

**From Humanitarianism to Securitization:
The Shift in Political and Media Discourse on Tamil Refugees Arriving by Sea in Canada**

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Abstract

As displacement increases and the Majority World hosts most refugees, political and media discourse play a key role in representing individuals seeking protection in Western nations. To explore Canada's attitudes towards refugees, this paper undertakes a comparative analysis on the political and media discourse surrounding Tamil refugees fleeing persecution and genocide in Sri Lanka and arriving by sea in Canada in 1986, 2009 and 2010. The analysis finds that while humanitarianism dominated the 1986 discourse, political and media actors reinforced each other's rhetoric to promote a negative and securitized outlook in 2009 and 2010 by labelling Tamil refugees as "illegals," "queue jumpers," "criminals" and "terrorists." This shift is explained in the broader context of the securitization of migration discourse and policies in Canada and globally, which continues to undermine the right to seek asylum and results in individuals resorting to dangerous methods of accessing protection.

Keywords: refugees, Tamil, discourse, securitization, humanitarian, media, political

Introduction

Globally, 82.4 million people are forcibly displaced due to persecution, conflict, violence and human rights violations (UNHCR, 2021). This figure includes 48 million internally displaced people, 26.4 million refugees and 4.1 million asylum seekers (UNHCR, 2021). While these numbers are staggering, most displacement results in internal movement, approximately 73% of refugees live in neighbouring countries, and the Majority World is home to 86% of the world's refugees (UNHCR, 2021). As the Majority World continues to shoulder a disproportionately large responsibility for hosting asylum seekers and refugees, political and media discourse play a key role in representing individuals seeking protection in Western nations. In recent years, negative discourse surrounding migration have prevailed, such as during the so-called “migration crisis” when over one million refugees sought protection in Europe in 2015. While compassionate attitudes towards refugees can build empathy and positively shape public opinion and state policies, prejudged and misleading portrayals such as “illegals,” “criminals” and “terrorists” harm the narratives around migration and attempts to seek protection from persecution and violence.

In this regard, Canada often prides itself as being a welcoming country for refugees. In 2019, Canada admitted 53,211 persons as permanent residents under refugee, protected persons, and humanitarian and compassionate grounds (Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2020). While this is commendable, it does not imply that the attitudes and portrayal of refugees are always positive. As past and recent history have demonstrated, prejudged, xenophobic and racist portrayals of individuals seeking safety and protection have been prevalent in Canadian political and media discourse. To explore this topic, this paper will analyze Canadian political and media discourse during three prominent cases of Tamil refugees fleeing persecution and genocide in Sri Lanka and arriving by sea in Canada: two lifeboats with 155 Tamil refugees arriving in

Newfoundland in August 1986; the MV *Ocean Lady* with 76 Tamil men arriving in British Columbia in October 2009; and the MV *Sun Sea* arriving in British Columbia ten months later in August 2010 with 492 Tamil men, women and children. While Tamil migration to Canada since the beginning of the armed conflict in Sri Lanka in 1983 has primarily been due to persecution and genocide, which has established a diaspora of more than 200,000 Tamils in Canada (Amarasingam, 2015), these three arrivals in particular gained significant political and media attention.

By analyzing the three events, this paper attempts to understand how the political and media discourse on Tamil refugees arriving by sea in Canada compare between 1986, 2009 and 2010. It will begin by presenting a brief history on the persecution and genocide of Tamils in Sri Lanka to contextualize their need to undertake such dangerous journeys. The paper will then separately analyze the political and media discourse during the arrivals in 1986, 2009 and 2010 to understand the dominant themes around each event. Next, the paper will discuss the events jointly to conclude that while a humanitarian discourse dominated the 1986 arrival of Tamil refugees, political and media discourse reinforced each other to present a negative and securitized outlook in 2009 and 2010. This section will discuss the shift in discourse in the broader context of the expanding securitization of migration in Canada and globally and its effects on those fleeing persecution and seeking refugee protection. The paper will conclude by providing examples of recent developments of Canadian asylum policies, including the increase in irregular crossings in 2017 at the U.S. border and the closure of the border to refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic to offer some insights on the current state of the securitization of migration in Canada.

The arrival of refugees by sea into Canada occurs nearly once every decade (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012) but result in strong public and political reactions, disproportionate amount of media attention, and significant discussions on a country's immigration and refugee policies (Mann,

2009). In the early twentieth century, Canada denied entry for most of the 376 passengers aboard the *Komagata Maru*; upon return to India, passengers were arrested, attacked and killed by Indian authorities (Mann, 2009). In 1939, Canada denied entry to 907 Jews fleeing Nazi persecution; upon return to Germany, many passengers died in concentration camps (Gélinas-Faucher & Nakache, 2018). Other notable arrivals by sea in recent years include 599 Fujian refugees arriving in 1999 and 174 Sikh refugees arriving in 1987 (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012).

