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The Functions of Research in Public Debates on Migration

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Knowledge, Legitimation and the Politics of Risk: The Functions of Research in Public Debates on Migration

There is a considerable body of literature exploring how far, and under which conditions, knowledge is drawn on to shape policy.¹ However, scholars have tended to focus on the impact of research on policy output; they have overlooked the more symbolic role that knowledge can play in lending credibility to policy positions (Meyer and Rowan, 1991; Feldman and March, 1981). Where contributions have inquired into this more symbolic function of knowledge in politics, they have tended to focus on knowledge utilization within the administration, rather than in the context of political mobilization (Knorr 1978; Weiss 1980). The question of how knowledge is utilized as a source of legitimation in party politics has been largely ignored.

This article explores a number of theses about the uses of knowledge in politics. Given the paucity of literature on this form of knowledge utilization, it is necessary to cast the net wide, drawing on rather disparate areas of research. Particularly promising are sociological theories of the role of science in risk construction, as well as the growing literature on political communications. However, these bodies of research seem to yield rather conflicting conclusions. On the one hand, the political communications literature points to the ‘dumbing down’ of political debates. It argues that policy issues are discussed in a simplistic and dramatized way in public fora, implying a limited role for expert knowledge as a strategy of political mobilization (Poggi, 1990; Peterson, 1996; Meyer, 2002). On the other hand, a number of prominent sociologists have suggested that expert knowledge has become more crucial than ever in influencing public debates in late modern societies (Beck 1996; Giddens 1994a; Luhmann 1991). The key point here is that many areas of contemporary political debate are characterized by competing constructions of risk, rather than more prosaic struggles over material resources. And under these conditions, expert knowledge acquires a more decisive role in defining and justifying possible policy responses, not just at the level of expert policy-making but also in public debates.

I argue that despite the *prima facie* contradiction between the two theses, they are not necessarily incompatible. Research does appear to play a role in public policy debates, but the context and nature of its utilization are highly selective. In line with the ‘dumbing down’

thesis, knowledge clearly needs to conform to the criteria imposed by the mass media, which militates in favor of novelty, drama and scandal. But research results can and often do meet these criteria. Analyses of the politics of risk, meanwhile, provide more insight into the context of utilization: knowledge is likely to be used in areas characterized by scientific uncertainty and the potential for risk construction, rather than more traditional conflicts over distribution or values.

I build on these contributions to advance four central claims about knowledge utilization in political debate. First, knowledge claims are most likely to be invoked in political debate where participants accept the legitimacy of technocratic, as opposed to democratic, modes of justification. This is typically the case for areas of risk, where expert knowledge (as opposed to arguments about interests or values) is considered crucial for evaluating the desirability of different policy options. However, the second point is that in areas of high political salience, such knowledge claims are rarely deployed in a politically neutral way. Political elites seek to use knowledge to substantiate their political preferences, while the mass media is keen to draw on knowledge in a way that exposes political transgressions. Thirdly, the persistence of epistemic uncertainty in areas of risk undermines the authority of science as a basis for decision-making. Thus while policy-makers are keen to legitimize decisions through drawing on research, they are also aware of the limitations of knowledge in predicting potential outcomes; and, moreover, that politicians (and not science) will be attributed responsibility for future damages caused by bad decisions. Taken together, these three points generate a fourth claim: that there is a paradoxical disconnect between the ritualistic acceptance of technocratic modes of settlement, and the limited authority of knowledge in settling disputes.

The article illustrates these points with the case of the utilization of knowledge in the politics of migration. This is a politically salient area, with extensive possibilities for the exposure of scandal, and one that is characterized by epistemic uncertainty and risk. However, it also has strong distributive elements, and touches on a number of value conflicts. It therefore provides an excellent case for exploring patterns of knowledge utilization in political mobilization. An examination of the political discussion on migration in the UK in 2002-2004 largely supports the four claims about knowledge utilization. It also indicates different strategies adopted by governments to deal with the disjuncture between expectations about expert knowledge, and its ultimate incapacity to underpin risky decisions.

Politics and Legitimizing Knowledge

It is worth starting with some general comments about the utilization of knowledge to mobilize political support, or what I term ‘legitimizing knowledge’.² The article focuses on research utilization within politics, by which I mean the system of party politics, which is engaged in the competitive mobilization of electoral support for the purpose of securing political power. This mobilization is achieved through appealing to societal interests and laying out programmatic agendas for policy improvements. The precondition for exercising power, then, is to secure consent from the public for policies or programs, or to mobilize opposition to those of rival parties. Clearly, there are multiple ways in which political parties and governments attempt to do this. Drawing on expert knowledge is just one, and not necessarily the most appropriate, strategy. But as we shall see, there are circumstances under which political actors consider it expedient to appeal to this form of justification.

There are two ways in which we can understand expert knowledge as a source of legitimization in politics. First, knowledge can lend authority to political actors, or endow them with what has been described as ‘epistemic authority’ (Herbst, 2003). The perception that an individual, party or government possesses reliable, relevant and detailed knowledge creates confidence that their decisions will be well-founded. The second way in which knowledge can legitimize political actors applies not so much to how it endows them with legitimacy, but rather the ways in which it can legitimize particular claims about policy problems. Scientifically based empirical or analytical claims can substantiate and thereby enlist public support for particular policy positions. Under what conditions, then, might such strategies of knowledge utilization be deployed in political debates? Here we turn to the two theses about knowledge utilization.

