Denials of racism

‘The current situation is not about race; it is about numbers and volume’:

Denials of racism in constructing post-racialism

Rahul Sambaraju¹, Chris McVittie¹, Andy McKinlay² and Karen Goodall¹

¹Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh UK.
²The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh UK.
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Abstract

Recent leaked reports by one Migration Advisory Committee showed that the claim that immigration into the UK had untoward consequences for its citizens in employment was highly exaggerated. The impact of immigration on employment for British citizens has been and still is an overriding overtly claimed concern for restricting immigrants into the UK and for other policies that limit what immigrants can do. At the same time UK’s immigration policies have a problematic history, in being associated with, rightly so at times, racism. Here we examine how UK parliamentarians engage in a debate on immigration in the UK House of Commons. We offer a discursive analysis of a debate on ‘Immigration control’ that included the introduction of a ‘points-based system’. We show that participants managing implications of racism associated with the said policy, descriptions of immigrants and immigration and even the act of participating in the debate. We show that parliamentarians do so by relegating racist positions on immigration to the past and/or extremist political parties in working up post-racial society.

Introduction

For discourse analysts a routine finding in talk on immigration has been that of denying and distancing racist motivations and/or associations in warranting limitations, restrictions and/or specific laws (Augoustinos, Quinn 2003, Billig 1988b, Reeves 1983, Capdevila, Callaghan 2008). In one of the earliest studies on discursive practices on immigration into the UK, Reeves (1983), showed that British politicians had recourse to talking about immigrants who were non-White in a variety of ways instead of directly referring to their skin colour or ethnicity to avoid accusations that of racism. This action was named ‘discursive deracialisation’ (Reeves, 1983) which is when ‘persons speak purposely to their audiences about racial matters, while avoiding the overt deployment of racial descriptions, evaluations and prescriptions’ (p.4). Talk on immigration in nation states, traditionally understood as ‘White’ readily shows such features. Augoustinos and Every (2007) provide a thorough summary of such research. Indeed it is now well known and documented that discursive deracialisation is a pervasive aspect of talking about limiting immigrants and asylum-seekers1 (Goodman, Burke 2010a).

In those interactional settings, people orient to implications of racism and use denials (van Dijk 1992) to manage such. These include denying being prejudiced (van Dijk 1984), denying being opposed to immigration (Capdevila, Callaghan 2008) and denying that opposition to immigration and/or asylum-seeking is racist (Goodman 2010). Alternatively, people also turn the

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1 The authors are well aware of the differences between immigrants and asylum-seekers. Here we do not aim to conflate aspects associated with each. Discursive research however has shown very many similar findings in talk about these two groups of members (please see Augoustinos, Every 2007 for an overview).
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tables and accuse those accusing them as racist to be prejudiced (Billig 1988b), intolerant (Augoustinos, Every 2010) and/or stifling free speech (Boromisza-Habashi 2011).

However there are considerable differences. A disclaimer that ‘I’m not racist, but…’ serves to prevent inferences that the speaker is racist, in that its use serves a personal cause. It attends to how a speaker may be perceived. In denying that the speaker is racist, it offers the inference that the speaker does not entertain irrational conceptions such as racism and/or prejudice (Billig, 1988). Indeed, speakers routinely follow this with providing grounds for how it is that they came to the conclusion that they did. For instance, Edwards (2003) shows that this involves presenting one’s conclusion to be based on how ‘reality’ is.

Alternatively, speakers may also present their arguments as not being racist. Wetherell and Potter (1992) show that this may involve the use of one among many common-places such as that one cannot turn back the time, that one has to be pragmatic or that one has to put the past behind. Augoustinos, Tuffin and Every (2005) show that this may take the form of using principles based on liberal-egalitarianism, such as that merit needs to be the main criterion in deciding employability. Goodman and Burke (2010b) show that this may involve straightforward denials along with providing economic or practical grounds. These studies shown that denials of racism give a veneer of rationality, reasonableness and validity to the behaviours and/or arguments being made.

Here, we show one instance of denials of racism, where these denials occur in distancing racist implications from the activity of debating immigration. It is noteworthy that here parliamentarians themselves introduce, index and orient to racism in talking about immigration policy. In the UK, social, political and historical issues point to a rather close association between immigration policies and racism (Kundnani 2007).