As journeys by sea mark the most desperate attempt to seek protection, this analysis is valuable for two main reasons. First, this study intends to examine Canadian attitudes towards refugees in political and media discourse in the context of a relatively small number of arrivals by sea. Second, scholars have mainly studied these three events separately by focusing on either the political or media discourse surrounding each event. By drawing upon previous research, this paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by exploring how political and media discourse can reinforce each other and subsequently influence asylum and refugee policies.

It is important to clarify a few terms that will be used throughout the paper. The term “discourse” is contextualized within van Dijk’s definition of “migration discourse,” which is defined as not only a specific instance of text or talk, but in a more generic sense as a “large class of all discourse genres of/about migrants or migration” (van Dijk, 2018, p. 230). In accordance with van Dijk’s (2018) text and his broader framework of “migration discourse,” this paper analyzes two general classes of discourse and its “genres”—or types of a certain discourse—as they relate to migration: political discourse (e.g. parliamentary debates, bills, policy documents, speeches of politicians) and media discourse (e.g. news reports, editorials, interviews, reportages).

This paper analyzes the three events through the lens of humanitarianism and securitization by drawing upon Watson’s (2009) research on the securitization of humanitarian migration.

Therefore, “humanitarianism” in this paper refers to compassion or a general sense of humanity—beyond economic and family reunification as it relates to the reasons for international migration—by locating “the refugee as the referent object of security rather than the state” (Watson, 2009, p. 4). “Securitization” in its traditional understanding refers to “a process whereby political elites justify emergency measures and break the normal rules by which they are otherwise bound by arguing and persuading an audience that a particular development represents an existential threat to the state or society” (Watson, 2009, p.2). This paper integrates this traditional definition while including one of Watson’s additional elements of securitization, which is the influence of “legitimizing actors” such as the media within the expansion of securitization (Watson, 2009).

Tamils in Sri Lanka: A History of Persecution and State-Sponsored Violence and Genocide

To contextualize the arrival of Tamil refugees in Canada, a brief history on the state-sponsored oppression and genocide of the Tamil population in Sri Lanka is essential. Sri Lanka is divided by the majority Sinhalese people (74 percent of the population) and minority groups such as the Tamils (12 percent of the population) (Amarasingam, 2015). Following independence in 1948, the Sri Lankan government adopted Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism as its hegemonic ideology and invoked various discriminatory policies that disenfranchised the Tamil population (Seoighe, 2017). Most notably, the 1956 “Sinhala Only Act” recognized Sinhala as the official state language, which not only made Tamils feel unrecognized as equal citizens, but resulted in discrimination in education, public service employment, and interaction with both state institutions and the majority Sinhala community (Seoighe, 2017). As discrimination prevailed and peaceful means of resistance failed, Tamil militant groups, including the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the “LTTE” or “Tigers”), emerged to protect the Tamil people.

While anti-Tamil pogroms are common in Sri Lanka’s history (as they occurred in 1956,

1958, 1977 and 1981), the anti-Tamil pogrom in July 1983, commonly referred to as “Black July,” marked the beginning of a 26-year armed conflict between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan government (Manoranjan & Sivaselvachandran, 2020). Mobs destroyed 18,000 Tamil homes and 5,000 shops, raped hundreds of women, killed over 3,000 Tamils, injured thousands, and further displaced approximately 150,000 Tamils (Manoranjan & Sivaselvachandran, 2020). The systematic and well-planned nature of the attacks is attributed to government cooperation as government officials provided electoral lists to the mobs, which allowed them to identify Tamil homes and properties to attack (Eleanor, 2017).

May 2009 marked the end of the armed conflict as Sri Lankan forces defeated LTTE militants who attempted to form *Tamil Eelam*—an independent state in the North and East of Sri Lanka—in the traditional homeland of the Tamil people. The armed conflict came to a brutal end as up to 140,000 Tamil civilians were killed and grave violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law were committed by the Sri Lankan government (Seoighe, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2012). A United Nations report found credible allegations of multiple violations committed by the Government of Sri Lanka, such as the killing of civilians through widespread shelling (including hospitals and humanitarian objects), denial of humanitarian assistance, and human rights violations against victims and survivors of the conflict (including internally displaced persons and suspected LTTE members) (United Nations, 2011).

The state-sponsored violence against the Tamil people in Sri Lanka have been described as a genocide by pointing to various moments in history: the burning of the Jaffna library in 1981, which destroyed over ninety thousand rare Tamil manuscripts and books; the numerous anti-Tamil riots and pogroms during the second half of the twentieth century; and the mass atrocities committed during the final stages of the armed conflict (Manoranjan & Sivaselvachandran, 2020;

Powell & Amarasingam, 2017). While the conflict was complex and nuanced, background on the persecution, violence and genocide that the Tamils have faced at the hands of the Sinhala-Buddhist nationalist Sri Lankan government—which resulted in desperate attempts to seek protection in Canada in 1986, 2009 and 2010—is important context for this paper.