The Dumbing Down of Politics

There has been a discernible tendency in political science literature towards pessimism about the role of knowledge in political debate. Many commentators have pointed to a growing gap between politics as it is discussed in public arena, and the highly specialized, technical basis for actual policy-making (Poggi, 1990). Indeed, there appears to be a paradox between the increasing dependence of policy on expert research, and the simultaneous simplification of political rhetoric (Peterson, 1996). Followers of this school argue that advanced industrial

states have experienced radical change towards highly technical and specialized forms of policy. Policy decisions and implementation need to draw on detailed and often highly technical knowledge.

However, a number of scholars have argued that this trend has not been accompanied by greater emphasis on knowledge and expertise in politics. Instead, there has been a radical ‘uncoupling’ of technocratic policy from political debate (Poggi, 1990, p. 189). Just as policy becomes more complex, public debates on politics appear to be increasingly irrational, emotive and personalized. Much of the literature on simplification in politics locates its source in the impact of a media which has come to dominate political communication (Meyer, 2002). The mass media plays a central role in determining the political relevance – and resonance – of issues. And it serves as the central channel of communication between the public and politics. Politics largely relies on the mass media to convey messages about public opinion – it acts as ‘a sounding board’ for feedback on public responses to policy positions and strategies (Koopmans, 2004). And politicians also depend on the media to communicate their positions to the public. Indeed, the media has largely ‘colonized’ politics, forcing the latter to acquire its values, or else risk areas of politics being lost to view (Meyer, 2002).

The mass media clearly has its own criteria for selecting what is considered to be newsworthy. Influenced by a logic of maintaining the interest of its readers or audiences, it tends to be biased towards more sensationalist, emotive stories (Hildgartner and Bosk, 1988). Typical criteria for defining the news value of stories are novelty, drama, conflict and controversy, human interest, and the prominence of the people involved. Stories must also be presented in compressed and simplified form, often involving the use of misleading metaphors, dichotomies and stereotypes (Cook, 1998, p. 113; Mueller, 1973). This often involves detaching events from their context and placing them within a stylized narrative. Such narratives tend to become fixed, so that the media ignores news or information that does not fit them.

Media colonization has also engendered a preoccupation with the disclosure of scandal. Scandal refers to ‘actions or events involving certain kinds of transgressions which become known to others and are sufficiently serious to elicit a public response’ (Thompson, 2000, p. 13). In the context of politics, such scandals often revolve around the betrayal of expectations about what is considered to be moral or responsible behavior – whether on the part of

individual politicians, or governments. Scandals involving corruption or abuses of power or the transgressions of individual politicians tend to get the most prominent coverage. But the mass media also frequently sees its role as exposing scandals linked to the failed delivery of political promises, or public expectations about the role and functions of the state.

If these observations are correct, we would expect the media to couch political debate in simplistic terms, in a way that militates against the reporting of expert knowledge. Because of the bias towards drama, novelty and simplification, one could predict that the media would limit the coverage of research, and attach little weight to expert knowledge. By extension, given the media's 'colonization' of politics, one would expect politics to respond through a parallel dumbing down of its political communication, placing limited emphasis on knowledge utilization as a mobilizing strategy.

Expert Knowledge and Risk Construction

A second body of literature on knowledge in politics would suggest a rather different tendency. The starting-point here is the observation that the subjects of political debate have fundamentally changed over the past three or more decades. Politics in late modern societies mobilizes support on the basis of response to rather abstract risks, most notably environmental damage, certain branches of medical research, and the impact of new technologies (Beck, 1996). We can also add risks associated with many areas of foreign and defense policy, terrorism, crime and migration, and economic policy (Douglas and Wildavsky, 1982, p. 2).

A number of scholars have questioned how far contemporary conceptions of risk reflect an objective change in the nature and scale of threats. Instead, the preoccupation with risk may best be understood as a shift in the way dangers are constructed (Smith, 2004; Elliott, 2002, pp. 300-1). In other words, risk is an attribution of observers rather than an inherent property of politics (Luhmann, 1996, p. 5). Following this constructivist approach, we can characterize areas of risk in terms of two features. The first is the question of causal responsibility. In contrast to more traditional forms of threat, risks are constructed as manufactured, as the result of decisions. Niklas Luhmann clarifies this point through contrasting the concept of risk to that of danger (Luhmann, 1991). In the case of danger, damages are perceived as being externally caused and thus outside the control of decision-makers. But in areas of risk, future damages can be brought about by decisions that are taken now. Thus decision-makers assume

responsibility for preventing or mitigating damage, with important consequences for political debates (Bovens and 'tHart, 1996).

The second point concerns the appropriate means of dealing with risk. Anthony Giddens argues that unlike dangers linked to distribution, policy areas characterized by risk cannot be addressed through material interventions. While the types of danger endemic to modern welfare states could be addressed through traditional forms of insurance against poverty, ill-health or old age, areas of risk display different features. They are characterized by uncertainty over their scale and consequences, as well as controversy over the appropriate means of controlling them (Giddens, 1994b, pp. 152-3). Rather than relying on practical knowledge and experience, such risks are constructed and vary according to often highly abstract expert knowledge. One consequence is that political debates become far more susceptible to influence from science. Expert knowledge has a privileged role in defining the scale and nature of phenomena associated with risk, and how best to address it. Thus late modern societies are characterized by an unprecedented dependence on science and technology for determining the risks and consequences associated with political action (Jasanoff, 2006, pp. 23-4; Levy, 1990, pp. 127-9).

