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Disciplining or Signaling?

The Uses of Targets in UK Immigration and Asylum Policy

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1. Introduction

Targets have become an increasingly important component of governance and public sector management across OECD countries. Mainstream public administration literature depicts them as management tools, designed to improve the performance of public services through their 'disciplining' function. Yet targets and indicators also have an important symbolic function: they can be adopted to signal commitment to, and underscore achievement of, a range of political or organizational goals. This dual function implies that targets can operate as 'boundary objects' (Star and Griesemer 1989), concepts that move between and are comprehensible to quite different social worlds – in this case, the world of party politics, and that of organizational management.

The existence of such a dual role was especially evident in the Labour administration's use of targets from 2000-2010. Indeed, the targets set as part of the government's Public Service Agreements, as well as numerous other targets developed within government departments and No.10, can be seen as an experiment in attempting to marry two distinct objectives: the goal of galvanising organizational action to implement ambitious reforms; and that of securing public support for the Labour administration through demonstrating its ability to deliver improved public services. This coupling of objectives was epitomized in the role of the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit, which unremittingly drove forward departmental performance to meet the 10 or so key targets that the PM saw as crucial for demonstrating the impact of Labour reforms to public services.

Yet *prima facie*, we might expect that this coupling of disciplining and signalling functions would create a number of organizational and political challenges. Targets that are designed to steer organizational behaviour may not be the best suited to serve as political signals about government performance. They may be couched in overly technical terms, or focus excessively on internal processes. Or they may involve a degree of 'stretch', making them risky to publicise in case they are

not achieved. On the other hand, targets adopted to convey a political commitment or demonstrate performance may not translate smoothly into operative goals that can feasibly be implemented within an organization. Political pressure may well galvanise action to try to meet high profile targets, but this will not necessarily result in genuine or sustainable organizational reform (Brunsson and March 1993), indeed it may engender various kinds of gaming (Hood 2006).

This paper explores the tensions between disciplining and signalling through examining the development and implementation of PSA targets in the area of UK immigration and asylum policy between 2000-2010. Immigration and asylum was a highly salient issue over this period, with concerns about irregular immigration and rising asylum applications receiving extensive media coverage. Labour was also keen to demonstrate its credentials as a party able and willing to exert robust control over immigration. This would suggest that targets might play an important signalling role, demonstrating the government was managing the problem. At the same time, the Home Office's Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND) – already notorious for its inefficiency – was widely acknowledged to be overwhelmed by the increased number of applications. Consecutive Home Secretaries – Jack Straw, David Blunkett, Charles Clarke, John Reid, Jacqi Smith – struggled to drive through various changes that would improve organizational performance. This might suggest the importance of targets as a tool for disciplining organizational behaviour. Immigration and asylum policy therefore provides a good case for exploring how the two functions of targets might be combined, and examining the types of tensions that emerged, and how they were handled (or mishandled).

The research was carried out as part of an ongoing ESRC project on the Politics of Monitoring (2013-16).¹ The paper draws on part of the data already collected for the project, namely: (1) 18 semi-structured interviews with officials, politicians and special advisors involved in immigration and asylum policy over this period (to be supplemented by a further six scheduled this Spring)²; (2) government documents (PSAs, Service Delivery Agreements, annual departmental reports and PSA reviews, press releases, websites); (3) evidence and reports from the Public Accounts, Public Administration, Treasury and Home Affairs select committees; and (4) political memoirs, diaries and autobiographies of senior politicians closely involved in immigration and asylum policy-making over that period.

The paper starts by providing some background on the use of PSA Targets under the Labour administrations of 1997-2010, showing how they sought to combine disciplining and signalling functions in what the science and technology studies literature would describe as “boundary objects”. Drawing on literature from public administration and organizational sociology, the paper then sets out some expectations about the sorts of problems or tensions that might emerge from trying to combine these two functions. In part three, I explore these expectations through looking at the case of immigration and asylum policy. Part four offers a discussion of the findings, tentatively

¹ The full title of the project is “The Politics of Monitoring: Information, Targets and Indicators in Climate Change, Defence and Immigration Policy”. As the title suggest, it actually looks at three case studies, the other two being climate change and defence procurement. For more information, visit: http://www.pol.ed.ac.uk/research/grants_and_projects/current_projects/politics_of_monitoring

² The project will involve carrying out a total of around 90 interviews across the three case studies; as well as quantitative data analysis of media and parliamentary debate on the three issues.

suggesting some broader ramifications for theorising the relationship between performance measurement and political legitimation.