1986: Humanitarianism in Newfoundland

After five days adrift off the coast of Newfoundland, on August 11, 1986, two lifeboats carrying 155 Tamils fleeing the armed conflict in Sri Lanka were rescued by local fishermen. The individuals were brought ashore and given temporary accommodation as immigration officials conducted interviews and confirmed their identity within three days. During that period, the “B-1 List”—a list of eighteen refugee-producing countries to where individuals would not be returned to—became the basis for a fast-track refugee determination process as individuals from these countries were exempted from making a refugee claim and going through the refugee determination process (Watson, 2009). As Sri Lanka was on this list, the government immediately issued renewable one-year permits to the 155 Tamils, which enabled them to live and work in Canada (Mann, 2009).

In terms of the political discourse surrounding this event, the decision to grant Minister’s permits was controversial as some MPs questioned the government’s practice of quickly accepting refugees and providing legal status (Mann, 2009; Watson, 2009). Further revelations of the journey of the Tamil refugees created a stir in political and media spheres. Initially, they claimed to have fled Sri Lanka to India, from where they directly travelled to Canada. However, it was later revealed that they had in fact departed from West Germany—which was considered a safe state—where they had also filed refugee claims (Watson, 2009). On August 17, a spokesperson for the refugees explained that they were subjected to police harassment and limited freedom of

movement in West Germany, and so they decided to come to Canada (Mann, 2009). Media and political debates argued that these individuals had already found protection in another state, and as such, they were not in need of “genuine” protection in Canada (Watson, 2009).

Despite this, as Mann (2009) analyzes, the political discourse that accompanied this event was predominantly humanitarian in nature. The government maintained that it would not deport the Tamils even after it was confirmed that they arrived via West Germany. While stating that the government did not “want people jumping to the head of the line” and would “tighten up procedures if required,” Prime Minister Brian Mulroney said the following in a public statement:

“(m)y government will do anything but allow refugees in lifeboats to be turned aimlessly around in the ocean and turned away from our shores [...] But there will always be human suffering and human misery and there will be people who come [to Canada] for freedom [...]. And if we err ... we will always err on the side of justice and on the side of compassion [...] And it’s not the presence of [155] frightened human beings searching for freedom and opportunity that’s going to undermine Canada of our immigration policies” (as cited in Mann, 2009, p. 197).

The leaders of the New Democratic Party and the Liberal Party applauded the Conservative government by stating that “providing refuge was the only option” and “Tamils had to be given temporary shelter in Canada” (as cited in Watson, 2009, p. 60). Mulroney maintained that the need to provide protection and the need to conduct a reform of the immigration system were separate questions. The Minister of State for Immigration echoed this sentiment by stating that “(t)here’s a difference between an immigrant and a refugee and a refugee cannot wait for a number” (as cited in Mann, 2009, p. 197). Additionally, when West German media reported that the Tamils were suspected to be part of the LTTE—an internationally proscribed “terrorist” organization—government officials maintained that the Tamils would be considered as refugees while security checks would be left to the RCMP (Mann, 2009). Despite questions around immigration reform

and security, the political discourse exemplified empathy and humanitarianism as officials upheld the obligation to provide protection to those fleeing persecution.

While Canadian media rarely reported on the arrival of asylum seekers or interrogated their claims at that time, the inaccuracy of the Tamils' journey resulted in depictions of "leaving a safe haven," "jumping the queue," and "entering illicitly," which conformed to the broader narrative of "untruthful," "bogus" and "illegal" migrants (Watson, 2009). The decision to promptly give legal status resulted in labels of Canada being "gullible" and "a dumping ground" (as cited in Watson, 2009, p. 57). However, the dominant media discourse was humanitarian in nature as it condemned the backlash against the refugees as "unthinkable," "small-minded and ignorant" and "devoid of compassion" (Watson, 2009). Watson's analysis of articles in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Montreal Gazette* and *Maclean's* from August 13 to October 17, 1986 found that 74 percent of 82-front page articles, 80 percent of 194 other articles and 85 percent of 13 editorials maintained this humanitarian discourse by describing the refugee claims as legitimate and Canada's response as consistent with its international legal obligations (2009).

Overall, a predominantly humanitarian political and media discourse surrounded the 1986 arrival of Tamil refugees. Despite further revelations of their journey and some discussion on immigration reform and security concerns, the government held a strong stance to offer protection, while the media empathized and supported the government's humanitarian efforts. While Watson (2009) argues that the media can be a legitimizing actor to support a state's securitization efforts, this case study demonstrates that political and media discourse can complement each other to promote a humanitarian discourse. However, subdued discussions on "jumping the queue" and reforming the immigration system may have foreshadowed the criminalized and securitized portrayals of Tamil refugees in 2009 and 2010.

2009: The Arrival of the MV *Ocean Lady* in British Columbia

On October 17, 2009, the MV *Ocean Lady*, carrying 76 Tamil refugees, arrived in British Columbia. During the months prior to their arrival, from January to May 2009, Tamil-Canadians filled the streets of major cities such as Toronto to protest grave human rights violations being committed by the Sri Lankan government (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012). Despite extensive media coverage of the protests and the calls for intervention by the Tamil community, when 76 Tamil men arrived five months after the brutal end to the armed conflict, the political and media discourse did not follow the same humanitarian attitude that was prevalent in 1986.

