

**Racist and anti-immigrant violence: how can it be prevented?** by Dr Ben Whitham, SOAS University of London (19<sup>th</sup> August 2024)

**Serious racist and anti-immigrant violence spread across England and Northern Ireland in late July and early August 2024.** This included attempts to burn hotels housing asylum seekers, attacks on mosques, and many attacks on the homes, businesses, and bodies of racially minoritised people. While [social media misinformation](#) spread by far-right agitators undoubtedly played a key role, **parliamentary and news media rhetoric also bears some responsibility for this violence.** This makes [legislative solutions like the Online Safety Act inadequate to prevent such violence.](#)

In recent years, small-boat migration across the English Channel has been the subject of increasingly intense [media](#) and parliamentary scrutiny. Hansard-recorded parliamentary references to small boats increased from 21 in 2019 to 630 in 2023 (a 2900% increase over four years). **There was a 110% increase in parliamentary references to small boats from 2022 to 2023 alone, despite a 37% decrease in people making the journey across the Channel in the same period.**

[Politicians and media](#) have fixated on a national '[small boats crisis](#)', '[small boats nightmare](#)' and '[the small boats problem](#)'. The previous government made '[stop the boats](#)' its slogan and **most prominent policy pledge:** it was displayed on the prime minister's lecterns during official addresses to the public and was subsequently chanted and displayed on banners during the recent violence. **This has created a national sense that this is the most urgent political issue of our time, and that migrants landing on the south coast represent an existential crisis and a threat to the UK's 'way of life'.**

**Parliamentarians and media have contributed to the tone of denigration and dehumanisation of small-boat migrants.** While [earlier dehumanising political and media narratives](#) referred to a '[swarm of migrants](#)' and portrayed them as '[cockroaches](#)', more recent debate has framed small-boat migrants as deceitful, '[illegal](#)' or '[criminal](#)' [invaders who](#) threaten national security and identity. Some parliamentarians allege the presence of '[murderers and rapists](#)' among those arriving on the south coast; other interventions focus on alleged deceit around age, family membership, and asylum need.

**There has been a particular focus in both [media](#) and [parliamentary debate](#) on the use of hotel accommodation to house asylum seekers in this context.** Despite extensive [evidence to the contrary](#), [politicians](#) and journalists have implied that this means small-boat migrants and asylum seekers are living a life of [excessive luxury](#) in the UK, exploiting British generosity in a period of scarcity.

**The fact that many people crossing the Channel by small boat in recent years come from majority-Muslim countries has been exploited in [political debate](#), fuelling already [well-established Islamophobic anxieties](#) about Muslim migration being part of a racial population 'replacement'.** This angst is a popular white supremacist conspiracy theory, which has been [cited by far-right terrorists carrying out Islamophobic massacres](#). Yet, alongside its twin Islamophobic anxiety of all Muslims being potential terrorists, it feeds the [racist fantasy of a 'Muslim Problem' in the UK.](#)

**To reduce the likelihood of continued far-right violence targeting people perceived to be migrants or Muslims (including racially minoritised people in general) and asylum seekers in hotels, parliamentarians should re-assess the language used around small-boat migration, the centrality of this issue to our national politics, and the adequacy of media regulation.**

**To find [more humane policy solutions](#) to dangerous channel crossings, asylum backlogs and hotel accommodation, and the prevalence of Islamophobic and anti-migrant narratives, government should urgently convene and consult people with [pertinent expertise](#) and [lived experience](#).**