

**Explaining EU migrant workers:
Irish political interventions in public discourse.**

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Introduction

Since the expansion of the European Union Ireland has experienced a significant increase in the proportion of immigrants from EU states (Quinn 2010). Between 2002 and 2006 the fastest growing category apart from Irish or UK nationals, were EU nationals (6.6% of the population). Polish nationals numbered 63,300 while the number of Lithuanian nationals was 24,600 (CSO Census 2006). This trend continued in the period to 2009: “Between 2005 and 2009 an average of 44 per cent of the immigration flow and 54 per cent of the non-Irish immigration flow has been made up of nationals of EU States that acceded in 2004 together with Romania and Bulgaria which acceded in 2006” (Quinn 2010, 3). The 2006 Census showed that Dublin South City had the highest concentration of foreign-nationals anywhere in the state, with the figure standing at 18.7% of the total population. Of this figure, 9.3% were EU citizens.

Immigrants to Ireland, including EU nationals, often find themselves concentrated in the lowest paid and lowest grades of employment. In some cases, they are subject to exploitation on the part of employers who deny them access to the full rights to which they are entitled both as EU nationals and Irish residents. Despite these circumstances, migrant workers have nonetheless faced pockets of popular resistance to their presence; they have in some cases been characterised as undercutting and displacing Irish workers for example. In this chapter we discuss the manner in which Irish politicians have framed EU migrant workers for the Irish public, focusing in particular on their experiences of their position in and contribution to the economy and their social welfare entitlements. We deconstruct politicians’ contributions to public discourse by analysing the content of their statements in the print media, rather than through government or party press releases. This decision 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.

The data and conclusions discussed in this chapter are drawn from a larger research study of Irish politicians’ statements regarding EU migrants living in Ireland, which was funded by Doras Luimini, a migrant support service based in Limerick City in the mid-west of Ireland. The methodology employed adopted a content analysis strategy. Specifically, we

undertook a qualitative content analysis of statements published over a two year period. Print media content was sampled¹ from three newspapers - a national Broadsheet (Irish Independent) and two local imprints (The Limerick Leader and The Limerick Post). The Irish Independent was chosen as the national newspaper with the highest circulation figures within the period of the study. The time period within which we selected articles was 01/01/08 – 31/12/09. 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.

Articles which met the sampling criteria were subjected to qualitative content analysis. Content analysis can be defined as “... a research technique for making valid and replicable inferences from texts ... to the contexts of their use” (Krippendorff 2004, 18). Content 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 to which meaning will be inferred.

We have endeavoured to identify the constructions which politicians contribute to public discourse regarding EU migrants and any misinformation in the content of their statements. We have restricted our analysis to the statements attributed to politicians and excluded the journalists interpretations of these statements from our analysis. As a consequence of this process of data analysis, nine key themes² were identified (see Haynes et al. 2010 for a full overview). In this chapter we present the results of this analysis relating to discourse on the exploitation of Transnational EU migrant workers.

Ireland’s migrant population

Prior to the start of the global economic crisis in 2008 migration became an increasingly important political issue in the wider context of social and economic change, with policy debate focused on a number of propositions. Firstly, that replacement migration was needed to meet demographic shortfalls and provide for an ageing population, and secondly, that immigration was an engine of economic growth in what had become a competitive global skills market. In this regard immigration was seen as a ‘brain gain’ and a way to avoid labour and skill shortages, contributing to economic growth and slowing wage inflation in the process.

Ireland experienced strong economic growth from the later part of the 1990s up to the middle of the 2000s, with the number in employment almost doubling to 2.1 million in 2007. Furthermore, the rate of unemployment dropped to approximately 4.5 per cent in 2007. The openness of Ireland's economy in 2007 was reflected in strong migratory flows and high levels of foreign direct investment. In fact, in that year net inward migration stood at over 67,000 people (Economic and Social Research Institute 2010). In 2007, labour force participation rates were up to 80% for migrants, compared to a national participation rate of 64.5%, and in 2008 foreign-nationals comprised 16% of the labour force (FAS 2009). Migrant workers tended to be concentrated in the areas of Hotels and Restaurants, Wholesale / Retail, Manufacturing, Financial services and Health (Awad 2009). By the end of 2006 displacement of indigenous workers was still not a major or widespread phenomenon, however FÁS, The Irish National Training and Employment Authority, (2007, 7) warned that "displacement could become an issue for low-skill workers should there be an economic slowdown. Much would depend, in such circumstances, on the extent to which immigration to Ireland fell rapidly and existing foreign nationals returned home."