Upon the ship's arrival, the Canadian Border Service Agency (CBSA) took all passengers into custody, conducted admissibility interviews, and transported them to a Vancouver detention facility the next day as they were deemed to be "flight risks" (Mann, 2009). The CBSA detained Tamil refugees for two months due to the ship's alleged link to the Tamil Tigers (Mann, 2009). To prevent the release of the remaining individuals, government lawyers unsuccessfully attempted to invoke the rarely used Section 86 of the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act*, which would have allowed them and the Immigration and Refugee Board to hold secret hearings in absence of the remaining individuals in detention (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012).

Initial political statements highlighted concerns about human smuggling as the Minister of Public Safety stated that "obviously, they are arriving in a non-conventional fashion so that raises concerns... of human smuggling" and that "the CBSA is working with domestic and international partners to combat irregular migration to Canada, including smuggling and trafficking in persons" (as cited in Mann, 2009, pp. 199-200). Minister of Immigration and Citizenship, Jason Kenney, followed similar language by stating that the government did not "want to encourage people to get into rickety boats, pay thousands of dollars, cross the oceans and come to Canada illegally" and

wanted to ensure it was not “creating a kind of perverse incentive for people to try to come to the country through these kind of really dangerous circumstances” (as cited in Mann, 2009, p. 200). Furthermore, Kenney stated that Canada did not want a “two-tier immigration system” in which some individuals come to Canada illegally through the “back door” instead of arriving by legal channels (Mann, 2009). Criminality and terrorism were bluntly evident in the political discourse, most notably by Alykhan Velshi, the spokesperson for Minister Kenny:

“We won’t allow Canada to become a place of refuge for terrorist, thugs, snakeheads and other violent foreign criminals. Nor will we support those who want to create a two-tier immigration system: one tier for law-abiding immigrants who wait patiently in the queue, and a second, for-profit tier for criminals and terrorists who pay human smugglers to help them jump the queue” (as cited in Mann, 2009, p. 201).

Statements by high-level public officials reveal that Canada was focused on borders and the immigration system instead of the refugees’ need to undertake a dangerous journey. The need to rely on human smuggling can be described by the notion of “survival migration,” which Baird (2013) explains is when domestic courts and internal migration cannot resolve an individual’s need to flee an existential threat to their basic rights. As cross-border migration remains the only option, and strict border controls and stringent visa policies constrain this possibility, individuals resort to human smuggling networks to meet their protection needs (Baird, 2013).

Additionally, as Mann (2009) explains, comments of entering through the “back door” and creating a “two-tier” immigration system undermine the need to flee persecution and the right to seek asylum. After fleeing from a government that steered a ruthless end to a prolonged armed conflict, it should be strongly emphasized that the refugee and immigration process are not the same, and refugees cannot afford to “wait patiently in the queue” as suggested by Canadian officials. Moreover, the threat of criminality and terrorism remained a central element, explained by an extended period of detention and Velshi’s comments of not wanting Canada to “become a

place of refuge for terrorist, thugs, snakeheads and other violent foreign criminals.” While Velshi does not directly characterize the Tamils in that way, the political discourse around criminality and terrorism construes that Canada’s perception of the refugees was primarily based on threat.

Like the political discourse, the media focused on legality, criminality and security. Bradimore and Bauder analyzed a total of thirty-two news articles published between October 17, 2009 and January 31, 2010 in the *Toronto Star*, *Vancouver Sun* and *National Post*. The media primarily focused on the concerns of human smuggling as Bradimore and Bauder explain that the coverage “presented the event as a matter of security rather than discussing migrant welfare and contextualizing human smuggling as a human rights issue” (2012, p. 646). Of the total sample, 59% of headlines presented the issue within the framework of a security/risk discourse, while 25% of articles directly referenced the Tamil refugees as terrorists and/or criminals, which resulted in these individuals being framed as dangerous rather than in need of protection. In line with the political discourse, the “discussion moved away from a refugee or human rights perspective and focused on the state and security management” (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012, p. 648).

Furthermore, the media used sensationalist and fear-provoking discourse, such as falsely claiming that the passengers did not have identity documents or that they paid USD 45,000 to board the ship when it was later revealed that it was in fact 45,000 *Sri Lankan rupees* (approximately 300 Canadian dollars) (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012). The initial hefty figure implies that they were not “real” refugees. One National Post headline indicated the Ocean Lady was “one of four ships” but the body of the text revealed that the three other ships reached Australia’s shores, and none were on the way to Canada. Using such a headline is part of a common strategy to spark public anxiety of possibly being “flooded” by “waves” of refugees (Bradimore & Bauder, 2012). Evidently, false, sensationalist and headline-grabbing tactics in the media spark

anxiety and undermine attempts to seek protection from persecution and violence.

