
FROM THE MOUTHS OF JANUS: Political constructions of transnational EU migrants in Ireland

Martin J. Power, Amanda Haynes, Eoin Devereux

Introduction

INTERNATIONAL RESEARCH INDICATES that recessionary periods may be accompanied by a decline in the quality of relations between the majority population and migrant groups as the latter are at risk of being scapegoated for the economic downturn. In that context, political leadership on the matter of immigration is of crucial importance, with political parties having a key role to play in framing how the public understand immigration.¹ This article is based on research which examined how politicians construct non-Irish EU immigrants to Ireland through an analysis of the content of statements attributed to this group in the print media. The article focuses on those statements relating to welfare and the economy, which were among a larger range of themes identified in the wider study.

Our sample of articles demonstrates that representatives on both the left and right of the political spectrum were found to commonly address the issue of immigration as a social problem, whether by contributing to its framing as a problem, or by seeking to contradict its problematisation. In particular, our analysis demonstrated that some representatives of mainstream parties contribute to a discourse whereby migrants are constructed as fraudulent and as burdens on the economy. Drawing on theories (McLaren and Johnson, 2004; Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996) that link anti-immigrant hostility to perceptions of resource competition, our paper argues that such political constructions of EU migrants reflect a neoliberal understanding of citizenship which prioritises the economic citizen. We find that such constructions will in turn ‘inform’ public debate, thus impacting on citizens’ awareness of these issues; and that they may ultimately have a detrimental impact on how immigrants and their needs are publicly perceived and treated.

Overview

Ireland experienced strong economic growth from the later part of the 1990s up to the middle of the 2000s. The openness of Ireland’s economy was reflected in strong migratory flows, with migrant workers tending to be concentrated in wholesale/retail, the hotel and restaurant industries, manufacturing, financial services and health (Awad, 2009). Economic growth slowed in the second half of 2007, with Ireland eventually moving into a recession, which deepened in 2009. The impact of this economic collapse manifested itself in the labour market, with the sectors where

¹ “The larger research project upon which this is paper is based was funded by Doras Luimní.” A non-governmental organisation which supports and advocates for the rights of migrants’. (See www.dorasluimni.org)

migrants were concentrated experiencing significant decline. Experts expressed concern that this vastly changed economic situation might have a negative impact on attitudes to immigrants (Barrett, 2009).

Resource competition

Research on attitudes to minorities in the United States and Europe has identified self-interest and competition for resources as key explanations for hostility to migrants (Bobo, 1988; van Dalen and Henskens, 2005; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996). 'Members of the ingroup' – in our case Irish citizens – 'enjoy privileged access to resources such as jobs, power, money, welfare benefits, and housing. If this relationship is challenged by competition from outgroups' such as migrants, 'then prejudice is manifested, as a tool to retain a grip on the good life' (Gibson, 2002: 72, cited in McLaren and Johnson, 2004: 713).

Although it is often alleged that social and political attitudes are fundamentally driven by self-interest, research (see Sears and Funk, 1990; McLaren and Johnson, 2004) indicates that people's perceptions of the effect of various policies on society, the economy, or the nation as a whole, are also key factors. Indeed, findings from US research show that 'sociotropic concerns about the economy are far more powerful than personal economic circumstances in explaining anti-immigration hostility' (Citrin et al., 1997; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996, cited in McLaren and Johnson, 2004: 714). Interestingly, such findings suggest that attitudes to immigration 'may be driven by group interest', with opposition to immigration 'linked to concerns about the loss of resources of one's ingroup' (McLaren and Johnson, 2004: 714).

This group conflict theoretical framework (Blumer, 1958) holds that how members of outgroups are portrayed/perceived is dependent on whether they pose a potential threat to the advantages enjoyed by the ingroup; in effect, those in the outgroup may be 'perceived as taking resources that "belong to" one's own group' (McLaren and Johnson, 2004: 714–15). Group conflict theory is extremely relevant to understanding the representation of migrants (Quillian, 1995) as they are often seen as 'newcomers who threaten the jobs and benefits of established native-born citizens' (McLaren and Johnson, 2004: 715).

The importance of political leadership

In this economic and social context, political leadership on the matter of immigration is of crucial importance, as political elites, political parties, or processes implemented or controlled by political parties, are responsible for framing the issue of immigration, and for how, when, and where these issues arrive on the political spectrum (Schain, 2008: 465). Political elites also have substantial influence over the general public's attitudes towards immigration (McLaren, 2001).

