Cross centre at Sangatte. Their answers were illuminating. They listed three factors – the English language, more money and better accommodation ... The truth is that the arrangements that exist in this country for asylum seekers are significantly more favourable to them than those that exist in other member states of the European Union.¹⁶

Shortly after this speech, a French committee set up to examine immigration controls between France and the UK conccevena French

obligations to refugees, and more to a failure on their part to offer a satisfactory legislative solution to the problems associated with Sangatte.

The political controversy surrounding Sangatte at that time stemmed from differences in the way these problems were framed. Both the French government and the Conservative Party used Sangatte as a symbol to illustrate the potential scale of the 'asylum influx' into the UK. The UK government, in contrast, tried to emphasise how Sangatte was not indicative of a wider 'asylum problem', but simply an isolated case. For example, the government gatte

asylum seeker's responsibility to claim asylum in the proper state; that is, in the first safe country in which they arrive within the European Union. As one parliamentary under-secretary for the Labour government made clear:

That Convention does not give them a choice of country in which to claim asylum. If people are in France – I assume France is a safe country – why on earth should they not claim asylum in that country? Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that people should be allowed to choose the European country in which they claim asylum? That would be the end of the Dublin Convention²¹

It should be noted, however, that France does receive tens of thousands of asylum applications every year, and has again started to receive more than ten percent of all applications lodged in the EU (see Figure 2 in Appendix 3).

Furthermore, as Schuster (2002) points out, the migrants in Sangatte may have been there precisely because they had little reason to claim asylum in France. Daniel Vaillant, France's Interior Minister, followed this line of thought, once again reiterating the arguments of the opposition Conservative Party in the UK. People not only preferred to claim asylum in the UK because of its more liberal asylum policies, but also because they spoke English, not French.²² Echoing findings by Hovy (1993) that people are more likely to seek asylum in countries with which their country of origin has historical, cultural or linguistic ties, research by Böcker and Havinga (1998) has similarly highlighted the colonial pasts of European countries as a significant factor determining asylum flows into France and the UK. Indeed, the number of people applying for asylum in the UK from Iraq and Afghanistan, both former UK protectorates and the two countries most highly represented in Sangatte, was respectively 6,710 and 9,095 in 2001 (UNHCR, 2003). In contrast, figures for

Iraqi and Afghan asylum seekers in France were significantly lower, respectively at 265 and 269 in the same year (*ibid.*).

Böcker and Havinga (1997: 80) were at pains, however, to stress that the 'choice of a particular country of destination [was] often a choice to join a family member, friend or acquaintance and not for the country itself'. This distinction was rarely made during political discussions about Sangatte. Despite the frequency of debates about the Dublin Convention in the UK parliament, no politician specifically mentioned that the Convention recognises reunion with a family member in an EU member state as a valid reason for an asylum applicant to have their claim heard by that

friends)²⁶ in the UK who they had hoped to join *upon leaving their country of origin*. His findings indicate that a little over 64 per cent of this particular group of respondents had initially planned to travel to the UK (*ibid.*, 67). In contrast, although nearly 52 per cent of those without family or friends in the UK declared that they had initially intended to go there, Laacher strongly believes this figure to be quite misleading. As will be explained below, this figure is also certainly indicative of the migrants' desire to leave Sangatte and start rebuilding their lives. Whereas those with family in the UK gave precise reasons as to why they wanted

Furthermore, Laacher's findings illustrate that less than 11 per cent of his respondents from the centre knew of their right to claim asylum in France (2002: 61). An article by Violaine Carrère (2002) on Sangatte similarly reports that information given to its residents was aimed more at dissuading them from claiming asylum in the UK than explaining how to claim it in France. There were also reports that the police at the entrance to the centre had prevented information on asylum in France, translated into several different languages, from being distributed to its residents (*ibid.*). Conditions in the centre further deteriorated during 2002 when tensions between its residents increasingly led to fighting. One incident on 15 April ended in the death of a Kurdish man (Borel, 2002). Subsequent incursions by the police into the centre, with frequent searches of people's belongings (Carrère, 2002), simply added to the impression that the centre was there to contain rather than address the issue of asylum in France.