2. PSA Targets

UK governments have been deploying targets on a large scale since the early 1980s, when the Thatcher administration rolled out a series of performance targets across sectors (Smith 1990; Carter 1991; Carter, Klein and Day 1992). This approach was reinforced after 1997 when a new Labour government came to power. In 1998 the government conducted a Comprehensive Spending Review, which introduced performance requirements for each government department. Each department was instructed to introduce a series of improvements and reforms to the way they delivered their services, in order to justify funding allocations. These targets were updated in 2000 with a more comprehensive set of Public Service Agreements (PSAs), which were more outcome oriented. The new PSAs set out for each major government department “its aim, objectives and the targets against which success will be measured” (Treasury 2000). A key component was the measurement and monitoring of delivery of these targets, through annual departmental reports. Each objective should have at least one target, which was “SMART”: specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and timed. PSAs were accompanied by Service Delivery Agreements, concluded between the Treasury and each department, which set out more specific, lower level targets and milestones to support delivery of the PSA performance targets.

From the outset, it was clear that targets had a dual function. The Treasury characterised the PSAs as “a major agenda to deliver *and demonstrate* change in the commissioning, management and delivery of public services” (Treasury 2002a: 13; emphasis added). The targets should be easily understandable by the public – not too technical, and jargon-free. In the words of the Treasury, “Departments were given a real incentive to drive up standards in public services and the public was given the opportunity to judge their performance” (ibid: 12).

This dual purpose of steering performance while also demonstrating improvement conforms with insights from the literature about targets and indicators as “boundary objects” (Star and Griesemer 1989; Turnhout 2009: 405). On the one hand, targets are adopted to enhance public sector performance, through what might be termed their “disciplining” function: they provide incentives for officials, elected politicians and other actors involved in formulating and implementing policy to improve their performance and ensure value for money. But at the same time, targets clearly have a range of other, more political, functions. They may be developed for symbolic reasons, to signal commitment to, and underscore achievement of, a range of political or organizational goals. Targets thus need to operate as management tools, providing relevant and practical guidance for steering policy; but at the same time, they need to resonate with – and often mitigate – public concerns about public service performance; and in some cases, they also need to signal to other audiences such as lobby groups, foreign governments or international organizations that the government is committed to a particular course of action.

Aside from this dual function of delivering and demonstrating improved public services, there were a number of formal or technical criteria that guided the selection of targets. For a start, targets needed to be monitored, and thus linked to indicators. The potential to measure and monitor

targets – and thus the use of performance indicators - was built into the very definition and selection of targets. Second, targets increasingly became focused on delivery, or outcomes. Outcomes were defined as the “ultimate results the Government seeks to achieve from its activities, and the activities of those it influences, in order to meet its objectives”. These were distinguished from outputs defined as the “immediate results of the activities of Government and its agencies”; and inputs, defined as “staff or physical resources required to deliver an output” (Treasury 2000). The House of Commons Treasury Committee, which monitors Treasury policy, calculated in 2000 that most of the targets under the 1998 PSA had been process targets (51%) or output targets (27%), with only 11% comprising outcome targets (House of Commons Treasury Committee 2000). It recommended that the new PSAs established in 2000 focus more on outcomes; and indeed the National Audit Office classified that 68% of the targets adopted in 2000 were as outcome targets (National Audit Office 2001: 1).

In short, the selection of targets and PIs was guided by two main goals: the managerial goal of disciplining behaviour to improve performance, and the political goal of signalling to key audiences that key objectives were being met. And targets also had to meet a number of formal requirements linked to measurement, and a focus on outcomes.

There were a number of perceived advantages to coupling organizational and political requirements in this way. For a start, adopting such a public target created intense pressure on departments to deliver. The Blair government was famously very frustrated at the lack of progress in driving through reform within the civil service during its first administration of 1997-2001 (Blair 2010; Campbell 1997). By setting prominent “stretch” targets, Blair and his close allies hoped to ratchet up the pressure on the ministers and senior officials involved in public service delivery. This was seen as especially important given the substantial increase in public investment across government over this period. At the same time, the government was confident – at least in the early days of the PSA targets – that visible improvements in performance would be rewarded by an increase in public confidence in the Labour administration. Targets would galvanise improved performance, while also creating a new way of measuring and publicising such improvement (Panchamia and Thomas 2014?). They would be a lever for driving through change in a way that would be monitored by the public. That, at least, was the theory.

In practice, literature on public administration and organizational studies would caution scepticism about this neat formula. Indeed, drawing on this literature we might expect tensions to emerge at two levels.