International literature suggests that immigration poses a more severe challenge for the centre-right than for the left. However, left-wing parties have also supported restrictive immigration policies. Such instances usually occur when employers are seen to be using immigrant labour to deflate wages or because reaction to immigrants by displaced native working-class voters has made them electorally susceptible. Parties of the centre-right experience similar tensions regarding issues of immigration. For these parties, immigration is of substantial benefit to their 'business wing', but they face a challenge to please those business interests without the disaffection of

their ‘identity wing’, which is concerned about national identity (Tichenor, 2002: 169–75, cited in Schain, 2008: 467–8).

During the boom period, all Irish political parties seemed to accept the economic benefits of immigration. Smith (2008: 528) argues that up until 2007 immigration was not really a highly politicised issue in Ireland, with centre-right parties seeing little electoral advantage to be had in contravening what she perceives as a ‘liberal consensus’ on immigration, a consensus which arose in part because the possible ‘negative’ social impacts of immigration had been minimised by a sustained period of economic growth.

Prioritising the economic citizen

Conceptions of citizenship primarily revolve around Marshall’s (1950) ideas, which saw the state conferring civil, political and social rights on the citizens of its sovereign territory. The social rights afforded by citizenship were to reduce the worst excesses of the inevitable inequalities produced by the market; as citizens had ‘the right to share to the full in the social heritage and to live the life of a civilized being according to the standards prevailing in society’ (Marshall, 1950: 11, cited in Cook and Marjoribanks, 2005: 13). Yet it is clear that the ‘redistributive outcomes of social citizenship rights’ are now at best, in ‘a tenuous position’ (Cook and Marjoribanks, 2005: 13–14).

‘There is a new political discourse’ of global welfare reform which ‘combines elements of Thatcherite Conservative discourse with elements of communitarian and social democratic discourses’ (Fairclough, 2000: 166). Indeed, the ex-New Labour prime minister in the UK, Tony Blair, effectively paraphrased Thatcher when stating it is an individual’s responsibility to provide for their own welfare (Lund, 1999: 451); in the process his party depoliticised unemployment and constructed it as an individual choice. MacKay (cited in Byrne, 1999: 18) labels this process as ‘counter-revolutionary economics’ which sees the unemployed being forced into the labour market while having to accept lower wages, reduced working conditions, or relocation. A similar process of neoliberal reform has occurred in Ireland (see Considine and Dukelow, 2009).

During the run-up to a general election in 2007, Fine Gael leader Enda Kenny sought to stimulate debate on the issue of immigration, with Deputy Kenny and numerous Fine Gael election candidates choosing to instigate discussion by problematising the relationship they perceived between immigration and pressure on public services in particular (Smith, 2008: 427). We would argue that such discourse reflects the neoliberal understanding of citizenship, which prioritises the economic citizen. In essence, EU migrants in Ireland were being constructed as ‘Quasi Citizens’ (Nash, 2009: 1076).

Methodology

The larger research study upon which this article is based analysed the content of statements attributed to Irish politicians about non-Irish EU immigrants to Ireland in the print media.² We endeavoured to document statements about, depictions of, and information about immigrants, which politicians have disseminated through the

² We examined statements made by elected political representatives – including city and county councillors, and members of the Oireachtas. Our decision to examine statements made through the print media was informed by a desire to analyse those political statements which are most accessible to the public and therefore most likely to influence public opinion.

print media; to identify the constructions to which they contribute; and any misinformation in the content of their statements.³

Media content

The methodology employed adopted a content analysis strategy. Specifically, we undertook a qualitative content analysis of statements published over a two-year period, from 1 January 2008 to 31 December 2009. We selected this timeframe in order to enable us to examine the possibility of change in the nature of political statements in a period of transition from prosperity to recession. Print media content was sampled from three newspapers – a national broadsheet (the *Irish Independent*) and two local imprints (the *Limerick Leader* and the *Limerick Post*).

We began by searching both Lexis-Nexis and the proprietary archive of the *Limerick Leader* for the following terms: ‘immigration’, ‘immigrant’, ‘migrant’, ‘foreigner’, ‘foreign national’, ‘non-national’, ‘non-citizen’, ‘newcomer’, ‘nomad’. The sample of statements relating to the local Limerick context was supplemented by also sampling the *Limerick Post*.

All articles returned were read in full to determine, firstly, their relevance to non-Irish EU immigrants to Ireland and, secondly, whether they included a statement about this category or individuals from this category made by politicians. Duplicate articles and letters from readers were excluded. Our sampling strategy returned a final total of 71 articles (*Irish Independent*, 53; *Limerick Leader*, 15; *Limerick Post*, 3), which were then analysed.