Overall, there was a striking difference between the discourse in 1986 and 2009. Prime Minister Mulroney was admittedly concerned about the integrity of the asylum system and state security but maintained the dominant humanitarian discourse along with the media in 1986. In 2009, despite mass diaspora mobilization efforts condemning Sri Lanka's human rights violations in the preceding months, there was little context in the political and media discourse as to why the Tamil refugees were fleeing Sri Lanka. The government fixated on human smuggling, "abuse" of the immigration system and security concerns, while the media promoted "criminal" and "terrorist" labels and used sensationalist and fear-provoking headlines. This exemplifies Watson's (2009) argument that states use legitimizing actors such as the media to advance its securitization objectives. While this was a remarkable shift from 1986, similar themes of illegality, criminality and security were prevalent in 2010.

2010: The Subsequent Arrival of the MV *Sun Sea*

Ten months following the arrival of the *Ocean Lady*, on August 12, 2010, the MV *Sun Sea* carrying 492 Tamil refugees arrived in British Columbia. Three weeks prior to their arrival, a 37-year-old Tamil man died of illness during the journey and was buried at sea (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015). The refugees sold land and jewelry to afford the journey, and endured inhumane conditions, such as cramming into small cabins, sleeping outside on the deck, and surviving with inadequate food and water. Several were hospitalized upon arrival in British Columbia (Bell, 2013). All adult passengers were detained initially on identity grounds (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015) and 443 of the passengers were ordered for continued detention, including children who accompanied their mothers in detention (Nakache, 2011). Most passengers were held in detention for close to a year, and five years after their arrival, about two-thirds of them had

received positive decisions on their refugee claims (Epp, 2017).

To comprehend the political discourse, it is worth analyzing excerpts from a speech delivered by Minister of Public Safety, Vic Toews, two months after the arrival of the MV *Sun Sea* (Public Safety Canada, 2010):

“We know that jumping the immigration queue is fundamentally unfair to those who follow the rules and wait their turn to come to Canada. We know that abusing Canada's generosity for criminal financial gain is utterly unacceptable.

Canada welcomes and will continue to welcome those who wait their turn to come to Canada in search of a better life... we will not tolerate the abuse of our immigration system either by human smugglers or by those who are unwilling to play by the rules.

If you want to come here, there are fair, legal and legitimate means to do so. Ladies and gentlemen, these measures...will strengthen our ability to protect Canadians from criminal or terrorist threats and they respect our international obligations to provide assistance for those legitimate refugees who need our protection and help to start a new and better life.

From coast to coast to coast Canadians want to help those in need or those who genuinely need our protection but that does not make us naïve and it does not make us pushovers.”

Evidently, the political discourse surrounding this event was similar to the hostile response in 2009. A few key themes are worth exploring from this speech, which explain the broader phenomenon of securitizing migration discourse and policies. As in 2009, the focus was on the criminality of human smuggling, rather than the harsh conditions in which the refugees travelled and the reasons to undertake such a journey from a human rights perspective. A common theme was that they were “jumping the queue” and “abusing the system,” which created a negative and criminalized portrayal of them and undermined the persecution that the Tamils were fleeing in the first place. Krishnamurti (2013) argues that while there is in fact no queue in which legal refugees were waiting to arrive, this characterization as “queue jumpers” portrays them as “backdoor entrants who are not fleeing from any real persecution...Rather they are jumping ahead of the ‘legitimate’ claimants who may be imagined languished in faraway refugee camps, and their

arrival by sea is seen as illegitimate” (p. 140).

Another theme in the political discourse was around Canada’s generosity, which was not as prevalent in 2009. The Minister argues that Canada is a welcoming and generous country, but it does not want individuals to “abuse” the immigration system or the generosity of the Canadian government. As such, the government is once again providing a negative portrayal of the refugees by accusing them of somehow undermining Canadian generosity by undertaking a gruelling and dangerous journey of many weeks to seek protection from a genocidal regime. Furthermore, the Minister states that Canadians want to help those who “genuinely need our protection,” thus implying that these Tamil refugees did not require such “genuine” protection. The political discourse in 2009 and 2010 were similar as they focused on the criminality of human smuggling, the “illegitimacy” of the refugees and the argument of “jumping the queue” in the immigration system. A notable difference was the focus on undermining Canadian generosity, thus victimizing the government and criminalizing the refugees, rather than focusing on the persecution, journey and needs of the Tamil children, women and men aboard.

The media discourse followed a similar tone, which can be explored by drawing upon Medianu, Sutter and Essen’s (2015) research. The authors studied the portrayal of refugees during the six months prior to and the six months following the arrival of the Tamil refugees in 2010 by analyzing 95 newspaper articles (46 articles six months before and 49 articles six months after the arrival) in six highly circulated newspapers (*Toronto Star*, *Globe and Mail*, *Vancouver Sun*, *Calgary Herald*, *National Post* and *Ottawa Citizen*) (Medianu et al., 2015). They found that many newspapers portrayed refugees negatively, either as “bogus” refugees (45.7% of the coverage before the arrival and 14.3% after) or as “criminals” and “terrorists” (8.7% before the arrival and 30.6% after) (Medianu et al., 2015). Interestingly, while portrayal was primarily focused on the

“bogus” theme before the arrival, they were more likely to be portrayed as “criminals” and “terrorists” after their arrival, likely explained by the government’s focus on human smuggling and the suspicions of terrorism. In line with the political discourse, the “bogus” theme focused on the Tamils making “illegitimate” refugee claims and abusing the immigration system, and the “criminal” and “terrorist” themes focused on entry into Canada with the help of human smuggling and associations with “terrorism,” respectively (Medianu et al., 2015).