(1) The first concerns the relationship between targets and political legitimacy. Much of the literature on policy-making has emphasised how governments derive legitimacy largely from symbolic politics: rhetoric and cosmetic adjustments rather than actually steering social and economic systems (Edelman 1977; Gusfield 1981; Majone 1989). Yet in setting measurable targets, governments are effectively making assessment of their performance contingent on certain observable outcomes. And in so doing, they are limiting their scope for relying on symbolic adjustments to garner legitimacy. To paraphrase Scott and Meyer, they are shifting from institutional to technical modes of legitimation (Scott and Meyer 1991). There are, of course, potential advantages to moving from a symbolic to an outcome-oriented mode of legitimation. There is an immediate dividend of being seen to be locked into a measurable pledge, which might

signal greater commitment than just rhetoric alone. And clearly, if a government is successful in realising the target, then it might expect to be rewarded by public support. But of course, there is a risk is that further down the line the government will be unable to deliver, especially if the target is an ambitious “stretch” target.

(2) The political risks of targets are exacerbated by a second problem: that of the government’s capacity to steer its public administration. Where the government is seeking legitimacy through demonstrating outcomes, it will obviously need to achieve a related shift in organizational behaviour. The ministries charged with (overseeing) the delivery of targets will need to introduce a number of reforms to their structures and modes of operating. But five decades of studies in organizational sociology have taught us about the problems in attempting top-down reform, especially in public sector organizations. Reform driven by political goals and/or informed by modish ideas about good management frequently conflicts with the internal requirements of effective organizational action. Indeed, as Brunsson and March argue, the policy/ideas and action-oriented parts of organizations tend to be only very loosely connected, and display a limited understanding of one another (1993: 63). A reform plan that makes sense to the (political) management may show a lack of understanding of the structures and processes necessary for effective action. In many organizations in the public administration, this gap results in a “decoupling” between organizational talk and action (Brunsson 1991). Organizations adopt the trappings of the latest management fad because of pressures to conform to external norms about legitimate governance (Covaleski and Dirsmith 1991). But this ritual of conformity is accompanied by the retention of quite separate informal structures and routines. This form of decoupling has been noted in studies on the impact of new monitoring systems. For example, Taylor’s analysis of the use of key performance indicators (KPIs) in Australian public sector management found that organizations frequently go through the motions of producing KPIs for external consumption, but these KPIs do not drive or affect their day to day operations (Taylor 2009; see also Walshe, Harvey and Jas 2010 and Vakkuri 2010).

What is interesting about outcome-based targets, however, is that they limit the possibility of this form of decoupling as a way of reconciling internal and external pressures. The setting of public targets, as we saw, reduces the scope to “fob off” one’s audience with purely cosmetic adjustments. Something has to give. Unless the government is very lucky, either it will fail to meet the target; or the target will be met, but at a price. That price is likely to involve considerable investment in driving top-down change; most likely accompanied by various forms of gaming (Smith 1990, 1995; James 2004; Pidd 2005; Bevan and Hood 2006; Diefenbach 2009) and potentially traumatic confrontation between government and the civil service, as observed by Brunsson and March in the case of Thatcherite reform of the administration (Brunsson and March 1993: 30).

In what follows, we explore how far these types of tensions emerged through looking at the cases of targets on immigration control and climate change.

3. Immigration and Asylum

Asylum Applications

Targets on immigration and asylum were originally set as part of the 2000 Public Service Agreements between the Treasury and the Home Office. From the outset, two main considerations guided their development. The first was the spending round agreed with the Treasury. Home Office activities in asylum processing and removals benefited from a substantial injection of resources in the early 2000s, with investment rising from £357m in 1998-99 to around £1.6bn in 2001-02 (Home Office 2003). In return, the Home Office was required to demonstrate a corresponding improvement in performance in the area of asylum processing. This improvement was to be measured through meeting two targets: swifter processing of asylum applications, and an increase in removals of rejected asylum applicants. Both targets reflected concerns that the Home Office, and especially its Immigration and Nationality Directorate (IND), were failing to keep on top of rising asylum applications. The target system was somewhat reluctantly embraced by the Home Office, in the words of one official, as “a necessary evil for doing a deal.. with the Treasury” (Interview, Feb 2014). Seen from the perspective of Treasury oversight of Home Office expenditure, PSA targets operated as a management tool to drive and monitor organizational performance.