To be sure, reliance on expert knowledge is not limited to areas of risk. Policies in typically distributive areas, such as welfare or taxation, also depend on specialized data and studies to guide the elaboration of policy. The difference is that the deployment of knowledge claims in areas of risk becomes a central criterion for settling debates. Unlike in policy debates revolving around rival interests or values, it is not sufficient to justify claims on the basis of popular support, or to settle disputes through bargaining (see Barry, 1990 on these different modes of settlement). In areas of risk, participants in the debate are likely to acknowledge the authority of technocratic, rather than democratic, modes of justification.

Of course, the notion that debates may be settled through technocratic deliberation becomes more problematic in contentious policy areas (Radaelli, 1999). Technocratic modes of settlement may prevail in relatively non-politicized policy areas, which are not the object of public claims-making. But where an issue is the object of rival political claims, it is unlikely that knowledge will be deployed in a neutral way, or that disputants will accept without question the authority of scientific evidence as a criterion of settlement. Instead, participants will seek to deploy expert knowledge to substantiate particular claims. In the case of politics,

strategies for deploying knowledge will depend not just on expected policy impacts or what will ‘work’. They will also be influenced by the concern to mobilize popular support, through rhetoric and decisions (Brunsson, 2002). In the case of the mass media, as we saw, the selection of which types of knowledge to deploy will depend on the potential of research findings to meet criteria of novelty and drama, and especially to reveal government transgressions. The different constellations of technocratic/democratic modes of settlement, and high/low political salience, are depicted in Table 1.³

- Table 1 about here -

The propensity to use knowledge to substantiate rival claims is augmented by a second factor: the acknowledged fallibility of scientific knowledge, especially in areas of risk. Areas of risk are almost by definition characterized by contestation about the validity of scientific claims. In such areas, many of the objects of inquiry are particularly difficult to measure, and enjoy limited possibilities for experimental forms of testing that employ trial and error based methods (Rüdiger, 1993, p. 25; Giddens, 1994a, p. 220). The resulting heterogeneity and often incomparability of research results limit the possibilities for building up a more robust and uncontested ‘acquis’ of knowledge. This lack of a solid body of knowledge can imply that public opinion and the media are more open to influence from the latest findings. It also provides greater scope for the exploitation of research findings. Users of knowledge – whether these are operating within politics, business, the media or interest groups – can instrumentalize new research findings to substantiate divergent claims about the phenomena in question (Beck, 1996, p. 167).

At the same time, however, the acknowledged uncertainty of such diagnoses creates risks in the utilization of knowledge to secure political legitimacy. Policy-makers will be held accountable for the damages caused by what (in retrospect) can be seen to have been wrong decisions, belated reactions, or a failure to act (Luhmann, 1991, p. 117). This implies an important discrepancy between the systems of politics and science. The system of science does not – and probably cannot – evaluate the validity of its findings on the basis of their practical implications. By contrast, politicians are held accountable for such choices, even where they must be taken without adequate scientific knowledge.

The insufficiency of expert knowledge as a basis for decision-making in areas of risk also implies a discrepancy between knowledge utilization on the part of incumbents, and critics of their policies. Governments are likely to want to avoid placing too much faith in scientific research, aware of the fallibility and ultimate unaccountability of such findings. By contrast, opposition parties and the media may display no such qualms. They may deploy scientific evidence to support claims without being held accountable for the implications of decisions based on such knowledge. And they will be keen to criticize governments for taking decisions which, in retrospect, can be depicted as irresponsible. This asymmetry between decision-makers and their critics creates scope to portray governments and their decisions as scandalous. Governments can hardly avoid taking risks; but the media and opposition parties are quite free to depict (the outcomes of) such decisions as betrayals of trust (Luhmann, 1991, p. 117). In this sense, the mass media's penchant for scandal is quite compatible with insights about the politics of risk: damages brought about by political decisions are prime objects for scandalization.

Where scandals revolve around decisions taken (or not taken) in areas of risk, the media is quite likely to draw on research to help reveal government transgressions. Expert knowledge can help describe or explain the damages caused, or can cast doubt on the scientific basis of government decisions. This implies that expert knowledge can meet the criteria of newsworthiness, and may indeed serve as a means of exposing scandal in policy areas characterized by risk.

Four Claims about the Political Utilization of Knowledge

I would like to draw on these insights about risk, political communications and knowledge utilization, to advance four claims.

1. Research findings are likely to be invoked in political debates where participants accept the legitimacy of technocratic modes of justification. This will be the case for policy areas characterized by risk, i.e. where there is (a) uncertainty about the nature and scale of potential damages caused by policy choices, and (b) dependence on expert knowledge to assess such threats. Such areas can be contrasted to those revolving around competing interests or values, which are typically subject to democratic modes of settlement.
2. Where such policy areas are politically salient, it is unlikely that knowledge claims alone will be authoritative in settling disputes. While participants may accept the relevance of

technocratic modes of justification, they will seek to deploy competing constructions of risk to substantiate preferences generated by non-technocratic considerations. The dynamics of selecting expert knowledge will vary between politics and the mass media.

- In the case of politics, the instrumentalization of expert knowledge will be influenced by perceived possibilities for political mobilization.
- In the case of the mass media, it will be determined by the potential for research findings to meet the criteria of novelty and drama, exposing scandal in the form of political transgressions.