Economic growth slowed in the second half of 2007 with Ireland eventually moving into a recession, which deepened in 2009. This economic collapse manifested itself in the labour market, the numbers on the Live Register increasing by 70% in 2008 while the average rate of unemployment for 2009 is estimated to have reached almost 12 per cent (Economic and Social Research Institute 2010). The construction, retail, hotel and restaurant sectors, which had particularly high concentrations of migrant labour, experienced a significant decline. Accordingly there was acceleration in the rate of unemployment among immigrants for much of 2008, especially among accession state nationals, exceeding the rate of decline among natives (Barrett 2009).

The economic downturn would also appear to have had a major impact on the migration patterns of EU nationals to and from Ireland in 2008 / 2009. Of the 65,100 emigrating from the state between April 2008 and April 2009, EU12 nationals were by far the largest group. Additionally, immigration to Ireland from the EU12 countries manifested the largest fall of any group (from 33,700 to 13,500) between April 2008 and April 2009 (CSO 2009, 1). Yet, a significant proportion of immigrants appeared to remain in Ireland despite the decline in economic fortunes (Barrett 2009).

The economic downturn saw the public finances rapidly move into deficit. The situation worsened throughout 2008 and the general government deficit reached 14% of GDP in 2009. It was estimated that the level of national debt may have exceeded 41 per cent of GDP in 2009,

up from 12 per cent in 2007 (Economic and Social Research Institute 2010). Experts expressed concern that this vastly changed situation in the economy might negatively impact attitudes to immigrants (Barrett 2009).

The importance of political leadership

In this economic and social context, political leadership on the matter of immigration is of crucial importance. This is because 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. If all political parties and political elites are supportive of a particular policy, it may well result in “politically aware individuals ... incorporating these preferences into their own belief systems” (McLaren 2001, 87). With a more differentiated spectrum of political positions, individuals have a choice to align with the party advocating policies most in agreement with their own ideological convictions (McLaren 201, 87).

Some commentators would argue that political parties' are often merely ‘conduits of public opinion’. But political parties are substantially more than conduits; structuring as well as reflecting voter opinion (see for example Lens 2002). Political parties are ultimately composed of a hierarchy of ideological individuals (Bale 2008, 453). Thus, if political elites and political parties play a key role in creating public attitudes, it is important to investigate the discourses constructed in relation to migration (McLaren 2001, 88).

International literature suggests that immigration poses a more severe challenge for the centre-right than for the left. In general, parties of the left have tended to be supportive of immigration and immigrants as they are viewed as additional working-class electoral support. 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 disaffecting their “identity wing” who are concerned about national identity (Tichenor 2002, 169 – 175 cited in Schain 2008, 467–468).

Politicians Explaining Migrant Workers

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.'

Framing Migrant Labour Exploitation in Ireland

It is crucial that strong regulations are in place to ensure that employers comply with labour legislation so as to avoid the exploitation of workers (FÁS 2006, 7). In an Irish context, the key pieces of equality legislation are the Employment Equality Acts, 1998 and 2004 and the Equal Status Acts, 2000 and 2004. These Acts proscribe discrimination in employment, vocational training, advertising, collective agreements, the provision of goods and services etc. on nine distinct grounds: gender; marital status; family status; age; disability; race; sexual orientation; religious belief; and membership of the Traveller Community. Yet, research indicates that public perception of resource competition promotes negative attitudes towards immigrants (Semyonov *et al* 2008; Coenders *et al* 2005)³, particularly in times of recession. J.J. Lee (1989) asserts that the Irish have historically tended precisely towards such perceptions, viewing economic prosperity in particular as a 'zero sum' game, in which others' betterment necessarily equates to the worsening of one's own fortunes and vice versa. In such contexts, the role played by our political leaders (and the media) is of paramount importance, particularly in the context that these groups have the power to define our social world and subsequently "impose a framework within which migrants are perceived" (O' Donoghue 2010).

In examining the sample of articles only three contained relevant statements highlighting discrimination against EU nationals with regards to pay, all published in the Irish Independent. Statements concerning EU migrants on this theme were made by individuals from across the political spectrum including Fine Gael's Denis Naughten, Fianna Fáil's Dara Calleary and Councillor Jimmy Mulroy, Sinn Fein's Kevin Meenan, Joe Higgins and Clare Daly of the Socialist Party, and Labour's Joe Costello.