While we do not claim that our sampling strategy has produced a complete sample of relevant political statements attaining media coverage in 2008–9, by focusing on two Limerick imprints and the *Irish Independent* our strategy has identified the statements with the highest profile and those that reached the widest audience in that period in our geographical areas of interest (Limerick and nationally).

Analysis

Articles which met the sampling criteria were entered into Nvivo, where they were subjected to qualitative content analysis (see Krippendorff, 2004: 18). The analysis involves identifying themes, concepts, and patterns thereof within the data. We infer meaning through interpreting these patterns. Themes and concepts may emerge from the data as a result of close reading and constant comparison, a process facilitated by sensitivity to:

- The relationship between the research question and the text
- The relationship between the texts and the context from which meaning will be inferred.

Statements in the National Print Media: The Irish Economy

In examining the sample, we found 18 articles in which politicians spoke about EU migrants in the context of the economy appearing in the *Irish Independent*. The statements came from politicians in Fianna Fáil and Fine Gael.

³ We acknowledge that journalistic and, more significantly, editorial processes have an impact upon which of the statements made by political figures are published. However, we also assert that politicians, as public figures, are highly conscious of the public nature of all the statements they make in their capacity as elected representatives. We have restricted our analysis to the statements attributed to politicians and excluded the journalists’ interpretations of these statements from our analysis.

In an article entitled ‘Shortage of work leads to drop in immigrants’ (8 October 2008), Minister of State for Integration Conor Lenihan warned against projecting ‘phobias, worries or concerns’ about the economic recession onto migrant workers in Ireland. He further stated that research indicated far higher rates of unemployment among migrants than Irish citizens. The Minister continued to highlight this issue in an article entitled ‘Ethnic tensions alert as immigrants fight for jobs’ (29 December 2008). He warned of ‘tensions’ which could develop in the competition for jobs between Irish and immigrant workers as unemployment rose and Irish people returned to sectors of the economy that they had largely abandoned (and which were subsequently filled by migrant labour) during the economic boom. The Minister stated that ‘there is potential for tension because people project their anger on to ethnic groups when they see their friends, uncles and aunts losing their jobs. You tend to have that pattern, by international evidence. It’s not defined that it’s going to happen in Ireland, but we have to guard against it.’ Lenihan went on to say that ‘we still have a need for immigrant labour, and it is here to stay’ (29 December 2008). In the preceding months Lenihan was also on record as insisting that it was ‘not correct’ that transnational migrants were displacing Irish workers (19 July 2008).

Concerns about the displacement of Irish workers were apparent in public discourse as far back as 2005 and 2006 (Quinn, 2010: 6; also see Smith, 2008: 426). Minister Lenihan’s statements sought to undermine the politicisation of fear by presenting contradictory evidence. However, Hajer and Versteeg (2009) assert that to effectively oppose divisive and conflict-generating statements politicians need to reframe the issue by presenting the public with alternative understandings of the situation at hand, rather than simply countering the opposing argument. Rebuttals, they argue, often serve to reinforce the original framing in the public mind. Although the content of Lenihan’s statements is to be welcomed, there is a danger that the stylistic focus on denial may be counterproductive. A reframing of the issue as one of a requirement for solidarity in recessionary times might be more effective.

As an example of how the economic aspect of citizenship is emphasised within neoliberal political discourse, Fine Gael immigration spokesman Denis Naughten, in commenting on the rate of unemployment among migrants, said ‘the figures showed a need to provide extra language support for foreign nationals’ and that ‘by equipping migrants with the required English language skills, it will allow them move up the value chain which will in turn benefit our economy’ (4 October 2008). An alternative proposal, drawing upon a resource competition frame (van Dalen and Henkens, 2005; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996) was introduced by Fine Gael’s Leo Varadkar, who suggested that as unemployed foreign workers cost the State €400m every year in dole payments, it might be prudent to pay 6 months of social welfare benefits to foreign national workers prepared to return to their country of origin (see for example 5 September 2008 and 29 September 2008). Varadkar argued that his proposed repatriation scheme would be strictly voluntary. However Fianna Fáil backbencher Thomas Byrne said it was ‘a very dangerous proposal and sets a new low in Irish politics’ (5 September 2008). Furthermore, the Social and Family Affairs Minister Mary Hanafin said:

All European nationals have free movement. The only people [Mr Varadkar] could be talking about are non-EU nationals, which must mean he was talk-

ing about the Africans, which means it's a racist comment ... He would want to think where he's putting his foot before he puts it in his mouth. It is undoubtedly racist to do it ... We are delighted to have these people; they are making a contribution to our economy. The Irish were never rejected anywhere when things got difficult for them (10 September 2008).