3. While politics is keen to draw on knowledge to underpin the legitimacy of its decisions, it is likely to be cautious about relying on science as a basis for decision-making. This is both because of the acknowledged fallibility of knowledge in areas of risk; and because of the unaccountability of science in taking responsibility for damages caused by risky decisions. This creates an asymmetry between knowledge utilization on the part of incumbents and their critics.

4. The combination of these three points generates a paradox. On the one hand, participants in political debate acknowledge the authority of science as a mode of settlement in areas of risk. But on the other, they also recognize its epistemic short-comings, and are quite willing and able to deploy rival knowledge claims to substantiate preferences arrived at on other grounds. In short, disputants are engaged in a ritual of knowledge-based deliberation, whilst remaining profoundly ambivalent about the authority of science in settling disputes.

Legitimizing Knowledge in the Politics of Migration

These ideas can be better illustrated by looking in detail at knowledge utilization in the politics of migration. There are a number of reasons why migration policy provides a good subject for our inquiry. First, migration issues have frequently been characterized as a typical subject for risk construction (Beck, 2001; Huysmans, 1998; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2006). Decisions taken on the admittance and integration of immigrants clearly have major societal impacts. But knowledge about migration – in particular its causes, scale, and impact on host societies – displays the feature of epistemic uncertainty (Sciortino, 2000). This is most patently the case for research on the causes and dynamics of international migration, as well as the phenomenon of irregular migration (Geddes, 2005, pp. 330-1). At the same time, though, migration policy is not a pure case of ‘risk politics’, but is characterized by contention

over resource distribution (Freeman, 1995), especially in the area of the admission of new migrants, and their access to welfare resources and employment (Bommes and Geddes, 2000). Migration policy also raises important value conflicts, invoking competing ethical notions of duties to non-nationals (Boswell, 2000), and different conceptions of national identity and the criteria of membership (Favell, 2001). This implies that in many areas of migration policy, democratic modes of justification are likely to prevail over technocratic ones. Issues about how to distribute welfare resources between residents and newcomers, for example, clearly cannot be settled by expert knowledge. The combination of these features of risk, distribution and value conflict therefore make migration an excellent area for comparing patterns of knowledge utilization prone to different modes of settlement.

Second, migration policy issues are clearly highly salient in public debates. They are a popular topic of mass media reporting, and in many countries have become the object of highly populist forms of political mobilization (Faist, 1994). This often takes the form of the scandalization of betrayed political promises, especially over the control of unwanted immigration, irregular labor or asylum. The policy area therefore offers a good case for examining claims about how different actors deploy knowledge in contentious policy debates.

The UK offers a very good example of these tendencies. Its popular media, and especially the press, show a high level of preoccupation with political scandal, including on migration issues. And public debates on migration are characterized by conflicts over both distribution and values, and risk construction. The analysis that follows focuses on examples from political debates on immigration policy in the United Kingdom (UK) between 2002-2004. Over this period, of the nine prominent migration policy issues surfacing in public debates in the UK, three were triggered by, or involved the extensive use of, research.⁴ The first was a debate on the 'real' level of immigration to the UK; the second a discussion about the economic impact of immigration in the UK; and the third a debate on the impact of European Union (EU) enlargement on immigration from Central and East Europe to the UK. The three cases allow scope for comparing knowledge utilization under conditions of different levels of risk. While the first and third issues involved estimates of future migration flows, and were scientifically uncertain, the second question of the economic impact of immigration has been the object of a relatively solid body of empirical research.

The analysis of these three cases is based on a variety of sources from the print media and politics. Press coverage includes reporting in the *Daily Mail*, an anti-immigrant tabloid paper; the *Daily Telegraph*, an anti-immigrant broadsheet; and the *Independent*, a broadsheet with more liberal views on immigrants. Other sources are the House of Commons and Westminster Hall debates; speeches by the Prime Minister, Home Secretary and Conservative spokesperson for Home Affairs; daily press briefings of the Prime Minister's Official Spokesman (PMOS); and press releases from No. 10 Downing Street, the Home Office, and the Conservative Party.

Migrationwatch and the Debate on Immigration Statistics

In Summer 2002, a recently founded think tank called Migrationwatch UK launched a report on immigration statistics. The report claimed that official figures on immigration issued by the British Home Office seriously underestimated the true level of immigration. Based on official immigration statistics, estimates of irregular entry and overstay, and extrapolation from previous trends, the report suggested that 'at least 2 million non EU citizens per decade' were expected to immigrate to the UK in coming years (Migrationwatch 2002).

The report was immediately picked up by several newspapers, notably the right of center broadsheet the *Daily Telegraph*. On 5 August it ran an article entitled '2m migrants for Britain in the next decade', and in its editorial of the same day used these findings to criticize the government's immigration policy. According to the *Telegraph*, the Migrationwatch report illustrated 'how startlingly high levels of immigration to these shores now are', and demonstrated the need for more data: 'To work out what we want, we need the facts' (Daily Telegraphy 2002). Over the next few months – until the end of 2004 – the paper cited findings or comments from Migrationwatch in 21 out of a total of 32 articles dealing with the level of immigration and asylum flows into the UK. On two occasions they published articles by Andrew Green, the head of Migrationwatch. And on three further occasions, the paper devoted special articles to cover the launch of new reports from the think tank. The *Daily Mail*, a popular right of center tabloid, was another paper to report on the findings of Migrationwatch, though less extensively than the more 'highbrow' *Telegraph*. It cited reports or comments from the think tank in 19 articles between the launch of the August 2002 report and the end of 2004. The right-wing press seemed to hail Migrationwatch's reports as a brave

attempt to bring honesty into the debate on an important issue, which was otherwise suppressed by a ‘canting, smug liberal elite’ (Daily Mail, 2004b).