This study demonstrates the predominantly negative perception of Tamil refugees in 2010. As in 2009, the political and media discourse portrayed the Tamils as potential threats to Canadian society, rather than as refugees in need of protection. The political discourse focused on illegitimate claims, abuse of the immigration system, terrorism and criminality, and the media discourse focused on the notion of “bogus” refugees, “criminals” and “terrorists” attempting to enter Canada. This reiterates the argument that political and media actors can converge to undermine genuine attempts to seek protection. Notably, the study found that some Canadian newspapers, such as the *Toronto Star* and *Vancouver Sun* focused on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka, the difficult conditions throughout the journey, and the harsh detention measures upon arrival (Medianu et al., 2015). This reaffirms the importance of contextualizing the arrival of refugees to create positive public opinion and more humanitarian and welcoming policies and receptions to those undertaking dangerous journeys.

Analysis: The Shift in Discourse in the Broader Securitization Context

In exploring these three events individually, this paper establishes that while a humanitarian approach dominated the 1986 arrivals, political and media discourse reinforced each other to present a more negative and securitized outlook during the 2009 and 2010 arrivals of Tamil refugees fleeing oppression, violence and genocide in Sri Lanka. Scholars have raised that

the September 2001 attacks accelerated the securitization of migration, such as through the focus on anti-terrorism and national security (Simeon & Atak, 2018). Watson (2009) underlines that to ensure security from potential “threats” of international migration, states tighten borders through visa requirements and safe third country agreements. In the context of the arrival of Tamil refugees in 2009 and 2010, initial reactions by state officials focused on the criminality of human smuggling, instead of contextualizing this arrival from a humanitarian perspective. As Baird (2013) referred to the concept of “survival migration,” Watson (2009), Krishnamurti (2013) and Ma and Bhandar (2016) argue that as migration policies become more restrictive, borders are hardened, and securitization and surveillance become more prominent, refugees desperately resort to dangerous and extralegal options such as human smuggling to access territory. Yet, the political and media discourse did not consider this perspective regarding the 2009 and 2010 arrivals.

Furthermore, comments in the political and media discourse on creating a “two-tier” immigration system, entering through the “back door” and “jumping the queue” in both 2009 and 2010 focused on the “abuse” of the immigration system instead of the need to provide protection for the Tamil refugees. Accordingly, the theme of Canadian “generosity” was common in 2010, as officials stated that Canadians were neither “naïve” nor “pushovers.” This is problematic as it implies that although the Tamils were attempting to seek refuge in accordance with international refugee law, they were somehow undermining the generosity of Canada. As Watson (2009) points out, Canada has reiterated its commitment to humanitarian (or “generous”) efforts for refugees mainly through its large-scale resettlement program. In portraying the refugees as “queue jumpers,” the state aims to convey that they are undermining existing Canadian humanitarian efforts and generosity. Epp (2017) echoes this argument by highlighting the differentiation between “sponsored” refugee applications that are normally processed overseas and “claimants”

who seek protection at the Canadian border. The differentiation contributes to the former being portrayed as “good” or “patient” refugees, while the latter are defined as “illegitimate” or as “queue jumpers” (Epp, 2017). This not only results in refugees being labelled as “illegal” immigrants (Ma & Bhandar, 2016), but the discourse on “abusing” Canadian generosity serves as a rationale for invoking increasingly exclusionary migration policies (Krishnamurti, 2013).

As Simeon and Atak (2018) explain, the criminalization of migration is a consequence of this securitized approach to international mobility. Ma and Bhandar sum it up precisely: “ocean-borne refugees come by sea, coming by sea is an act of desperation bringing claimants in contact with criminal elements, therefore ocean-borne refugees are desperate, out of order, and criminal. The reality of the risk and danger of the ocean voyage is supplanted by a spectacle and aura of criminalization that is produced and popularized by the state” (2016, p. 184). Because of the securitization of migration and its accompanying discourse, refugees are framed first as criminals, and only second as possibly legal seekers of refuge, thus failing to discuss or explain the complex situation of persecution that they face (Ma & Bhandar, 2016). This is part of an ongoing process that constructs the foreigner as “dangerous” (Watson, 2009).