**UK Immigration policies**

Immigration into the UK has been a consistently troublesome issue for its lawmakers since World War II. While economic considerations were taken into account, social, political and cultural considerations remained central in UK’s immigration policy (Freeman 1978). For instance, The 1968 Commonwealth Immigrants Act effectively allowed entry only for those with ancestral ties to British citizens (Murray 2011). Such policies were aimed at keeping people out and denying entry to certain sorts of people, in effect these were ‘negative control’ policies (Joppke 1998: 270). These concerns over who would come into the UK and become its citizen were vociferously voiced in Enoch Powell’s “Rivers of Blood” speech (Powell 1969). There, Powell warned of race riots in urban UK because of non-white immigration into the UK, which would make the indigenous British feel unwelcome in their own land. Migration into the UK historically resulted in a responsive drive for restrictive immigration policies (Brau 2011), which have been associated with ‘imperialist mentalities’ (Gilroy 2004). Gilroy (1987, 2004) argues that it was not immigration from non-White areas that led to a rise in xenophobic attitudes and racism rather that these attitudes
were already in action, as evidenced in the imperialism of Great Britain. Indeed such attitudes towards immigrants are similar to what polls would suggest are extant (Ipsos MORI 2011).

A very noticeable change in the UK’s recent history on immigration policy was the introduction of the ‘points-based system’ (PBS) (Murray 2011). This came into effect in its entirety in late 2008 (British Broadcasting Corporation 2008). A direct importance of this policy was that it served as a prelude to and a central feature of the Borders, Citizenship and Immigration Act 2009 introduced by Gordon Brown’s government. This Act was aimed at strengthening of UK’s borders, increasing the government’s power over immigration and to introduce the idea that staying on in the UK is an earned right (The Guardian 2010). There is a case that the introduction of these policies and Acts is motivated by populist concerns over dislike towards immigrants rather than any economic concerns (Murray, 2011). The impact of immigration on employment for British citizens has been and still is an overriding overtly claimed concern for restricting immigrants into the UK and for other policies that limit what immigrants can do (Mendick, Duffin 2013, Migration Watch UK 2012, Trott 2012, Brau 2011).

Here we offer an analysis of a debate that ended with approval for one such policy, namely the PBS. This debate took place on 21st of October 2008 in the UK House of Commons. We show the ways in which the debate, participating in it and the proposal under question were explicitly treated as not racist.

Method

Data

The data here were selected from a transcript of a debate on 21st of October 2008 on “Immigration Controls” in the UK House of Commons. The motion being debated here was certain amendments to the extant immigration system, which included the introduction of one PBS. Specifically, the data are transcripts in English gathered from an online version of The Official Report of the Proceedings of the UK House of Commons or the Hansard, which is a record of interactions in the UK Parliament. This was accessed from the World Wide Web via this link: www.parliament.uk. Relevant transcripts were copied and pasted onto MS Word™ to enable analysis.

Here, it is worth elaborating on the nature of these transcripts. Firstly, these transcripts are at the level of words and do not contain intonation markers, pause lengths and other non-lexical particles. Secondly, these transcripts “filter out spokeness” (Slembrouck 1992: 104) to enable a smoother reading. Thirdly, these transcripts are produced in ways to show a more grammatically correct English, than showing how it is that talk happens in the here and now (Mollin 2007). However, these transcripts are treated as rather accurate representations of what transpires in the Parliament as parliamentarians themselves use these transcripts for various purposes, inclusive of quoting each other (Antaki, Leudar 2001). The use of these transcripts as data for then needs to take these features into account.

The transcripts so collected were read and reread for those stretches of talk that involved parliamentarians orienting to potential interpretations that talking about immigration would be
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racist, in particular, or problematic in general. Such stretches of talk were further screened for most demonstrative instances. These were selected and transformed into extracts for analysis.

Methodology

The data so collected were analysed using discourse analysis (McKinlay, McVittie 2008). Given the variety of ways that discourse can be analysed and ‘discourse analysis’ is understood, we provide a brief description of the analytic procedure. Here, discourse analysis means an analysis of discourse on its own right, in that there was no effort to go beyond the realm of discourse. Participants’ utterances, so transcribed, were analysed for the actions accomplished through those utterances. There was little effort to map interpretative repertoires (Wetherell 1998, Edley 2001) or ideological commonplaces (Billig 1988a, Billig 1991) onto participants’ utterances. Rather, these were left for the framing the findings of the analysis, as presented in the discussion section.