Migrationwatch figures certainly did not go unchallenged. The liberal press and the government were highly skeptical about its methodology, not to mention what it considered to be the think tank’s right-wing populist agenda. Labour Member of Parliament (MP) and former immigration minister Barbara Roche criticized the organization for lacking independence and objectivity. ‘This organisation appears determined to peddle exaggeration and distortion to an audience of certain newspapers only too keen to embrace its message ... We need a strong, academically grounded and truly independent organisation that can act as a counterweight in the media and beyond’ (Waugh, 2003). Responding to the attack, the *Telegraph* in particular was keen to bolster the credibility of its source: it stressed the fact that its head, Andrew Green, was a former UK Ambassador; and its co-founder was David Coleman, a demographer from Oxford University (Johnston, 2002a). Arguably, the continual use of statements from Migrationwatch also filled a gap left by Conservative Shadow Home Secretary Oliver Letwin and his successor David Davis, who over this period appeared unwilling to be too directly associated with the more extreme anti-immigration positions of the right-wing press. Indeed, Conservative speeches and press briefings on migration and asylum over this period are notable for their omission of any reference to the Migrationwatch figures, although the extensive coverage of Migrationwatch certainly bolstered their critique of Labour Party policy.

Despite this reticence, parliamentary debates over the following two years suggest that media coverage of Migrationwatch had a discernible impact on the migration debate within the political system. In March 2003 a Conservative backbench MP, Nicholas Soames, launched a parliamentary debate on immigration statistics. He announced that the ‘conspiracy of silence about immigration, which has lasted for a generation, must end ... we need proper, accurate and truthful figures’. Citing Migrationwatch estimates, he challenged the government to provide estimates for ‘clandestine arrivals’, arguing that ‘[t]he British people have a right to be told how many more immigrants are expected to arrive over the next 10 years’ (House of Commons, 2003a, pp. 2-4). The immigration minister Beverley Hughes, while stating that ‘we do not accept Migrationwatch UK’s immigration projections as accurate’, nonetheless accepted the need for improvements in statistics (indeed the debate coincided with a national statistics quality review on migration). The issue of migration statistics featured prominently

in subsequent debates. During a Westminster Hall debate on immigration the following day, one Conservative MP stated that ‘Migrationwatch ... is the independent organisation that we can rely on for sensible statistics on migration’; another referred to ‘the important work done’ by the organisation’, although the Liberal Democrat Home Affairs spokesman considered that ‘its figures have not been independently verified’ (House of Commons, 2003b, p. 7). Concern about Migrationwatch criticism also influenced the Office of National Statistics in their decisions on releasing data. The *Telegraph* reported in August 2003 that ‘officials wanted the ONS to hold back some potentially embarrassing figures’ in order ‘to avoid renewed attacks from Migrationwatch’ (Sparrow, 2001).

Migrationwatch figures were not explicitly cited in parliamentary debates after March 2003, and the Conservative Party continued to be reticent about drawing explicitly on their findings. Nonetheless, it is fairly clear that they had a substantial impact on the debate. They provided the opportunity for the right wing media and Conservative Party to put concerns about the scale of immigration back on the agenda, in particular raising questions about the government’s credibility in providing accurate information on it. Andrew Green was the ‘man who set off [the] immigration timebomb’ (Johnston, 2002b).

The Migrationwatch episode provides an intriguing example of how politics and especially the media seek to couch claims in terms of expert knowledge. Participants in the debate were ostensibly accepting a technocratic mode of justification, emphasizing the decisive role of expert knowledge on migration figures in settling disputes. And indeed, the question of estimating and projecting immigration flows is in many ways a classic area of risk. The debate drew on estimates of irregular entry and overstay, phenomena on which there are no reliable data, and which are extremely difficult to observe. It also revolved around the even more scientifically problematic task of projecting future migration flows.

However, it is quite clear that the *Daily Mail* and the *Telegraph* were invoking these findings to substantiate other sorts of claims. Migrationwatch figures were used to bolster a generally anti-immigration stance, and, perhaps more importantly, to disclose government transgressions. Indeed, most attention was given to findings that appeared to expose government failings: its dishonesty over claims about the level of immigration, its inability to control influx, or its prevarication over the negative social impacts of immigration. This is evident from the quantitative break-down of media interest, which shows that the most

extensive coverage of research was on Migrationwatch's reports on the 'true' level of immigration (see table 2). It is also supported by the qualitative analysis, which shows a striking preoccupation with revelations about government deceit and ineptitude. The pattern of reporting clearly supports the claim that the media will draw on knowledge where it can expose political scandal.

- Table 2 about here -

The episode also reveals some discrepancy between knowledge utilization on the part of politics and the media. The Conservative Party appeared to be cautious about drawing on Migrationwatch figures as a means of substantiating their critique of the government. This implies the exercise of some caution in being associated with a group whose epistemic credibility, and whose political correctness on migration issues, was very much questioned by the more liberal press. In this sense, it was the media rather than politics that most directly utilized research to undermine the credibility of the government. The press was clearly less concerned about source credibility than the Conservative Party.

Projections of East-West Migration Flows after EU Enlargement

In June 2003, the Government defended in parliament its decision not to impose barriers on the free movement of workers from the 10 new candidate countries joining the European Union on 1 May 2004. While most other EU countries had decided to introduce a moratorium of up to seven years on free movement of workers from the new member states, the UK government decided to grant access to its labor market from the outset. This decision became the subject of intense party political discussion, with Home Office sponsored research becoming a central theme of parliamentary debates.