As Carrère (*ibid.*, 20) suggests, the real or supposed attraction of UK asylum policy allowed France to justify doing little for the migrants in Sangatte. In contrast, the extent to which people in Sangatte chose the UK is moreover indicative of their hope that they would be afforded better treatment in the UK. Morrison (1998: 24) has indicated that many asylum seekers to the UK perceive the country as committed to protecting human rights. The sentiments of one migrant from Sangatte illustrate this well:

I would like to go in Britain because ... I love the merciful and kind people of England, and ... they are going to help us. They [will] look after us. And here [there] is no other country to help us, either the Arab countries or any other (The Today Programme, 2001b)

By April 2002, political debates about resolving the problem of illegal immigration from France into the UK therefore appeared to be framed around two related policy measures – making the UK less attractive to asylum seekers, and

closing the reception centre at Sangatte. The effect of framing debates in this way was that both governments avoided discussing the welfare of the migrants in Sangatte, with politicians in the UK frequently treating them as simply an abstract problem. Although France appeared to address the humanitarian needs of the migrants by resisting calls to close Sangatte, it should be noted that the centre's closure might have created an even greater political problem for the governing Socialists if its residents had once again been made homeless in and around the nearby town of Calais. The reception centre at Sangatte at least contained the problem, rendering it less visible and potentially less controversial. It would, however, be left to the centre-right in France to finally resolve the issue of Sangatte as subsequent presidential and parliamentary elections removed the Socialist Party from government.

*The Impact of Policy on Asylum Flows
(May 2002 – mid-October 2002)*

This shorter time period begins with a change in the French government, and saw renewed efforts by both countries to close Sangatte. Three meetings between David Blunkett and Nicolas Sarkozy, the new Interior Minister in France, took place during these months. Joint statements by the two ministers established a timetable for the closure of the reception centre. Meanwhile, the UK government announced two policy measures during this period that would, in the words of the Home Office, 'tackle the pull factors which might draw those with unfounded asylum claims to the UK' (Home Office, 2002).

The joint statements by the French and UK governments principally framed the issue of Sangatte as a security concern. The indication was that the new government in France had adopted the view of many UK politicians that Sangatte represented a security problem, irrespective of whether it was responding to a humanitarian need in the region or not. Security measures announced included technology in Calais to detect the presence of illegal immigrants, high-tech scanning equipment to help identify forged documents, and longer and higher fencing around preferred illegal entrance points to the Channel Tunnel.

A speech by Nicolas Sarkozy just a month after the new government had officially taken office illustrated changes in the way the Interior Ministry in France portrayed the centre at Sangatte and its residents:

I went to Sangattebswhich

dependent on the state for welfare support.

Given that asylum seekers to Europe might lack any detailed knowledge of asylum policy in EU member states, research has subsequently questioned the extent to which changes to policy are effective in controlling asylum flows into a particular country. Böcker and Havinga (1998) concluded that whilst some of the most significant shifts in asylum flows can be related to policy changes, many policy measures had little or no effect. Furthermore, they claimed that it was often difficult to relate shifts in asylum numbers to specific policy measures because many European countries had introduced tighter policies across the board. For example, France implemented a series of policy measures in the early 1990s that appeared to cut the numbers applying for asylum. Despite tighter asylum policies, however, numbers again started to rise from the late 1990s (see Figure 3 in Appendix 3).

The evidence that changes to asylum policy can directly affect the number of asylum applications, especially in the long-run, appears inconclusive. Holzer *et al.* (2000), who similarly looked at the impact of policy on asylum flows, concluded that it may be equally appropriate to understand changes to policy as an essentially political response to asylum seeking. Because politicians had framed Sangatte as indicative of a wider 'asylum problem' in the UK, the Labour government needed to be seen to be offering an appropriate legislative response even if legislation could not be proved to reduce pull factors to the UK. Truths are understood in this way to be performative (Crang, 1997); that is, fellow politicians and the electorate assess the 'truth' of what the government says by how well it fits into an established policy framework. People simply believed that legislation would tackle unwanted asylum flows into the UK.