In August 2009, Fine Gael's immigration spokesperson Denis Naughten was named in an article criticizing a shortfall in the number of National Employment Rights Authority (NERA) inspectors. Deputy Naughten is cited as highlighting the exploitation of transnational migrant workers and is quoted publicly critiquing the government's enforcement of labour law in this regard:

“Fine Gael immigration spokesman Denis Naughten said cowboy companies were breaking the law by paying less than the agreed minimum wage rates to migrant workers in particular.” The Government is refusing to enforce the law and both Irish workers and migrant workers are paying the price,” he said. Mr Naughten pointed to examples in the construction industry where Irish workers were let go and replaced by migrant workers at much lower rates. “Some have hit national prominence such as the treatment of Gama construction workers from Turkey and the Polish workers at the ESB station in Moneypoint, Co Clare,” he said. ... Mr Naughten said it was time for companies who exploited workers to be “weeded out”. “The only way that this can be effectively eradicated is by putting in place a stringent inspection system,” he said.” (Irish Independent 24th August 2009)

In the same article then Junior Minister for Labour Affairs Dara Calleary is cited as defending the adequacy of the governments’ response to the exploitation of workers and placing the responsibility on individuals to report cases of exploitation:

“Junior Minister for Labour Affairs Dara Calleary called on people to complain to NERA if they were aware of cases where migrant workers were being exploited.”I’m happy there is enough protection in place. We have inspectors who have a key knowledge of the migrant sector, so we are responding to the challenge.” (Irish Independent 24th August 2009).

The statements of both representatives highlight the need to address exploitation of migrant workers, although they evaluate the efficacy of the government’s record in this regard very differently. The comments attributed to Junior Minister Calleary reflect a process of individuating responsibility which Gilbert (2002) associates with a broader rolling back of the State. It is important to recognise that provisions to protect the vulnerable, which depend on individuals reporting discrimination, are limited by the power differentials between the individual and the person or organisation against whom they wish to make a complaint. Particularly in the case of exploited migrant workers, it may be very difficult for them to submit a complaint, given fears of the loss of employment (see Primetime Investigates, RTE Television 2008). The Migrant Integration Policy Index acknowledges the importance of Ireland’s Equality Authority’s remit with regards to instigating investigations of discriminatory practises and providing legal advice to victims, but criticises the State’s policy of denying aid to individuals taking equality-related cases (Niessen, Huddleston and Citron 2007, 96).

In 2007, The Migrant Integration Policy Index criticised the Irish State for off-loading its responsibilities in leading public discourse regarding anti-discrimination onto the then (increasingly poorly resourced) Equality Authority (Niessen, Huddleston and Citron 2007, 96). The comments attributed to Deputy Naughten highlight the significant role that opposition politicians can (but in this sample infrequently do) play in stimulating public awareness of issues impacting immigrant workers and, perhaps more significantly, in providing a critical voice regarding the State's response to the needs of immigrants, although the content of the comments are also reflective of Smith's (2008, 415) assertion that "Fine Gael has primarily criticised the way the government implements its policies rather than showing any fundamental difference over substance".

An article dating from February 19th 2008 provides a starkly contrasting illustration of the use to which politicians may put their public platform. In an article entitled 'FF councillor is branded absurd over call to pay foreigners less', then Chairman of Louth County Council (2007-2008), Councillor Jimmy Mulroy, is cited as advocating differential pay for migrant workers in response to a motion by Sinn Fein Councillor Jim Loughran that the government should include the principle of equal treatment in any legislation relating to agency workers⁴:

"In a debate on the abuse of workers by some employment agencies, he said that while Irish people, "need 12.50 an hour, people from Lithuania are doing very well on 8.50 an hour." ... Speaking after the council meeting, Cllr Mulroy defended his remarks, arguing that many migrant workers were "very happy with 10 an hour", which could be equivalent to a month's wages in their home country. While acknowledging that his remarks would probably "hit the headlines", the councillor -- who runs an electrical contracting business -- stood by the remarks." (Irish Independent 19th February 2008)

The article records that the Councillor's political party disassociated itself from his remarks. As well as referring to Councillor Loughran's proposal, which highlights both the exploitation of agency workers and the government's responsibility in regard to same, the article also records that during the debate Cllr Kevin Meenan (Sinn Fein) challenged the framework of understanding proffered by Councillor Mulroy stating that immigrant workers "do not fly home at night. If they live and work here they should get the same money (as Irish workers)" (Irish Independent 19th February 2008).