Leo Varadkar responded to these accusations of racism by stating that 'if Fianna Fáil is accusing me of racist comments, then they are guilty of racist acts and ... hypocrisy' (10 September 2008). However the accusations would appear to have stifled any further debate on this issue. By late September Varadkar said he did not want to comment further on the issue, but did add that, 'despite the over-reaction from Conor Lenihan and Mary Hanafin, it is already being done on a small scale basis so I don't see why it can't be extended ... The government doesn't want to talk about immigration. Anyone who says anything is accused of playing the race card. If official Ireland ignores it, it will come back to bite us' (29 September 2008).

It is interesting that after Mr Varadkar made this argument, a member of his own party, Senator John Paul Phelan, accused a Liberatas candidate for the European Parliament elections of 'playing the race card' when that person suggested that given Ireland's economic difficulties and the rising unemployment rates, no additional foreign nationals should be given residency, but those already resident in Ireland should be allowed remain. Senator Phelan stated 'I was shocked at his outrageous statement ... To try and blame foreign nationals for our economic problems is completely missing the point' (15 May 2009).

Statements relating to assisting foreign citizens to return 'home' suggest an understanding of immigration as a temporary phenomenon (see Greenwood and Adshead, 2010: 6; Canoy et al., 2006, for a discussion of the limitations of this understanding of migration). However, many immigrants chose to remain in Ireland as the recession deepened. Even where employment is the initial impetus for inward migration, other factors such as intimate relationships and Irish children's affiliation to the nation may result in the decision to remain despite an economic downturn. Loyal (2010: 88) also asserts that the '... global nature of the recession has meant that even many of the EU nationals who can leave and re-enter without restrictions are unwilling to do so.'

Statements in the National Print Media: Welfare

The economic crash saw 65,793 EU (non-Irish) citizens on the Live Register by August 2009 (CSO 2010: 7). We argue that it is in this context that we see greatest evidence of discourses concerning resource competition. The State training agency, FÁS, responded to the increase in Live Register figures by arguing that there was a 'need to ensure that sanctions and eligibility conditions are sufficiently tight to ensure that the Irish social welfare system does not become a pull factor for migration at a time when unemployment is rising in many EU countries' (FÁS 2009: 17). 2009 subsequently saw the practice of the electronic transfer of funds being replaced with the requirement to physically sign on for one's payment at a post office/social welfare office (FÁS 2009: 17). However, it is crucial to note that on 1 May 2004, in the context of an enlarging EU and processes implemented in other existing EU Member States, a habitual residence requirement (HRC) was introduced into Irish social wel-

fare legislation, which affected all applicants regardless of nationality.⁴ This was an extremely important development in the context of politicians' utterances about welfare entitlements.

Our analysis identified 8 articles with a focus on welfare. Articles containing relevant commentaries on this theme included statements from Labour and Fine Gael politicians only. If the general public is to support high levels of welfare spending, particularly in times of economic crisis, then citizens must be kept informed of the needs of those requiring the assistance of the welfare state, the costs of addressing those needs, and the return the state is getting for that investment (Lens, 2002). Consequently what is omitted from public discourse is just as important as what is included. Given that the HRC is a key component of the Irish social welfare system, and the controversy around the application of the rules governing the HRC, we expected some statements on this issue. However, we instead found that all but one of the politicians' statements concerned 'welfare fraud' specifically.

Under regulations in existence since 1971, migrant employees from any EU member state can claim child benefit from the EU country in which they work, even if their children are living in their home country. It was interesting then that on 23 July 2008 Labour Party spokesperson on Social and Family Affairs, Róisín Shortall, said there was a need for greater vigilance against child benefit fraud. 'They need to keep on top of that because the situation is changing so quickly. There will be huge numbers of people returning to Eastern European countries.' She also called for the State to stop such payments abroad, while maintaining them for EU workers who were living here with their children (5 May 2008). Given that these reciprocal provisions are enshrined in legislation, it was surprising that Ms. Shortall would make such a call in the public arena. Indeed, she later accepted that the proposal may have been 'aspirational' given that the current payment arrangement is provided for under EU law (O'Brien, 2009).