The parliamentarians’ accounts were analysed for the constructions of immigration related state of affairs, constructions of this debate on immigration and orientations to racism in association with this debate. In so doing, we show the outcomes of such constructions, namely that of endorsing this debate, rejecting accusations of racism and work up a state of affairs where racism is relegated to the doings of extremist political parties and/or the past.

Results

Extracts shown below contain explicit references to race and/or racism. These extracts start around 1 hour and half after the first motion in the debate, which approximately lasted from 3 hours and 20 minutes. One feature of these is that most of these were taken from the first contributions of each parliamentarian. This is displayed in their consistent avowals that this debate is very welcome. However we will see that these welcomes serve other purposes, such as those of treating this debate to be important and not marred by racism.

In the first of these extracts we see Roger Godsiff a Member of Parliament of the Labour Party for Birmingham, Sparkbrook and Small Heath offering a warrant for debating immigration without inviting accusations of racism. This involves contrasting this current act with that of similar acts in the past and/or with those taken up by extremist political parties.

Extract 1

Roger Godsiff:

1 It is a pleasure to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Mr. Field) and the hon. Member for Mid-Sussex (Mr. Soames), who made excellent speeches. In welcoming this debate, may I make the point that immigration has been the taboo subject
of British politics for far too long? The reason is self-evident. Ever since Enoch Powell made his infamous speech in Birmingham back in 1968, politicians from mainstream parties—with a few exceptions who have perhaps been brave, foolish or sometimes both—have avoided the subject for fear of uttering a wrong word or saying something politically incorrect, and thus being labelled as racist or anti-immigrant.

Because mainstream politicians have not debated such issues as numbers and the effect that immigration might—I say might—have on public services, particularly in inner-city areas, the only parties that have talked about those issues have been racist or xenophobic parties such as the British National party, which has been left with a wide-open field to talk about immigration on its own terms and to draw its own conclusions.

Godsiff welcomes this particular parliamentary debate on immigration by citing events in the past that complicated the act of talking about or debating immigration by British politicians. Godsiff laments that ‘immigration has been the taboo subject of British politics for far too long’ (lines 3-4). For him, this can be ‘self-evident[ly]’ (line 4) traced back to the British politician Enoch Powell’s ‘infamous speech in Birmingham back in 1968’ (line 5). While the implication offered is that such speech was problematic, Godsiff is not clear on what makes this ‘infamous’. Rather, he trades on the audiences’ (following Heritage 1985) understanding of this infamy. However, for him the consequences of such a speech were akin to self-censorship, where politicians, unless ‘brave, foolish or sometimes both’ (line 6) would not discuss immigration ‘for fear of uttering a wrong word or saying something politically incorrect, and thus being labelled as racist or anti-immigrant’ (lines 7-8).

This version of past actions and would-be actions treats discussing immigration as open to problematic implications of racism and being anti-immigrant. In so doing, Godsiff works up a particular version of the context, referable only as ‘in the past’. This is noteworthy as Godsiff implicitly offers a contrast between what used to happen ‘in the past’ to what happens now. It is in this latter period – now – that Godsiff situates this debate. By implication and hearably he claims that things have changed, in that, discussing immigration does not in itself lead to ‘being labelled as racist or anti-immigrant’. It is interesting that he calls these actions as labelling people as ‘racist or anti-immigrant’, doing which treats the status of those actions to be racist or anti-immigrant, or not in doubt. Moreover, such a claim directly attends to the current action of participating and welcoming this debate.

What follows, at lines 9-13, is a demonstration of this claim in ways to support it and also to show that in fact this debate is not racist, rather it is reasonable (Billig 1988b). Primarily this is done through lamenting the absence of a debate on immigration that concerns itself with the ‘numbers and the effect that immigration might’ (lines 9-10) have on ‘public services, particularly on inner city areas’ (lines 10-11). This version is of note for in including the process noun ‘immigration’ and referring to ‘numbers’ and any potential ‘effect’, it does not readily offer inferences of racism or being xenophobic or indeed of being anti-immigrant. Rather, Godsiff ascribes these properties to political ‘parties such as the British National Party’ (line 12). He uses such ascription to further the reasons for participating in this debate, which reasons are that such
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extremist parties have ‘been left with a wide-open field to talk about immigration’ (lines 12-13), with the outcome of drawing their ‘own conclusions’ (line 13). It is hearable that these conclusions would not be favourable or even rational about immigration given the ascription that these parties are ‘racist or xenophobic’ (line 11). In these ways, Godsiff welcomes the act of participating in this debate on immigration. Tellingly, Godsiff relegates racism either to the past or to extremist parties.