The issue first rose to prominence in Summer 2003, then largely disappeared from media attention, to re-emerge as an important issue between February – May 2004 in the run-up to EU enlargement. In the first major parliamentary debate on the question in 5 June 2003, the Conservative MP Richard Spring drew on the findings of a survey of migration intentions carried out by the International Organization for Migration. He claimed the research found that 'several million people plan to move to the west', and that the UK would be the third most popular choice, after Germany and Austria (House of Commons, 2003c). The Labour

MP Alan Whitehead mocked the ‘spectacularly poor pieces of empirical evidence brought to bear’ by Mr. Spring, who was ‘making a series of hypothetical points’; a position that found support from another Conservative MP, Anne Winterton, who agreed ‘let us throw away all those polls ... they are not worth the paper that they are written on’ (House of Commons, 2003c). Nonetheless, despite widely held skepticism about survey-based findings, there appeared to be a striking level of confidence in the ability of (good quality) research to provide accurate projections. Indeed, the Home Office was criticized for having failed to produce the research it had commissioned on this topic in time for the debate. The Home Office research was seen as providing crucial evidence. Spring complained that the Government had ‘not published a full and up-to-date report into the likely effect’ of free movement, with the ‘last study on this matter that the Government published ... [dating] as far back as July 1999’. The Government had therefore ‘failed the House by not providing the information necessary for debate on this important subject’ (Richard Spring, House of Commons, 2003c). The critique was not therefore targeted at the idea of basing policy on such projections; but rather at the fact that the Government had so far failed to produce these figures.

However, once the Home Office commissioned report was published, it was criticized by the Conservative Party as being unrealistically low in its projection of annual inflows to the UK of 5,000 – 13,000 a year (Dustmann et al., 2005). As one MP declared during a debate on the Bill, ‘The Home Office’s predictions on new immigrants are wrong and have been challenged, not least by the Home Secretary’s own advisers.’ Writing in the *Telegraph*, Andrew Green described the estimate as ‘absurdly low’ (Green, 2004). Even the Liberal Democrat Mark Oaten argued in parliament that ‘it would make more sense to wait and base the policy on fact rather than prediction’ (Mark Oaten, House of Commons, 2004). Rejecting the findings, the Conservative Party stuck to the claim that ‘there are millions of people in these various eastern European countries who could come’ (Daily Mail, 2004a).

David Blunkett, the Home Secretary, was keen to distance himself from these estimates. When challenged by the Conservative Shadow Secretary on Home Affairs, David Davis, to defend the projections offered in the report, the following exchange ensued:

David Blunkett: I have never said that there would be only 13,000 people.

David Davis: Yes you did.

Blunkett: No, I have not. We published independent research on the website last summer, with its methodology. The figure of 13,000 has never crossed my lips (House of Commons, 2004).

Later in the debate Blunkett remarked that:

I have no intention of being held to the 13,000 figure: if I had, I would be a very foolish politician, because in the future the only issue raised in this House would not be whether those people were good for our country or had paid their tax or national insurance, but whether I had got the figure wrong.

Indeed, the Government and Labour MPs preferred to draw on other sources to justify predictions that there would not be a mass influx of workers after 1 May. The PMOS pointed to the experience of previous EU enlargements, when fears about mass influx had proven to be unjustified; only on one occasion did he refer to the Home Office research as an additional reason to doubt concerns about mass influx.⁵ In his key-note speech to the CBI, Blair did not refer at all to possible levels of influx, instead emphasizing arguments about skills gaps and the positive impact of immigration (Blair, 2004).

This second episode offers another good example of knowledge utilization in an area of risk. Policy planning based on projections of future migration flows faces huge methodological problems. If knowledge of the causes of migration flows is already contested, this is the case *par excellence* for projections of flows, and especially attempts to predict movement triggered by a change in policy. And yet the implications of such policy are clearly significant, as events after May 2004 amply demonstrated.⁶ Both the government and opposition parties stressed the importance of producing reliable projections as a basis for policy, thus accepting a technocratic mode of justification.

Nonetheless, the episode clearly shows the ambivalence of politics about the authority of expert knowledge. While there was a general expectation that well-based decisions should be underpinned by research, and the need for expert knowledge was constantly invoked in debates, once these estimates were produced there was obvious reticence about placing too much faith in them. The government in particular was cautious about being seen to base policy on estimates. Once the commissioned study was made available, it played a rather limited role in government justifications. The government wanted to avoid being held to account for estimates that could subsequently prove to be incorrect. The Prime Minister in particular showed a marked preference for other (non-research) sources, notably the experience of previous enlargements.

Home Office Research on the Economic Impact of Immigration

Between 2002-2004, the Labour Government drew on a number of research reports commissioned by the Home Office to justify labor migration policy reforms. They did this through high-profile launches of Home Office funded research, and through the continuous citing of specific research findings in speeches, policy papers and press releases. One example of this is the Home Office's launch in December 2002 of research it had commissioned on the economic impact of immigration. The report, which the Government hailed as 'independent academic research' (No. 10 Downing Street, 2002), was a summary of three Home Office commissioned studies, carried out by scholars from University College London and the University of Leicester. In the words of immigration minister Beverley Hughes, the research showed that 'it is simply not true that migrants "take the jobs" of the existing work force. It confirms that migrants can add to our economy, expand businesses and create success, jobs and opportunities for us all' (Home Office, 2002).