Prior to the period covered by this research, a new system was introduced which saw non-Irish EU nationals in receipt of child benefit required to prove that they were still resident or working in Ireland. Between November 2007 and April 2008 the Department of Social and Family Affairs wrote to 27,840 non-Irish EU child benefit recipients, giving them up to 21 days to return proof of residency or employment. In an *Irish Independent* article of 12 May 2008, a Department spokesperson said that 'in the case of non-Irish national recipients who are resident in Ireland with their children, certification is requested that the children continue to reside here, while in the case of non-Irish recipients who are working in Ireland but who have qualified children living in another EU state, certification by their employer of continuing employment is requested.' 4,960 did not return with proof of residency or employment and payment was suspended. Fine Gael front bench member, Olwyn Enright, subsequently claimed that:

⁴ After this date an applicant had to satisfy the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) for a wide range of social welfare payments. In addition, applicants also had to satisfy the same conditions applied to Irish citizens to receive whichever payment they had applied for (Department of Social Protection 2010: 4; see Department of Social Protection 2010a and 2010b for a discussion of the factors which are to be taken into consideration when deciding if someone is habitually resident).

... the percentage of foreign nationals who are claiming fraudulently is higher than Irish nationals. There needs to be communication with other countries to find out if these children exist and then we need proof of where they are living ... Fraud is fraud. If you're talking about 5,000 out of about 27,000 – that is almost a fifth and that's a high proportion. It may seem small but I still see it as significant ... That's money that could be going to people who need it more (12 May 2008).

In addition, Fine Gael immigration spokesman Denis Naughten said the social welfare system encouraged those who were living elsewhere to claim benefits in Ireland. Mr Naughten said: 'It is clear that this is not working, or we would not have the scale of fraud exposed today ... the disclosure that up to 11pc of non-nationals claiming social welfare were not resident in the State again highlights the need to strengthen co-operation between the immigration service and the Department of Social and Family Affairs (3 July 2009). Finally, in the same article Olwyn Enright, insisted that an 'incalculable number' were still getting away with open fraud against the taxpayer.

The picture painted by both Ms Enright and Mr Naughten is that of a worst-case scenario. The 4,960 cases which saw claims 'suspended' were all defined as fraudulent in their discourses on this matter. However, there is no information on whether the actions that led to initial inclusion of these individuals in this category were later rectified (for example as a result of submitting documentation which was not acceptable as 'proof of residency or employment', and later resubmitting documentation which was acceptable). In fact, there are a myriad of scenarios whereby individuals could have had their claim suspended and re-instated at a later date. The claim that all 4,960 cases were fraudulent on the basis that the individuals had not returned 'proof of residence or employment within the specified 21 days' requires further support. Indeed, it is worth highlighting that in late 2008, the Minister for Social and Family Affairs Minister, Mary Hanafin, had asserted that 95 per cent of foreign workers with PPS numbers were not claiming benefits at all (10 September 2008).

It was interesting that only one statement relating to this theme was not about welfare fraud. In an article entitled "'United Nations" of claimants costing State €150m' (5 August 2008) Labour deputy leader Joan Burton said it was particularly troubling that young immigrants from Eastern European states were reliant on the rent supplement scheme due to unemployment, when that scheme could potentially become a poverty trap: 'The critical thing is that you need to encourage people back to work because if they are bringing up children in rented accommodation and are barred from the workforce, it's not great for the kids.' Deputy Burton's statement demonstrates an understanding of the structural barriers which many individuals experience on a day-to-day basis. However, in this instance, the statement also reflects a neoliberal view of the welfare state, in that the rent supplement scheme is portrayed as assisting in the creation of 'poverty traps' and therefore possibly developing a culture of welfare dependency. Deputy Burton's assertion that the 'critical thing is that you need to encourage people back to work' reflects a variant of the 'Social Integration Discourse' (Levitas, 2003), which sees paid labour as the only way for individuals of working age to be fully included in contemporary society. However this perspective ignores the fact that entry to the labour market at (or

sometimes below) minimum wage can no more address social exclusion than welfare payments can.

Barrett and McCarthy (2008: 3) note that the comparatively small amount of research literature on immigration and welfare is in conflict with the concerns that are expressed over the supposedly excessive welfare claims by immigrants in public discourse. Yet growing hostility towards migrants is something that occurs during a recession, and politicians should be cognisant that constructing immigrants as disproportionately involved in defrauding the social welfare system may have serious implications for the treatment of migrants in this country (O' Donoghue, 2010).