In the following extract, Ann Widdecombe a Member of Parliament of the Conservative political party for Maidstone and The Weald, offers reasons why debating immigration is necessary and why it is not racist to do so. In so doing, she offers an implicit warrant for this debate.

*Extract 2*

**Ann Widdecombe:**

1 I think it beyond dispute that the Government have mishandled immigration. In recent
2 months, they have been active in trying to address a problem that they themselves allowed
3 to grow over the previous 10 years. When they came into office in 1997, the attitude was
4 that it was racist to talk about control of immigration—indeed, I should know, because I
5 was talking about the control of immigration. The initial signals sent out were all that the
6 system would be relaxed: the primary purpose rule was abolished; an amnesty was granted
7 to 25,000 asylum seekers who had not even had their applications processed; and some
8 high-profile deportation decisions taken by the previous Government were reversed. So,
9 the signal went out: the system is now more relaxed.

Widdecombe complains about how ‘the Government’ (line 1) ‘mishandled immigration’ (line 1). This complaint weds actions taken, to, what is phrased as, the then prevalent attitude towards talking about controlling immigration, namely that it was ‘racist’ (line 4). Widdecombe also offers evidence to support such a claim on this attitude, which involves presenting herself as the one who was blamed for ‘talking about control of immigration’ (line 5). Arguably, one outcome of saying so, of pointing the finger at oneself, is to demonstrate that she is not racist. Rather that, the accusation or the attitude in question is unfair.

This description is also interesting because, her claim and the evidence for her claim form a rather nice coupling. In that, she was accused of being racist because she was talking about control of immigration and the attitude then was that whosoever did the latter was accused of being the former. The interest here is that this is one version of what the attitudes were in ‘1997’ (line 3), which is rather well suited to the business in the here and now, namely that of allowing for talking about the control of immigration.

Widdecombe also provides descriptions of actions that show the Government to have mishandled immigration. These actions, summed up as sending signals that the ‘system would be
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relaxed’ (line 6), are offered as a three-part list (Jefferson 1990): ‘the primary purpose rule was abolished; an amnesty was granted to 25,000 asylum seekers who had not even had their applications processed; and some high-profile deportation decisions taken by the previous Government were reversed’ (lines 6-8). She then treats these actions to account for her claim that ‘the signal went out: the system is now more relaxed’ (line 9). In these ways, Widdecombe works up an unfavourable evaluation of the attitude in the past that talking about control of immigration is racist.

In the following extract we see Stephen Pound a Member of the Parliament of the Labour political party for Ealing North treating the current debate as different to those in the past, which had good reasons for accruing racist accusations.

 Extract 3

Stephen Pound:
1 I accept that the tone has changed since the late Enoch Powell, when he was Health
2 Minister, spent the early 1960s going round the West Indies begging people to come here.
3 I accept that it has changed since the Opposition proposed some fantasy island where
4 asylum seekers would be housed. I accept that the tone has changed, but I hope that, like
5 me, the right hon. Lady and all in this Chamber will accept that the current situation is not
6 about race; it is about numbers and volume. That is more important for our nation and the
7 people whom we are sent here to represent than any possible partisanship on this matter.
8 We have to go forward, accepting that everybody has made mistakes in the past and that
9 we are living with the dragon’s teeth sown then. We have to address this issue tonight, and
10 the amendment tabled by the Prime Minister lists a safe, sane and sensible way forward
11 that will ultimately unite, not divide.

Here, Pound treats the current state of affairs to be different from those in the past when the proposals made ethnicity relevant and were deeply problematic. It is for this reason that he treats the current debate as having nothing to do with ‘race’.