This type of discourse is particularly surprising in the context of Tamil refugees. Although the armed conflict ended in May 2009, fears of ongoing violence, detention and government reprisals against Tamils led many to flee throughout 2009 and 2010 (Krishnamurti, 2013). In the months before the arrival of the *Ocean Lady*, the Canadian media extensively covered the Sri Lankan armed conflict due to mass mobilization efforts by the Tamil diaspora to condemn and call for intervention against the Sri Lankan state’s human rights violations. Furthermore, one month before the arrival of the *Sun Sea*, UNHCR identified a list of individuals at risk in Sri Lanka, including suspected former LTTE members, journalists, human rights activists and LGBTQ-

identifying individuals (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015). Despite extensive coverage on the armed conflict in 2009 and guidance by the UN Refugee Agency, political and media discourse surrounding both arrivals did not provide context on the human rights situation in Sri Lanka.

Evidently, this analysis has demonstrated that political and media discourse do not exist in a vacuum, but rather they reinforce each other. This has been a gap in the existing literature as scholars have focused on either the political or media discourse separately regarding these arrivals but have not comprehensively analyzed the interaction between political and media actors in the three instances. As Watson crucially points out, the media is a key actor in the process of securitization as it maintains the dominant constructions of “us” and “them” and can legitimize a state’s securitization agenda (2009). In the 2009 and 2010 arrivals, the media reinforced and legitimized the political discourse through its securitized coverage, thus advancing the security concerns within the public realm. Relevantly, Bradimore and Bauder’s (2012) study found that the dominant sources consulted during the *Ocean Lady* arrival were governmental agencies, departments, and/or officials, which created a “hierarchy of credibility” as the government was able to define the situation and establish the tone of the discussion. As such, not only were the political and media discourse concurrent in 2009 and 2010, but the Canadian state also leveraged the media to advance its securitized narrative.

In terms of the acceptance rate of refugee claims, the latest information available shows that 335 claims were accepted, 107 were rejected and 37 were abandoned or withdrawn for passengers aboard the *Sun Sea* (Sadrehashemi, 2019), whereas 36 refugee claims were accepted, 21 were rejected and eight individuals aboard the *Ocean Lady* were found inadmissible and subsequently deported (Quan, 2017). Therefore, the majority of the Tamil refugees were in need of protection, thus challenging the notion that they were “bogus refugees.” It is also worth briefly

addressing the legitimacy of the argument that the Tamil refugees were “terrorists” and therefore a threat to Canada. After being elected in 2006, the LTTE was the first group that the Conservatives labelled as a “terrorist” organization, resulting in anger amongst the Tamil diaspora who view the Tigers as freedom fighters (Thurairajah, 2015). Even if they were labelled as “terrorists,” “Western states routinely acknowledged the LTTE had never targeted Western interests” (Nadarajah, 2018, p. 279) as there have been very few anti-terrorism prosecutions related to the LTTE in Western countries, with most convictions resulting in minor sentences (Nadarajah, 2018).

Furthermore, the notion that refugees are a threat to Western societies has been categorically rejected by evidence. One ground-breaking study on the United States found that between 1975 and 2017, “the approximate chance that an American would be killed in a terrorist attack committed by a refugee was 1 in 3.86 *billion* a year” (Nowrasteh, 2019, p. 7). In the Canadian context, despite fears about increased irregular crossings at the U.S. border in 2017—which is further explained in the next section—the statistics show that only 140 of the 45,000 asylum seekers (0.3 percent) who entered Canada in 2017 were blocked from claiming asylum due to “serious criminality” (Hill, 2019). Therefore, the majority of the Tamil refugee claims were legitimate, and the narratives of the threat of refugees to the Western world are not based on evidence. Even if some Tamil refugee claims were rejected, “international law recognizes the right to seek asylum and prohibits the imposition of penalties on asylum seekers who travel irregularly” (Rehaag et al., 2020), and therefore, does not justify the securitized and xenophobic response to Tamil refugees arriving in Canada in 2009 and 2010.

The concept of proportionality is also key in political and media discourse around migration. The arrival of Tamil refugees in 2009 and 2010 represented only one percent of all refugee claims made in Canada in those two years as 33,246 claims were made in 2009 and 23,157

claims were made in 2010 (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015). Evidently, the securitized and fear-provoking political and media discourse were disproportionate to the raw numbers. Yet this is not entirely surprising as arrivals by sea tend to create panic and anxiety through the media, which prompts government officials to review refugee policies (Medianu et al., 2015), once again exposing the synergy between political and media actors. Following the arrival of Tamil refugees in 1986 and Sikh refugees in 1987, Bill C-55 established the Immigration and Refugee Board in 1989 to reduce “bogus” refugee claimants (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011). After Fujian refugees arrived on the West Coast in 1999, the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* was introduced in 2002 (Bradimore & Bauder, 2011).

In line with the process of securitizing migration, following the 2009 and 2010 arrivals, the government introduced Bill C-49, the *Preventing Human Smugglers from Abusing Canada's Immigration Act* (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015). Although this bill did not pass, its provisions became law in 2012 through Bill C-31, *Protecting Canada's Immigration System Act*, which amended the *Immigration and Refugee Protection Act* (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015). The new laws deemed that arrivals by sea were “irregular,” and resulted in “automatic detention, lack of review or release for a year, bar on appeal, five-year ban on permanent residence application, bar on family reunification, denial of travel documentation, and deportation to country of origin” (Ma & Bhandar, 2016, p. 175). Evidently, discourse is not merely a matter of language, but can influence policies and legislation that can alter the lives of those fleeing persecution.