The minutes of the Council meeting, which do not record Councillor Meenan's remarks, do note that Councillor Loughran's motion was seconded by Councillor D.

Breathnach and agreed by the members (Minute No. 31/08, Minutes of Council Meeting of Louth County Council held in County Hall, Dundalk on Monday 18th February, 2008).

A third article, dating from the 8th of September 2009 and relating to the Lisbon Treaty Referendum (2) debate further illustrates that divergent frameworks of understanding regarding migrant workers may be deployed in service of a wider ideological arguments. In an article entitled 'Punish State with 'No' vote, Higgins urges', Socialist Party MEP for Dublin Joe Higgins is quoted as stating that:

“To ratify Lisbon would copperfasten the right of business to exploit migrant workers and enforce wages and conditions a way inferior to accepted norms in particular member states of the European Union. “This happens because the Lisbon Treaty institutionalises the rulings of the European Court of Justice, which endorsed the actions of foreign contractors in importing workers from one member state to another and seriously breaching the agreed rates of pay and various protections for such workers,” Mr Higgins added.” (Irish Independent 8th September 2009).

In the same article, Socialist Party Councillor Clare Daly is quoted as stating that:

“... voting 'No' on October 2 would not "move things forward" but would "strongly refute the argument of the 'Yes' side that claims workers' rights would be protected” (Irish Independent 08th September 2009).

while Deputy Joe Costello (Labour, then Spokesperson for European Affairs and Human rights) is cited as having:

“... rebutted minimum wage claims last night. He said the minimum wage in Ireland "is our own business" and a 'Yes' result would strengthen workers' rights and protect jobs.” (Irish Independent 08th September 2009).

The Socialist Party representatives and Deputy Costello demonstrate that vigorous debates regarding appropriate frameworks of understanding do not require either side in the debate to adopt an anti-immigrant stance. However, this was not always the case in relation to the Lisbon Treaty debate and some stakeholders did seek to frame immigration as a threat to the Irish citizenry (Migrant Rights Centre 2010).

Political Constructions of Migrants' Relationship to the Welfare State

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 welfare legislation, which affected all applicants regardless of nationality. 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: ... 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).

Discussion

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 Henkens, 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).

Considine and Dukelow (2010, 412) assert that Irish immigration policy “is primarily concerned with border control and law and order, including the regulation of migrants’ movement in and out of the state, and their residence within the state”. While there may be little support for groups who could be classified as being on the far-right of the political spectrum in Ireland, Lentin & McVeigh (2006) demonstrate that the Immigration Control Platform (ICP)⁵ for example made distinctions between immigration from different places, which when combined with language which portrayed “immigration as invasion”, served to construct mainstream discourse on immigration in terms of its problematisation. In such a context, the ICP played a prominent role in creating a discourse where “Irishness [was] ... politically racialized”, through a language calling for the defence of Irish “heritage, citizenship and resources against claims of un-assimilable Others” (Garner (2007, 117). Smith (2008, 528) argues that nonetheless, immigration was not really a highly politicised issue in Ireland prior to 2007 and that centre-right parties saw 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. But the first signs

of economic contraction saw concerns being expressed by Trade Unions in particular that migrant workers would displace Irish workers (Smith 2008, 427).

Despite widespread avoidance of participation in an ideological debate on immigration, we do however find moments in which particular issues are politicised in temporally and sometimes geographically localised ways. Statements regarding exploitation of migrant workers and the social welfare entitlements of immigrants evidence this phenomenon. While, at a national level, the positions adopted in such debates are more likely to be expressed by party spokespersons on immigration (although rarely party leaders themselves in the statements in our sample), contributions on such issues by individuals without a party brief are prevalent in national (and also local) debates. In the absence of the guidance provided by a clear party line, members may disseminate statements which are ill-informed, anti-immigrant or which their parties would not support. Where parties fail to publicly and effectively censure such claims or proposals, we argue that they effectively give them credence. In our sample, there are examples of such failures; equally there are instances of political parties actively disassociating themselves from the comments of candidates who adopt positions which their parties choose not to support. However, to be fully effective, we argue that such acts of disassociation should include, not merely the rejection of one position, but also a clear statement of the alternative position which the party does support. Research indicates extensive misinformation and confusion among the public regarding immigration (Haynes, Devereux and Breen 2009). Political leadership therefore requires that parties counter misinformation with accurate data *and* provide their membership and the public with the alternative frameworks of understanding to interpret the meaning and significance of same.