In response to a question by a Conservative political party member, Pound identifies a change in the actions of the Conservative political party members. He does this by giving two, hearably, problematic examples of policy attributed to members of the Conservative political party. The first of these describes the actions of ‘Enoch Powell’ (line 8) in a rather ironic manner: ‘spent the early 1960s going round the West Indies begging people to come here’ (line 9). The irony here is that it is rather well known that Enoch Powell was against immigration into the UK from its former colonies and made an infamous speech warning of race riots in urban UK because of such immigration, as seen earlier in Extract 1. The second example is a hearably clearer demonstration of an exclusionary policy where ‘asylum seekers would be housed’ (line 11) on an island. In so doing, he reinstates the importance of a race-relevant critique on certain immigration policies.
This is important, because subsequently, he attempts to gain consensus of those in the Parliament on the claim ‘that the current situation is not about race; it is about numbers and volume’ (lines 12-13). Further, he gathers the support of ‘people whom we are sent here to represent’ (line 14), inferable as the British public. This sort of claim on the current debate is also treated as a pragmatic choice as indicated by the use of the rhetorical tropes (cf. Wetherell, Potter 1992) that ‘[w]e have to go forward’ (line 15) and ‘everybody has made mistakes in the past’ (line 15) along with a further use of a metaphor to drive the point home: ‘we are living with dragon’s teeth sown then’ (line 16).

In the above ways, Pound works up a version of current context where racism is not to be directly associated with immigration as in the era of Enoch Powell, rather now the issue is about other matters such as numbers and volume. It is in such a context that he offers a highly favourable evaluation of ‘the amendment tabled by the Prime Minister’ (line 17): ‘safe, sane and sensible’ (line 17) and one that ‘will ultimately unite, not divide’ (line 18).

In the following extract we see, Mark Field a Member of Parliament from the Conservative Political party for the Cities of London and Westminster, employing references to the success of extremist political parties in warranting that mainstream politicians debate immigration and that this activity not be interpreted as racist.

**Extract 4**

**Mark Field:**

1. It is a pleasure to follow the thought-provoking contribution of the hon. Member for Elmet (Colin Burgon). It has been an interesting debate, which has often been at cross purposes. I will probably have a share of that in my speech today. However, I very much agree with two speeches made by Labour Members, who said that the British National party has picked up support and votes only because mainstream politicians have so patently failed to articulate public concerns, to the extent that the only outlet for such worries about immigration is often to be found at the extremes of the political arena. Anyone who is complacent about these matters need only look at the BNP’s success at local elections to see that, week in and week out, in places where one would not expect the BNP to have even the tiniest bit of support, it is getting 15 per cent. to 20 per cent. in council by-elections.
2. Had we always made room for sensible, rational discussion on immigration, the immigration system would have been sharpened and improved to the benefit not just of the indigenous population—by which I mean both the black and white indigenous population—but of those seeking new lives in the UK. Those who seek to silence debate on this topic by crying racism should be under no illusions about the nature of the current
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17 system. It is, I am afraid, often confused, inequitable, unjust and so administratively
18 chaotic that not only is the British taxpayer being failed but legitimate migrants and illegal
19 immigrants alike are often being mistreated.

Field voices his support for Labour party members’ complaints on the rise in ‘support and votes’
(line 5) for the British National Party (BNP). The reason –‘only’ (line 5) – given for such increase
in support is that ‘mainstream politicians have so patently failed to articulate public concerns’
(lines 5-6). Two features are of note here. First, Field treats whatever needs to be debated about
immigration as ‘public concerns’, which serves as a warrant for debating immigration. Second,
the use of the category ‘mainstream politicians’ readily makes relevant the alternative, namely the
extremist politicians, which he employs subsequently in describing the outcomes of failure on the
part of those ‘mainstream politicians’. In so doing, he connects these categories through treating
the issue of immigration as a public concern that has to be addressed either by the mainstream or
the extreme political parties. Indeed, this forms the primary reason for his justification and
welcoming of this debate on immigration.

Field offers further evidence that BNP is indeed gaining support because of this issue to
convince ‘[a]nyone who is complacent about these matters’ (lines 7-8). This involves pointing to
‘BNP’s success at local elections’ (line 8), that it is routine – ‘week in and week out’ (line 9), and
that its success is in ‘places where one would not expect the BNP to have even the tiniest bit of
support’ (lines 9-10). In indexing the BNP as an extremist political party he works up a
problematic picture based on such a form of success and allows for the inference that mainstream
politicians must take up the issue of immigration and address public concerns.