Although Schuster (2002) rightly considers Sangatte to represent a 'false crisis', in the sense

prefer not to recognise that more restrictive asylum policies make claiming asylum in an EU country an increasingly difficult and dangerous task for potential refugees. Because tighter asylum policies are often accompanied by tighter security arrangements³², it has become necessary for refugees to rely on people smugglers or agents who can facilitate travel to Europe (Morrison, 1998). In turn, there is growing evidence that more restrictive asylum policy in Europe has encouraged the growth of people smuggling and trafficking³³ into a 'global migration

The Reception of Asylum Seekers (mid-October 2002 – December 2002)

During these last months of political negotiations, France and the UK finally

4. Conclusions

This paper has sought to answer two research questions by analysing how politicians discussed the reception centre at Sangatte. The first question related to the political negotiations between France and the UK, and looked specifically at the ways the two countries resolved to deal with problems associated with the centre. Particular attention was paid to how politicians framed the issue of Sangatte in ways that promoted desired solutions to those problems, and then to whether there were any significant differences in the way that UK and French governments framed their respective discussions about Sangatte. The second research question aimed at understanding how politicians, through negotiations over Sangatte, justified the introduction of more restrictive asylum policies. In answering these questions, this paper explored political representations of the migrants in the centre, the centre itself, as well as the role of people smugglers in Sangatte.

Initially Sangatte did not figure very highly on the political agenda of the UK government. During the first half of 2001, the Labour government appeared content to hold Eurotunnel solely responsible for resolving the issue of clandestine entry into the UK. Whilst statements by the government aimed to put Sangatte in perspective, 2.73wrench governments betweenUK anylum policyand FTj10.02 0 0 10.02 230325796328.4897 Tm(imigrants)Tj0.0005 Tc

Focusing on preventing 'asylum shopping' through legislative changes does not address the root causes behind a person's decision to leave their country of origin. Indeed, there is ample evidence to show that

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Appendix 2 – Immigration and Asylum Reforms in the UK

Year	Main Policy Reforms
1981	<u>British Nationality Act</u> ^(b) restricts British citizenship rights to 'patrials', or people with a British parent or grandparent
1987	<u>Immigration Carriers' Liability Act</u> ^{(a) (b)} imposes sanctions on airlines and shipping companies if found carrying undocumented passengers (fines doubled in 1991 to £2000 per passenger)
1990	UK signs <u>Dublin Convention</u> ^(b) though did not enter into force until 1997, replacing the 1995 ' <u>Gentleman's Agreement</u> ' between the UK and France (see below)
1993	<u>Asylum and Immigration Appeals Act</u> ^(b) Extension of right of appeal to all asylum seekers Compulsory fingerprinting of asylum seekers 'Fast-track' procedures introduced, in particular for asylum seekers having travelled through 'safe third countries' (all EU member states). No right of further appeal to the Immigration Appeal Tribunal
1995	Bilateral agreement (' <u>Gentleman's Agreement</u> ') negotiated between France and the UK. France agrees to process asylum claims of asylum seekers coming to the UK from France
1996	<u>Immigration and Asylum Act 1996</u> ^{(b) (c)} Entitlement to welfare benefits removed for people claiming asylum 'in-country'; i.e. after entry into the UK (Subsequent court hearings nullified this by ruling that destitute asylum seekers must be supported by their local authorities in line with the 1948 National Assistance Act) Application of 'fast-track' procedures extended in case of appeals 'White list' introduced identifying 'safe' countries whose nationals would be subject to the 'fast-track' appeals procedure Sanctions against employers recruiting those without permission to work in the UK
1999	<u>Immigration and Asylum Act 1999</u> ^(d) A voucher-based welfare scheme introduced to replace cash benefits paid to asylum seekers Dispersal of asylum seekers away from London and the south-east

Nationality, Asylum and Immigration Act ^(e)

2002	Expanding legal routes for labour migration into the UK; e.g., the <i>Highly-Skilled Migrant Programme</i> Asylum seekers no longer permitted to work after six months from the date of their initial asylum application Proposal to set up a national network of induction centres to provide a comprehensive initial reception service for all asylum seekers. Four new accommodation centres proposed to open on a trial basis to provide for all the needs (nutrition, health care, education) of asylum seekers (750 in each) Cash support to replace the failed voucher scheme established in 1999
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Appendix 3