Statements in the Limerick Print Media: Prioritising the Economic Citizen

On 8 January 2009 the multinational Dell Corporation announced that it was moving production from Limerick to its Polish facility and third-party manufacturers over the following twelve months, and that it planned to cut 1,900 jobs at its plant in Limerick as a result.⁵ Less than one week later the chairman of the Irish-Polish Cultural and Business Association, Pat O'Sullivan announced that, 'Polish people were not responsible for the decision. Nobody is throwing stones, but that unease is there now. We are concerned about the negative impact of the decision on the Polish community from fellow workers and Limerick people in general' (Woulfe, 2009).

Against this backdrop, one of the candidates standing in the Limerick South constituency in the 2009 local elections for Limerick City Council, made public statements concerning EU migrants which constructed immigrants as a threat to the local economy. In an article in the *Limerick Leader* (7 May 2009), Councillor Jim Long is quoted as stating:

I see little evidence that Polish people or any other non-nationals have created jobs in the city but I will go on record and confirm they are detrimental to or are the cause of massive job losses in this city and I think that should be addressed.

In making these comments, Councillor Long seems to have fallen into the trap that Conor Lenihan advocated avoiding, i.e., that of projecting fears and frustrations resulting from the recession onto vulnerable migrant workers. Internationally, research suggests that frameworks of understanding similar to that disseminated by Cllr Long have in some cases been deployed to further strategic aims (van Dijk, 1992). Indeed the author of the article in which the aforementioned statement appeared asserted that:

Fine Gael's Cllr Jim Long now appears to see electoral capital in making the claim that jobs have somehow been stolen from under the noses of local people, as if Ireland has the option to ignore the rights of EU citizens now that times are tough (*Limerick Leader*, 7 May 2009).

⁵ The job losses came as a major blow to the mid-west region where Dell had been the largest employer and the core of the local economy. Several thousand other jobs were said to be at risk in so-called 'downstream' companies that directly supplied the Dell plant.

In a second article published on the same date, in which his assertions were vigorously challenged by other local candidates, Councillor Long is quoted as stating: 'I'd rather be called a racist than a traitor' (*Limerick Leader*, 7 May 2009).

The response of the Fine Gael party leader, Deputy Enda Kenny, to Cllr Long's comments, makes interesting reading:

I read the remarks and I spoke to Jim Long this morning and had a long and fruitful conversation with him about this. Migrant workers did not cause the unemployment problem in Ireland. The real problem here is the Government mismanaging the economy has failed to protect and create jobs ... Jim Long reported to me frustration he had been feeling and what was being expressed to him on the doorsteps. This is nothing unusual. All over the country I meet people who have either lost their jobs or are in fear of losing their jobs.

Deputy Kenny said Fine Gael would shortly publish a 10-point plan on immigration and integration which would deal comprehensively with all concerns expressed by Cllr Long.

Jim was quite open about this and having explained this to him, he is quite prepared to say publicly that he did not wish to offend any migrant worker and that if in the course of the remarks that he made in reporting frustrations of people on the doorstep, he is quite prepared to apologise to the Polish people ...

Asked if he was happy for Cllr Long to remain as a Fine Gael candidate if he made an apology, Deputy Kenny said: 'in those circumstances, yes.' (*Limerick Leader*, 12 May 2009).

Enda Kenny's quoted statements reflect the Janus-faced possibilities of immigration policy discourses, in that while they reject any assertion that immigrants are responsible for unemployment, they also give credence to Cllr Long's 'concerns' by indicating that they would be addressed in forthcoming policy. Although, Deputy Kenny is cited as requiring an apology from Cllr Long, the councillor was quoted in the same article as stating that '... He has "nothing to say sorry about" in relation to his recent remarks.' (*Limerick Leader*, 12 May 2009). Cllr Long was re-elected to Limerick City Council in June 2009.

Cllr Long's ideological stance on immigrants proved not to be unique. The live register for May 2008 showed that a total of 9,911 people were signing on in Limerick, an increase of 2,668 since May 2007 (Fitzgibbon, 2008). This figure for Limerick City and county more than doubled to 20,922 by June 2009 (CSO 2010: 5). Within this context, other local politicians have commented publicly on the social welfare entitlements of immigrants, constructing their access to State supports as placing them in competition with the Irish citizenry for scarce resources.