The research was frequently invoked to support the Government's new, more liberal policies on labour migration. It provided much of the evidence drawn on in the 2002 Home Office White Paper; and, more generally, helped substantiate what, in the words of Hughes, 'marked a radical shift in policy, based on a recognition of the positive contribution of migration' (House of Commons, 2003b). It was also drawn on by the pro-immigration Liberal Democrats. As the Home Affairs Spokesman Simon Hall put it, 'All the evidence from the Home Office and elsewhere shows that the migrant population coming to the UK is net financially beneficial ... Unless people can disprove that, we must be very wary of suggesting that migration is not a benefit' (House of Commons, 2003b).

Probably the best example of a single research finding being drawn on to justify policy was the estimate of the fiscal contribution of migrants offered by research published by the Home Office in 1997. A report by the Home Office Development and Statistics Directorate in collaboration with a centre-left think tank, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) estimated that immigrants in the UK had made a net fiscal contribution of £2.5 billion in 1999-2000 (Gott and Johnston, 2002). This figure was repeatedly referred to in speeches, press releases and parliamentary debates (Blunkett, 2002; House of Commons 2002, 2003b; No. 10 Downing Street, 2003; PMOS, 2004). The research was also reported in the liberal center-left press – the Independent cited these and similar findings on the benefits of

migration in five articles between 2002-2004. The IPPR report was subsequently up-dated and published during the general election campaign of May 2005.

But the research findings were also queried from a number of directions. During a Press Briefing by the PMOS on 5 April 2004, journalists questioned ‘the origin of these figures’, including the £2.5 billion fiscal contribution, and were simply referred to the Home Office for more information. (Interestingly, this figure was not included in the Prime Minister’s key-note speech on migration to the Confederation for British Industry (CBI) later that month.) Migrationwatch also produced a report challenging the methodology behind this estimate in early 2005 (Migrationwatch, 2005). Andrew Green commented that the figure was ‘plucked out of a lengthy document, shorn of its necessary qualifications, placed in a prominent position in the executive summary and then repeated endlessly – a classic case of spin doctoring’ (Johnston 2004). The figures were certainly not accepted as authoritative by opponents of the new immigration policy. As the Conservative MP Nick Hawkins put it in a parliamentary debate:

If, as the Government claim, high net migration brings many benefits, they should admit the numbers, sell the benefits to the public and bask in the adulation of a grateful electorate for providing such a generally beneficial improvement in our way of life. I see no evidence of that, because so far they have provided few arguments that mass migration is a good thing, but there are many arguments that the numbers put too great a burden on our infrastructure and public services, on the poorest people, and on our way of life (House of Commons, 2003b).

However, the notion that immigration was economically beneficial did not appear to be fundamentally questioned by most of the political establishment or even the media. The main reservation expressed about these findings was that the acknowledged economic benefits of migration may be outweighed by its negative social impact. Most opposing the Government’s new policy did so not by denying the economic argument, but on the basis that immigration risked overburdening social services or housing, and created problems with migration control. For this reason, the Conservative leader Michael Howard was convinced that ‘[wh]ile migration ... is part of a competitive and dynamic modern economy, immigration to Britain cannot continue at its present, uncontrolled levels’ (Daily Mail, 2004b).

It is worth noting that the Prime Minister and his official spokesman hardly referred to research findings on the economic impact of immigration. The CBI is continually cited as the preferred source for legitimizing government claims about skills shortages, while claims

about the economic contribution of immigration are drawn from the Treasury.⁷ This selection of sources suggests some caution in drawing on academic research.

Unlike the first two cases, this debate did not revolve around an area of risk. The question of the economic impact of migration best fits the category of a distributional policy issue, and it is the object of a relatively uncontested body of knowledge. The debate involved not so much a dispute over these economic impacts, but rather a struggle over the appropriate mode of settlement. The government was keen to settle the discussion through technocratic debates about the economic costs and benefits of migration, in the full expectation that it could win on these terms. It also displayed none of the caution evident in drawing on estimates in debates on EU enlargement, presumably because the body of research on the impact of migration was relatively conclusive. By contrast, those opposing the government's stance sought to avoid a discussion based on economic analysis, preferring to depict the issue as a conflict over distribution or values, thus implying the legitimacy of democratic criteria for determining policy.

This discrepancy was reflected in a pronounced asymmetry in knowledge utilization. While the government was clearly keen to invoke expert knowledge, the popular press gave very limited coverage to research on the economic impact of migration. Where the *Telegraph* reported on this research, it was to question the relevance of findings that focused solely on economic impacts, and which seemed to ignore less tangible social costs. The research was considered deficient because it failed to weigh up the economic benefits against other costs associated with immigration. So the newsworthy aspect of the research revolved around whether the indubitable economic benefits of immigration justified its potentially negative societal impacts.

Finally, while the government was keen to draw on expert knowledge, it was also aware of criticisms about the narrow, technocratic basis of its arguments on the benefits of migration. Indeed, this may explain why more senior political figures were less keen to draw on this research to substantiate the case for increased labor migration. As we saw, the Prime Minister and his Official Spokesperson preferred to draw on figures from the CBI and the Treasury to support arguments about the benefits of migration, rather than academic research. This may reflect a concession to the relevance of democratic modes of settlement. Both the CBI and the Treasury represented bodies with a broader representational remit than the academics who

produced the original study on the impacts of migration. By citing them as the source of research, the government could demonstrate a slightly broader base of democratic support.