The focus on asylum targets was dictated by a second consideration: the political salience of the asylum problem in the early 2000s. Asylum applications rose significantly over this period, from under 50,000 in 1997 to over 90,000 in 2000 and 2001, peaking at 103,000 in 2002. Asylum was the object of what was perceived to be relentless negative media coverage. From around 2001, it became one of the top priorities for No.10 (Barber, 2007). So there were clear political reasons to focus on asylum, as opposed to other areas of immigration. And yet in 2001-2002 there was increasing frustration in No.10 that the PSA target on processing applications was poorly pitched. The target was not seen as sufficiently ambitious, as it focused on internal Home Office procedures, failing to incentivise a range of other measures that might help reduce applications. Nor did it send the right sort of political message about asylum control. As one former special advisor put it, “If you were worried about public concern about asylum the concern was about numbers. It wasn’t about, ‘oh, they’re not being dealt with quickly enough’” (Interview, Feb 2014). So while it was a sensible management target from the perspective of Home Office reform in the context of increased expenditure, it was not delivering as a political target.

The perceived deficiencies of the PSA target on asylum processing meant that it was largely bypassed as a key performance indicator in discussions between the Home Secretary and No.10 about how to improve performance. Instead, the focus of these discussions was on how to achieve an overall reduction in asylum applications. And there was a determination to use all possible levers – visa policy, border control, and various deterrent measures – to achieve this. Meanwhile, the process of reducing asylum numbers was subjected to full Delivery Unit treatment. The Delivery Unit had been set up in No.10 in 2001, under the leadership of Michael Barber, to drive delivery on the government’s top 10 or so targets. It exerted enormous influence on government departments, through its unique methodology of targets, trajectories, twice yearly traffic light reviews and monthly stocktakes with the Prime Minister. Every detail of how to steer behaviour to reach the target was subject to forensic analysis. Participants in these stocktakes recall sitting in meetings where the PM was poring over the minutiae of offshore processing and procuring travel

documentations. In the words of one official, the Delivery Unit was “all over what the IND was doing” (interview, Feb 2014).

No.10 involvement was to become even more serious. By January 2003, with asylum figures still rising, Blair proposed that asylum should be treated as what was termed in Delivery Unit jargon a “Level 3 emergency”, or “COBRA mode” (Barber 2007: 171). This was soon followed by a personal intervention by the Prime Minister: in February 2003 he announced on BBC television that the government would halve the number of asylum applications within a year. This so-called “Newsnight target” was set without any prior consultation with the Home Secretary or Home Office officials. Indeed, there was broad scepticism on the part of the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, and the IND board, about whether the target was feasible (Interview, Feb 2014; Pollard, 2005). As one official observed, it would have been nigh impossible to negotiate such a target with the Home Office, so “the PM just sort of bypassed that whole process” (Interview, Feb 2014).

The Newsnight target was very public, and placed the Home Office under even more intense pressure. As one commentator put it, “Everything became just geared to meeting this objective” (interview, 2007). And meet it they did. By 2003, annual asylum applications were back down to 60,000, and they continued to fall year on year to under 40,000 in 2008. By 2005 asylum numbers appeared to be under control. How far this outcome was a product of government intervention remains contested. The Home Office and No.10 narrative is that a concerted effort to stop entry into the UK – notably through visa requirements and better off-shore border control – was the main driver. Research comparing asylum trends across Europe and the US has suggested that these measures account for around one third of the reduction, with the main determinant being war and armed conflict in asylum sending countries (Hatton 2009). Asylum numbers were decreasing across most European countries over this period. And indeed, they were already starting to decline at the point Blair made his announcement. As one former Home Office official put it, “The slight cynic in me knows that Blair knew the number was on its way down anyway because he was getting very regular management information reports on what was happening to asylum applications, which were on the turn by that point” (Interview, Feb 2014).

The fall in asylum applications and the achievement of Blair’s Newsnight target was not greeted with the public recognition that the government felt it deserved. As one former special advisor put it: “the media never just reports the Government has delivered something, it never does you know. That’s not how it works. And I think that’s something that both Blunkett and Blair were very frustrated by” (Interview, Feb 2014). But it signalled the demotion of asylum from a Level 3 priority, and the end of such intensive Delivery Unit involvement. With the number of new applicants down, performance on removals now became the focus of attention, and was widely seen as lamentable. The failure to deport large numbers of rejected asylum seekers exposed the government to accusations that it did not have a grip on the asylum system.