Statements in the Limerick Print Media: Social Welfare and Resource Competition

In spite of negative reactions to Cllr Long's previous statement, in an article published in the *Limerick Leader* on 26 May 2009 Cllr Liam Galvin (Fine Gael) argued that the government should research measures to encourage foreign nationals to return home for the period of the recession:

Cllr Galvin said that 20 houses in an Abbeyfeale estate of 80 houses which he canvassed had Eastern Europeans as residents. 'I am by no means racist, and I would like to help everyone, but I say that the time has come to take people aside and tell them that they had been very welcome here when the good times meant that work was plentiful, ... But the time has come to say straight out that we as a country cannot afford all these benefits and that these people would be more than welcome back in five, 10 or 15 years from now, whenever things have picked up again.' Cllr Galvin said that the Government should examine the options and come up with a scheme to encourage such people to leave. 'The equivalent of a week's social welfare would more than pay for the air fares,' he said. 'This country is bankrupt and somebody has to shout stop, because we can't afford to go on the way we are going. I see the day when people will go along to the local post office to find the doors locked, because the money just won't be there.' Cllr Galvin also said that he believes that a considerable amount of fraud is also being committed through the wrongful claiming of entitlements on the part of foreign nationals. He has been told, he said, that taxi drivers are picking up foreigners at the airport and driving them straight to the welfare office and straight back to the airport again. 'But the Government is taking every easy option, such as means testing old age pensioners and sending inspectors into places looking for TV licences. They'd be far better off sending in inspectors to see how much welfare and other payments are being received fraudulently,' he said. 'We have to realize what is going on. (*Limerick Leader*, 26 May 2009).

In the above statement, Councillor Galvin begins by focusing on the numerical quantity of immigrants. Semyonov (2008) and Coenders et al. (2005) suggest that public perceptions of the scale of immigration have an impact on attitudes towards this phenomenon; the higher the perceived number of immigrants the more negative the attitudes. Cllr Galvin's statements serve to de-legitimize immigrants' welfare entitlements, without consideration of their status as EU/non-EU nationals. The statements quoted also fail to relate the restrictions on access to welfare implicated by the HRC. Interestingly, Cllr Galvin supports his assertions regarding welfare fraud by reference to anecdotal, rather than authoritative evidence.

In November 2009, the Mayor of Limerick, Kevin Kiely (Fine Gael) originated a more forceful version of Councillor Galvin's proposals:

I'm calling for anybody who is living in the State and who can't afford to pay for themselves to be deported after three months. We are borrowing €400 million per week to maintain our own residents and we can't afford it ... During the good times it was grand but we can't afford the current situation unless the EU is willing to step in and pay for non-nationals ... I'm not racist but it is very simple, we can't continue to borrow €400 million a week and the Government has to pull a halt and say enough is enough unless the EU intervenes and pays some sort of a subvention (*Limerick Leader*, 11 November 2009).

Mayor Kiely's proposal was met with vigorous rejection from a number of quarters. Indeed, in the article in which the above statements appeared Pat O'Sullivan, Presi-

dent of the Irish-Polish Cultural and Business Association, referred to the comments as ‘... shocking and dangerous talk’. In a statement to the *Limerick Leader* published the following day, the Mayor withdrew his comments and apologised for any offence they caused:

I fully accept that comments attributed to me by Limerick Leader reporter David Hurley were accurately recorded and I regret having made them in a way that did not accurately reflect my views. It was not my intention to cause any offence to EU nationals who are legally entitled to live in Ireland and who have contributed much to this country. I apologise if I have done so and I unreservedly withdraw my initial remarks. In my comments on foreign nationals receiving social welfare payments, I was specifically referring to those individuals who travel to Ireland with ... the aim of taking advantage of our social welfare system. I am conscious of the thousands of foreign nationals who are living and working in Limerick who have made our city their home. I wish to acknowledge, as Mayor of Limerick, the huge contribution in an economic, cultural and social sense and that these people have made to the city and my comments were in no way attributed to them. My comments were also not in reference to foreign nationals who have become unemployed and are actively seeking work in Ireland ... I hope this clarifies my statement and I will be making no further comment on the matter (*Limerick Leader*, 12 November 2009).

However, in an article published the same day, the Mayor reproduces a modified version of his original assertions:

I still am of the opinion and so are others that have approached me in recent days, that there is abuse of the Irish social welfare system. But in seeking to highlight this I inadvertently caused offence to others, which I very much regret (*Limerick Leader*, 12 November 2009).

In the same article the Mayor’s proposals are rejected by MEP Alan Kelly (Labour):

I find those comments outrageous, for a Mayor of a city like Limerick which has always been welcoming to people to come out with comments like that is absolutely outrageous (*Limerick Leader*, 12 November 2009).

and by then Minister of Defence Willie O’Dea (Fianna Fáil):

The thing about it is, there is free movement in the EU. We can go to other members states in the EU and they can come here. That’s the law. There is no need for the mayor to resign. He’s entitled to his opinion like everybody else (*Limerick Leader*, 12 November 2009).