The shift towards negative and securitized discourse should not be surprising considering the immediate treatment of Tamil refugees in the three instances. In 1986, officials released the refugees within three days and maintained that security concerns would be addressed by the RCMP. In 2009 and 2010, the government automatically criminalized the refugees, prolonged

detention, and intervened in legal proceedings. As the Canadian Council for Refugee reports, before the *Sun Sea* arrived, the CBSA sent a memo which instructed officers to use all legal means to detain passengers for as long as possible and to declare them inadmissible on grounds of criminality or security (2015). While the memo itself recognized that many passengers were likely to be refugees, the rationale was to “ensure that a deterrent for future arrivals is created” (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2015, p. 3).

Recent Developments: 2017 Arrivals at the U.S. Border, COVID-19 Policies

It is worth briefly highlighting recent developments to contextualize the expanding securitization of migration discourse and policies in Canada since the events of 2009 and 2010. While Canada has boasted about its refugee resettlement numbers in recent years (Radford & Connor, 2019), the securitized approach to migration has continued through exclusionary asylum policies under the current Liberal government. Notably, Canada saw an increase in irregular border crossings from the United States in 2017 and 2018 following President Trump’s entry into office (Romero, 2019) and his consequent formation of racist and exclusionary asylum and refugee policies. In response to the increased number of arrivals, the Canadian government established the “Ministry of Border Security and Organize Crime Reduction,” which was mandated to manage irregular migration and ensure Canada’s safety (Romero, 2019). While this responsibility is now under the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness, as many have argued, the government’s reaction to irregular migration further advanced the criminalizing and securitizing discourse on migration by exacerbating fear about a border crisis and by conflating migration with crime in the name of the department (Neve et al., 2018).

The Canadian government under Prime Minister Trudeau has also persistently defended the Safe Third Country Agreement (STCA), which returns most refugee claimants arriving at

official ports of entry back to the United States as it is deemed to be a safe country for refugees (Rehaag et al., 2020). However, the notion that the United States is a “safe” country for refugees has been strongly opposed by refugee advocates due to inhumane detention conditions (Canadian Council for Refugees, 2018). Canada, nevertheless, capitalized on the COVID-19 pandemic to temporarily expand the STCA, a longstanding objective of the Liberal government due to political pressure, by returning asylum seekers arriving at unofficial ports of entry—which are not covered by the border agreement—back to the United States (Rehaag et al., 2020). While supposedly justified on “public health” grounds, this was in fact a reversal from the original plan to conduct health checks and provide mandatory quarantines for asylum seekers (Rehaag et al., 2020). Although there is no evidence that asylum seekers were more likely to carry COVID-19 compared to other travellers, asylum seekers were specifically targeted through Canada’s border measures (Rehaag et al., 2020). As in 2009 and 2010, closing borders invites unsafe and unmonitored methods of accessing protection, which not only endangers the lives of those fleeing persecution, but it can potentially exacerbate public health risks during a pandemic (Rehaag et al., 2020).

Conclusion

This paper has shown how the discourse fundamentally shifted from humanitarianism in 1986 to securitized political and media commentary in 2009 and 2010 as the Tamil refugees were described as “illegals,” “queue jumpers,” “criminals” and “terrorists.” The primary concern was the security of the state and the integrity of the Canadian immigration system instead of the individuals seeking protection. The political and media reinforced each other’s rhetoric to produce a public perception of threat to the state and the immigration system. Ma and Bhandar sum up it up concisely: “The xenophobic responses to the ocean-voyage arrivals of refugees can be read as a hyper-alertness or extreme vigilance that has been deployed through the media, government

officials, and revised policies. Throughout the deployment of these policies is a perpetual compulsive repetition of the dangerous, suspect, and criminal migrant behavior” (2016, p. 192).

While Canada is proud to be a leader for refugees, the securitization of migration in political and media discourse and its tangible impacts should not be overlooked. This paper has established that it is not merely a matter of words but a process that criminalizes the refugee and the right to seek protection. Policies designed to deter, detain and deport individuals end up imprisoning traumatized refugees, detaining children and separating them from their parents, and forcefully returning them to countries where they face serious persecution (Watson, 2009). As political and media discourse spark panic on the arrival of refugees, it is worth reiterating that on average, less than ten percent of the total number of new arrivals in Canada are refugees (Epp, 2017). Neighbouring countries in the Middle East, South Asia and the Horn of Africa host most refugees as the international refugee system is skewed to protect the interests of Western nations (Ma & Bhandar, 2016), the same actors which continue to displace racialized communities in the Majority World through contributions towards climate change, military interventions, and the promotion of neoliberal economic policies (Gonzalez, 2021). Ultimately, Canada should overturn its criminalizing and securitizing discourse, policies and practices which fail to protect refugees who are forced to navigate a system that is built against their safety, dignity and humanity.

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