Conclusion

This analysis finds that at the commencement of Ireland's great recession, politicians' on all sides of the spectrum are not adverse to perpetuating framing of migrant workers as an economic threat. Although politicians of the left are more likely to support migrant rights, representatives of all mainstream parties contributed directly to a discourse whereby migrants are constructed as a burden on the economy and/or as fraudulent. While comments from politicians in relation to the economy primarily focussed on the possibility of tensions developing between Irish and immigrant workers in the competition for jobs as unemployment grew, and the cost of social welfare payments to unemployed foreign workers, there were a number of important omissions from this debate. Firstly, we found an absence of statements from politicians explaining unemployed foreign workers' social welfare entitlements to the

media audience. Secondly there was little discussion of the fact that between April 2008 and April 2009, EU12 nationals were by far the largest group emigrating from the state, and immigration to Ireland from the EU12 countries evidenced the largest decline of any group, dropping from 33,700 to 13,500 (CSO 2009, 1). Almost all of the politicians' statements on the issue of welfare were concerned with welfare fraud. Yet, our analysis does not suggest that politicians used their media platform to explain to the public either the Habitual Residence Condition (HRC) or the manner in which Irish emigrants in other EU countries benefit from entitlements similar to those enjoyed by EU citizens here. Our sample indicates that neither did the existence of evidence that rules governing the HRC were being applied inconsistently (Smith 2010) attain a high profile as the result of political statements. The low profile of these issues in political commentary contributes to their low visibility in public debate, impacting on citizens' awareness of these issues and may ultimately impact detrimentally on how immigrants and their needs are publicly perceived and treated.

It is important to note this negative space in Irish public discourse regarding migration. While many of the statements made by politicians in this recessionary period were not overtly negative, neither did many explicitly champion migrant workers' rights or communicate their experiences and perspectives. Indeed, the majority of 'pro-migrant' statements were framed as rebuttals of anti-immigrant claims and positions rather than as agenda-setting frameworks of understanding in their own right. A defensive rebuttal of negative framings may in fact serve to reinforce, rather than undermine, their perceived salience and is arguably a weak substitute for providing alternative frameworks of understanding (Hajer and Versteeg 2009).

There is a danger that in pursuing this course, pro-migrant politicians will at best become ensnared in a reactive approach whereby the course of the debate is set by the problematisation of the issue and at worst will leave the field for alternative frameworks of understanding open to anti-immigration actors.

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¹ We began by searching both Nexis Lexis and the proprietary archive of the Limerick Leader for the following terms: 'Immigration', 'Immigrant', 'Migrant', 'Foreigner', 'Foreign National', 'Non-National', 'Non-Citizen', 'Newcomer', 'Nomad'. 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 2008-2009, we do assert that, by focusing on two Limerick imprints and the most widely circulated national newspaper, our strategy has identified the highest profile statements and those that reached the widest audience in that period, in our geographical areas of interest (Limerick and nationally).

² The Irish economy, social welfare fraud (see Power et al. 2012), marriages of convenience, education, road safety, crime (including trafficking), racism & discrimination, The exploitation of migrant workers and political, social and cultural integration.

³ Although Esses et al (2001, 394) clarify that the resources in question need not be exclusively economic and that perceived competition for social, cultural and political privilege are also factors in negative attitudes towards immigrants.

⁴ The complete text of the motion: "This Council notes the increase in agency employment throughout the economy; We are aware that many workers from home and abroad are offered agency employment when they are seeking direct and permanent employment. We understand trade unions have raised concerns that many of these workers are retained on minimum

conditions and in some instances are not receiving all their entitlements. Agency employment should not be used as an unnecessary substitute for direct employment or as a mechanism for avoidance of, or undermining of fair pay and conditions. Noting that legislation will come before the Oireachtas on the issue of Agency Employment, this Council believes and will recommend to the Minister, that the principle of equal treatment should be included in any such legislation on this issue”. (Minute No. 31/08, Minutes of Council Meeting of Louth County Council held in County Hall, Dundalk on Monday 18th February, 2008. [http://www.louthcoco.ie/en/Louth County Council/Minutes of Statutory Meetings/2008/Council-Meeting-Minutes-February-2008.doc](http://www.louthcoco.ie/en/Louth%20County%20Council/Minutes%20of%20Statutory%20Meetings/2008/Council-Meeting-Minutes-February-2008.doc))

⁵ The ICP first emerged prior to the 2002 general election in Ireland.