A third article published that day, reproduces the modified version of the Mayor’s proposal:

The people I am talking about are the people who are abusing our lucrative social welfare system and who are flying in here from EU countries and who have no interest in obtaining employment here. I have no issue with those who have been in this country for a number of years and who are entitled to claim benefits (*Limerick Leader*, 12 November 2009).

The mayor's 'revised' position problematises welfare fraud by EU nationals exclusively. It repeats the assertion made by Cllr Galvin that EU nationals are flying in to claim social welfare without the provision of authoritative empirical data to support the existence or scale of this phenomenon. The above article also reproduces MEP Alan Kelly's call for Mayor Kiely's resignation. A *Limerick Post* article of 14 November 2009 also reproduces this call:

The country is in economic turmoil at the moment and we as policy makers have a responsibility to come up with solutions, but racist comments like this have no place in the discourse and I believe councillor Kiely should now resign.

In our analysis we detected an almost complete lack of political leadership. An article published in the *Limerick Leader* on 17 November 2009, which records the withdrawal of an invitation to the Mayor to open a Polish festival in Limerick, also cites Fine Gael Leader Enda Kenny's response to Mayor Kiely's comments, in which he stated that the Mayor 'has been big enough and strong enough to withdraw this unreservedly and there the matter ends' (*Limerick Leader*, 17 November 2009).

Only four months after Cllr Long's controversial statements, Deputy Kenny exhibits a similar *laissez faire* response to Mayor Kiely's statements. In the above examples we see evidence of the Othering of immigrants on the part of some politicians and a weak response from their party leadership (and many of their fellow politicians) to these discourses. Although Enda Kenny is held to have sought to stimulate debate on immigration during the 2007 general election (Smith, 2008), in the comments above dating from 2009 he fails to politicise the issue either by adopting a firm stance in condemnation or support of his party members' statements. Recently, a similarly weak response from the Fine Gael leadership was evident in how they dealt with Kildare councillor, Darren Scully, who stated he would not represent black Africans (see Titley, 2011).

Yet weak responses to exclusionary statements are by no means exclusive to Fine Gael. Despite the ratification of an anti-racism protocol in advance of the 2002 general election, a Fianna Fáil candidate (Noel O'Flynn) who was accused of having exacerbated anti-asylum seeker sentiment as part of his campaign was not sanctioned by his party leadership (Fanning and Mutwarasibo, 2007).

Writing prior to the recession, Julie Smith (2008) raised the question of whether immigration to Ireland would become a politically charged issue in leaner times. The local Limerick elections of 2009 suggest that immigration is increasingly likely to be politicised in a recessionary period, following the trend predicted by researchers in this field. Accordingly, the potential of party leaders to ensure that the ensuing debate is reasoned and informed becomes all the more important.

Conclusions

As we have demonstrated in this article, recessionary times have the potential to see migrant groups being scapegoated for the economic downturn. Thus, political leadership on the matter of immigration is of crucial importance. Our article contributes to these debates by examining how politicians construct non-Irish EU immigrants to Ireland.

We have demonstrated that some representatives of mainstream parties contribute to a discourse whereby migrants are constructed as fraudulent and as burdens on the economy. Drawing on theories that link anti-immigrant hostility to perceptions of resource competition (McLaren and Johnson, 2004; Blumer, 1958; Quillian, 1995; Espenshade and Hempstead, 1996), we have shown that these political constructions of EU migrants reflect a neoliberal understanding of citizenship, which prioritises the economic citizen.

We hold that the construction of migrants in this way in political commentary has the potential to ultimately have a detrimental impact on how immigrants and their needs are publicly perceived and treated.

AUTHOR

Martin J. Power is a lecturer in Sociology at the University of Limerick. His research interests include the social aspect of urban regeneration, migration, and inequality and social exclusion.

Amanda Haynes is a Lecturer in Sociology at UL. Her research interests centre on the analysis of discursive constructions as processes of exclusion and strategies for inclusion. She has published on media representations of immigrants in such journals as *Translocations*; *International Journal of Critical Psychology* and *Etudes Irlandaises*.

Dr. Eoin Devereux is Senior Lecturer in Sociology at UL. His most recent publication is the co-edited collection (with Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power) *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities* (Intellect Books, 2011).

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