Subsequently he goes onto treat himself as a member of the category ‘mainstream
politicians’ and laments the lack of a ‘sensible, rational discussion on immigration’ (line 12). The
outcomes of such a debate according to Field would have been benefits to the ‘indigenous
population’ (line 14), which is avowed to include ‘both the black and the white indigenous
population’ (lines 14-15) and those ‘seeking new lives in the UK’ (line 15). In these ways, Field
reifies the act of engaging in a debate on immigration by those who belong to the category
‘mainstream politicians’. The opposition to this debate on grounds of ‘racism’ (line 16) is treated
as ‘crying’ (line 16) and those doing so are described in ways to be heard as naïve for being ‘under
illusions about the nature of the current system’ (lines 16-17). Such descriptions readily frame the
debate on immigration as a necessary although unpleasant act in a world which is decidedly
unpleasant. Those objecting to the debate for its racist implications then are treated as naïve
bleeding hearts who just do not understand the system, which is described to be rather harsh at
lines 17-19.

In these ways, Field treats a rational debate, like the current one, on immigration as
necessary to lessen the influence of extremist political parties. He also offers the inference that
such debate could not take place at that time because of flimsy racist accusations.

In this last extract, we see Martin Salter, who was a Member of Parliament of the Labour
political party for Reading West, offering an explicit anti-racist reading of the PBS. In so doing,
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he treats such policies and the act of formulating those policies as typically averse to racist interpretations.

Extract 5

Martin Salter

Finally, I want to turn to what occurred in Sylhet as regards the concerns of the Bangladeshi restaurateurs. We have between 300,000 and 400,000 people of Bangladeshi origin in Britain, some of whom are in the most deprived communities. I do not accept the argument that it is only possible to recruit a trained Bangladeshi curry chef from people who are already living in Bangladesh. Nor do I accept the absurd contention in the latest edition of Curry Life—a magazine that I commend to all hon. Members—that the points-based system is completely racist. A system that applies equally to a white Russian, a black Jamaican or someone from south Asia is not racially motivated. It is about meeting the needs of the economy, and the needs of the restaurant sector can be met by internal UK recruitment or the establishment of a college in Sylhet, part-funded by the Department for International Development, which will allow the training of chefs to enable them to acquire the tier 2 qualification.

This is an important debate, if not a coherent motion. It is right and proper that we have a new approach to migration, but it is equally right and proper that we clearly acknowledge the massive contribution of immigrant communities to all our communities and to making Britain the liberal, tolerant society that we should all be proud of.

Salter introduces the issue to be discussed at lines 1-2, as the ‘concerns of Bangladeshi restaurateurs’ (line 2). What follows is details on members closely associated, such that there are ‘between 300,000 to 400,000 people of Bangladeshi origin’ (line 2) and that some of them live in the ‘most deprived communities’ (line 2). This latter description is noteworthy for it shows that conditions for some of the immigrants in the UK are not all rosy. It is subsequent to this that Salter offers his argument for reducing the number of Bangladeshi migrants to be allowed into the UK. First, he disagrees with the claim that a ‘trained Bangladeshi curry chef’ (line 4) has to be brought in from Bangladesh. Second, he also disagrees with the claim that the ‘points-based system is completely racist’ (lines 6-7). He treats such an accusation as ‘absurd’ (line 5) while giving a reason why that is so at lines 7-8. The reason involves employing three category labels as being ‘equally’ (line 7) subject to the system in demonstrating “colour-blindness” (Bonilla-Silva 2005): ‘a white Russian’, ‘a black Jamaican’ and ‘someone from South Asia’. While clearly the interesting aspect is that these three category labels are used, hearably, to encompass the colour palette of human beings, of interest also is Salter’s indication that these are category exemplars. Such descriptions are used as stand-ins for members who are ‘white’, ‘black’ and from ‘South Asia’. Salter uses this demonstration to offer the inference that such a system is not ‘racially motivated’ (line 8), rather that it is designed to meet the ‘needs of the economy’ (line 9).
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proposal to address the ‘concerns of Bangladeshi restaurateurs’ (lines 1-2) involves alternative measures that prioritise the involvement of the UK government over that of immigrants’ own. In these ways, Salter warrants an immigration policy that would reduce the number of immigrants coming into the UK.