Figure 1 – Breakdown of Primary Sources

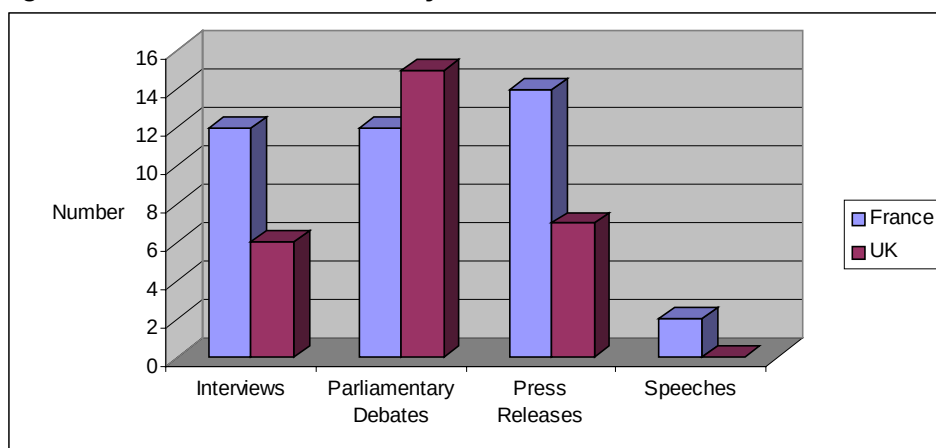
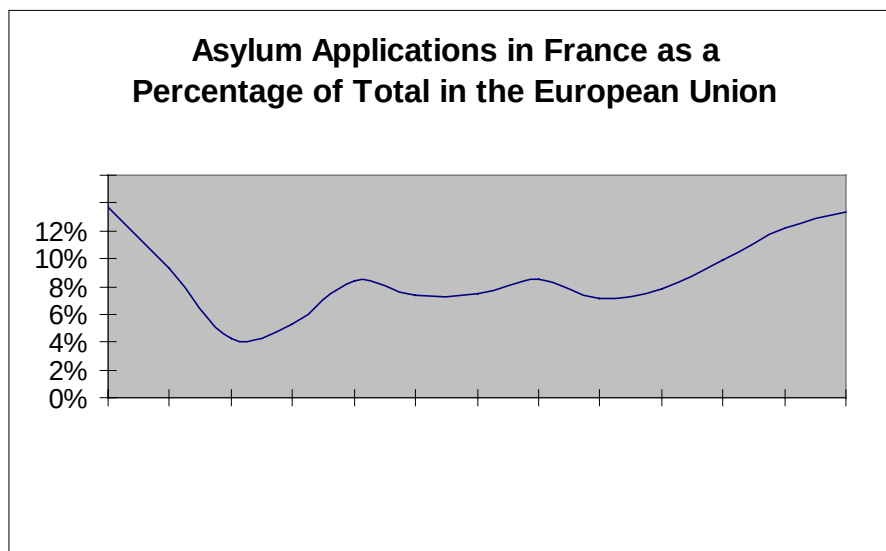


Figure 2



Appendix 4 – Sources of the Research Material

French sources

Interviews, Press Releases & Speeches: <http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/>
<http://www.lemonde.fr/>⁴¹

Parliamentary Debates: <http://www.assemblee-nat.fr/>

Ministry of the Interior Press Releases: <http://www.interieur.gouv.fr/>

UK sources

Parliamentary Debates: <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/>

Press Releases: <http://www.gnn.gov.uk/>

Radio Interviews: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/today/>

Newspaper Interviews: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/>

⁴¹ Interview with Nicolas Sarkozy, the French Interior Minister – 'Il faut porter le fer dans les zones de non-droit', *Le Monde*, 31 May 2002

25 Jun 2002	David Blunkett and Nicolas Sarkozy meet to discuss Sangatte. Sarkozy agrees that closing Sangatte is a joint objective
4 Jul 2002	UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) Ruud Lubbers offers to help resolve the situation in Sangatte
12 Jul 2002	David Blunkett and Nicolas Sarkozy meet for a second time to discuss Sangatte, indicating that the UNHCR will be given a role to help 'create a more controlled environment in the camp'
23 Jul 2002	UK Home Office announces the end to