Conclusion

The literature on political communications is certainly correct in its observation that political debate has become simplified and dramatized, and rightly points out its preoccupation with scandal. But this does not imply that research is being screened out of political discourse. Indeed, the analysis of research utilization in UK debates on migration policy suggests that research findings are frequently invoked in political debates, and can be the object of quite intensive media interest. I claimed that this was most likely to be the case for policy areas characterized by risk, in which those engaged in policy debate accepted the legitimacy of technocratic modes of justification. This was certainly borne out in the analysis of migration policy debates, in which expert knowledge was frequently invoked by the government, opposition parties and the media as an authoritative basis for settling disputes.

The three episodes examined also strongly supported the second claim: that participants would make use of research selectively, to substantiate policy preferences embraced on non-technocratic grounds. In this sense, the acceptance of technocratic bases for settling debates was to a large extent ritualistic. Politics was keen to draw on research, or to shift debates to technocratic grounds, where the evidence would support its claims. In the case of the media, there was a clear interest in research findings that could scandalize political decisions, exposing politicians as untrustworthy decision-makers in risky areas of policy.

The empirical analysis also demonstrates how politics may be cautious about depending on science as a basis for policy-making. This reflected in part a concern about the epistemic credibility of some of the claims asserted by research, and a desire to avoid being seen to be too dependent on contested knowledge as a basis for decision-making (as with the study on EU enlargement and migration). But it may also have reflected an awareness of the lack of ethical credibility of academic sources of knowledge. Senior policy-makers chose to draw on research produced by government departments or industry rather than scientists, especially where policies had a clear distributional or value component. Such sources were in a sense more accountable, produced by actors with a popular mandate, and thus carrying more weight in debates settled on democratic, rather than technocratic, grounds.

The fourth claim was that these various features of knowledge utilization create a paradox. In areas of risk, expert knowledge is attributed a salient role in settling debates, and decision-makers are under pressure to demonstrate the scientific basis of their decisions. But they, their critics and the general public are also aware of the limitations of science in predicting the outcomes of decisions, and in making calculations of risk under conditions of uncertainty.

How have governments responded to this paradox? In the case of UK debates on migration policy, we discerned three strategies. The first was to accept this ambivalence, simultaneously stressing the importance of research but being careful not to rely too heavily on particular findings as a basis for policy (as in the case of EU enlargement). But this strategy carries the risk that politicians will be seen to be inconsistent or incoherent in their approach towards research. An alternative strategy was to draw on more reliable knowledge on a relatively non-risky aspect of policy in order to shift the balance of potential benefits and costs of the policy in question and thereby justify risky policies. This may also create problems if the media and opposition expose and challenge this maneuver, as they did in the case of UK debates on the economic impact of immigration. Finally, political leaders displayed a penchant for citing research results from governmental agencies or influential interest groups. Knowledge produced by practitioners arguably avoided concerns about accountability.

It would be interesting to extend this analysis to compare knowledge utilization across different policy areas characterized by varying degrees of epistemic uncertainty and risk. Analyses of public debates around issues of food safety and the environment certainly display a similar ambivalence about the authority of scientific claims as a basis for risky decisions (Hajer, 1995; Liberatore, 1999; Smith, 2004). It would also be interesting to compare knowledge utilization in countries with different cultures of research. In cases where there is a higher level of respect for scientific knowledge, we might expect politics to be less cautious about drawing on research to legitimize policies. Indeed, the political culture in countries such as France, Germany and Italy does seem to show more deference to expert knowledge. But it may equally be the case that such countries face an even starker paradox between, on the one hand, high expectations about the role of research; and on the other, the deficiencies of such knowledge as a guide to policy-making in areas of risk.

Notes

- ¹ Prominent contributions include Weiss with Bucuvalas, 1980; Weiss, 1978; Heller, 1986; Holzner et al., 1983; Goldstein and Keohane, 1993.
- ² Expert knowledge in this context refers to the product of research (in fact I use the two terms “expert knowledge” and “research” interchangeably). Research, following Stone, is “a codified, scholarly and professional mode of knowledge production that has its prime institutional loci in universities, policy analysis units of government department or international organizations and private research institutes and produced by academics, think tank experts and [policy] professionals.” (Stone, 2002, p. 2). The term “science” is used to refer to this mode of knowledge production.
- ³ The table builds on a similar schema developed by Radaelli (1999), though I posit a rather different outcome for the combination of uncertainty and high salience.
- ⁴ Discussion in the media and parliament over this period were also dominated by the government’s handling of the asylum system, and the numbers of asylum applicants in the UK; control of irregular labor; the government’s position on EU immigration and asylum policy; the introduction of identity cards; and two scandals leading to the resignation of Minister Beverly Hughes and the Home Secretary David Blunkett. However, none of these debates involved the invocation of research findings.
- ⁵ See PMOS Press Briefings, 19 January 2004; 9 February 2004; 11 February 2004; 16 February 2004 (available at <http://www.number-10.gov.uk>).
- ⁶ The lifting of restrictions on labour market access for the newly acceding states did in fact lead to far higher levels of immigration than predicted – over 600,000 nationals for the accession countries had registered as workers in the UK by May 2007.
- ⁷ See, for example, PMOS Press Briefings from 9 February 2004, 16 February 2004, 26 April 2004; and the PM’s speech to the CBI on 27 April 2004. All can be downloaded from <http://www.number-10.gov.uk>.

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