Such a warrant is couched in favourable evaluations of the debate: ‘important’ (line 13) and ‘a coherent motion’ (line 13). The debate is also formulated as bringing about a ‘new approach to migration’ (line 14). In straightforwardly avowing such evaluations and characterisations, Salter orients to his prior claims as having distanced any potential implications of exclusion, being anti-immigrant and/or racism. This is also seen in his avowals of benefits of immigration: ‘the massive contribution of immigrant communities to all our communities’ (line 15).

Discussion

The above findings show parliamentarians in the UK House of Commons treating debating immigration as a rational act that is not motivated by and/or not to be taken as racism. In so doing, they not so much justify the act of debating immigration as much as they work to show that doing so cannot be and/or should not be taken as racism. In particular, the participants here were seen to present this activity of debating immigration and certain amendments to the UK’s immigration policy such as the introduction of a PBS as not racist.

The participants did so by situating this current activity in a specific sort of context. This was done in two interrelated ways: one was to contrast this context with the past populated by actors like Enoch Powell, who were well known for their overtly anti-immigrant and at times racist actions. The other was to contrast their own actions with those of contemporaneous others presented, and readily recognisable (cf. McKinlay, McVittie & Sambaraju 2011), as extremist political actors on immigration. This last also involved categorising themselves as “mainstream politicians” as opposed to those others who were “extremist politicians”.

Discourse analytical research on immigration has indeed addressed the issue of how it is that parliamentarians manage implications of racism in warranting limits on immigration (van Dijk 1993), specific policies on immigration (Van der valk 2003) and in the legitimation of expulsion of immigrants (Rojo, van Dijk 1997). Moreover, researchers have also shown that denials of racism go hand-in-glove with propagation of extant forms of discrimination and inequalities (Augoustinos, Tuffin & Every 2005), and that one way current actions are cleansed of racism and/or racist intent is by treating racism as a thing of the past (Ahmed, Nicolson & Spencer 2000).

The findings here complement these and extend such knowledge. Here we see that denials of racism and relegating racism to the past and/or to extremist groups were primarily used in constructing a particular version of state of affairs. This version is that in the current times debating policies on immigration in the parliament does not constitute a racist act. Notably, such a claim was not made with reference to any specific policy or the outcome of any such policy. Rather, it was an overarching claim made on the activity of taking part in the debate itself. Participants
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treated this debate as different to the activities of those in the past, the socio-political environment in the past and of those in extremist political parties like the BNP. As Billig (1988b) argues, racism is treated as an irrational act and denials of racism, deracialisation and justifications of discrimination routinely work up a rational view of the behaviour in question.

It is then not surprising that participants here attributed the need for debating this issue to other practical, pragmatic and those presented as ‘real’ issues. However, of central interest is that they did so while embedding this in denials of racism. While immigration policy in the UK has had a troublesome history, we see that this is exactly the version participants used in demonstrating that the current state of affairs was different. Conversely, talking about immigration does not necessarily mean being racist or making race relevant. Indeed we see Martin Salter employing it in Extract 6 to treat PBS as not racist. Furthermore, he embeds such a justification in treating the debate as an ‘important, if not a coherent motion’. In eschewing the relevance of race for this debate on immigration policy in the UK, the parliamentarians seem to warrant the occurrence of the debate itself. Moreover, it was not even the case that participants were oblivious to potential racism in talking about immigration as they readily implied that entities like the BNP routinely did so. Together, not only did they orient to the close associations between the issues of immigration into the UK and racism, but also that in dismissing such associations for this debate and their contributions, they constructed a particular sort of context. This context has many similarities with what has come to be known as a ‘post-racial society’ or a ‘color-blind society’ in the U.S. following the victorious election of Barack Obama as its President (Pettigrew 2009).

This context or state of affairs implies that in this day and age racism has little relevance especially since a Black man (however see Augoustinos, De Garis 2012) is the President of a White majority country. It is of little surprise that sociologists and commentators are highly sceptical of this idea (Sayyid 2010, Dawson, Bobo 2009). Indeed, some argue that this idea can be put into motion in disqualifying accusations that certain practices are racist (Howard, Flennaugh 2011). This takes the form of justifying certain act as not racist, simply because we as a society have moved on, that is, we live now in a ‘post-racial society’. The findings here, point in a similar direction, in that participants seem to treat racism as just not relevant to debates on immigration, while engaging in passing an immigration policy that is designed to limit the entry of people who are poor, with little education and have scant opportunities anyway.

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