Removals

As we saw, the first asylum PSA targets had included a goal of increasing the number of removals of failed asylum seekers. The 2002 Service Delivery Agreement had set the target at 30,000 removals by March 2003. But the Home Office was subsequently forced to admit this target was too ambitious (Home Office 2003: 23). In a scathing critique, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee noted that:

We are at a loss to understand the basis for the belief that a target of 30,000 removals a year was achievable, and ministerial pronouncements on the subject are obscure. It is surely not too much to expect that, if it is thought necessary to set targets for removals, they should be rational and achievable. (Home Affairs Committee 2003: 23)

In the new 2004 PSA, this target was adjusted from a specific numerical target back to a 'directional' target, i.e. to remove a greater proportion of failed asylum seekers in 2005/6 compared to the 2002/3. But the level of removals failed to budge, and even this more modest target looked unachievable by late 2004. Indeed there was general frustration within the Home Office and No.10 about lack of progress on removals. Home Office officials felt that they had very limited leverage on the issue, as many cases involved people who could not be removed because they did not have the necessary documentation and were not recognised as nationals by their countries of origin. No.10, meanwhile, felt that IND officials were making excuses, and were not using all possible levers to realise the target (Barber 2007).

Partly in an attempt to spur the IND to action, No.10 and the Home Office agreed on a new framing of the removals target in September 2004, the so-called "tipping point" target: that the number of removals should exceed the number of new asylum applications (Barber 2007: 229). While not introducing any new performance indicator (it was the ratio of applications to removals, both of which were already the object of targets), it articulated existing goals in a pithier, more catchy way. Again, it was an example of a politically driven target that was set outside of the PSA process. The tipping point target was reached in early 2006, as a result of declining applications.

In Spring 2006, the removals issue hit the media headlines in the context of the so-called foreign national prisoners scandal. In Autumn 2005 the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee (PAC) had begun to question Home Office officials about gaps in data concerning the number and profile of foreign nationals serving out sentences in prison in UK prisons. The implication was that hundreds of foreign nationals who had committed crimes in the UK had not been deported after their release from prison – a gift to the mass media. And as PAC member Richard Bacon pointed out, the scandal was "a microscope through which the wider problem of hundreds of thousands of failed asylum seekers wandering around the UK could be viewed" (Bacon and Hope 2013: 128). Figures produced by the Home Office in Spring 2006 estimated the number of "unresolved cases" – including rejected asylum seekers who had not been deported – as standing at 400-450,000.

The scandal prompted the resignation of then Home Secretary Charles Clarke, who was replaced by John Reid in May 2006. On assuming office, Reid very publicly announced that he was appalled at the poor management and information within the Home Office, which he declared was "not fit for purpose". Reid announced sweeping changes to the Home Office, including the creation of a new Border and Immigration Agency (subsequently UKBA) to replace the IND. He also declared that he would clear the asylum backlog in five years, by July 2011 – a target which was widely seen as unrealisable. As one official puts it, "There was a public commitment from John Reid to clear the backlog. That became a very high profile thing for the business that they had to be seen to deliver on" (Interview, Feb 2014).

The new 2007 PSA adjusted the asylum processing target to measure time taken to conclude cases, which implied a focus not just on initial decisions, but on whether rejected applicants were actually removed. This was widely seen as a more sensible indicator in terms of driving an increase in

removals, though it was set in a complicated and technical way, reducing its political usefulness. The time taken to conclude cases was to be incrementally reduced through a series of temporally staged targets. Thus there was an overarching target of concluding 90% of cases within 6 months, by December 2011. And then a series of “milestones towards this target”, with 24% to be concluded within 6 months by April 2007, 40% by December 2007, and so on. But most of the targets were not met; and nor was the 5-year backlog clearance target achieved. A 2009 report by the UKBA Independent Chief Inspector noted that both targets were unfeasible, and had been set without adequate consultation or understanding of case processing. Moreover, the completion target had led to widespread gaming (UKBA 2009).

By this time, though, asylum was no longer in the spotlight. The PSA targets on asylum processing and removals were functioning largely as management tools, used to improve organizational performance rather than to signal government achievements. Indeed, the whole apparatus was becoming increasingly technical and opaque. Departments had been instructed by the Treasury to reduce the number of targets for the 2007 PSA, but in the case of the Home Office, targets were simply rebranded as “indicators”. And many of these were subdivided into part (a) and (b). As a former special advisor noted, even select committee members were struggling to make sense of the system: “we had four and then we contributed to others, and then we had delivery agreements, and we had strategic objectives and everything else. And it became a very complicated architecture”. So while they remained useful for driving organizational behaviour, “in terms of having a wider audience in public, parliament, [their use was] pretty non-existent” (Interview, Feb 2014). So by the mid-2000s, “it had morphed ... into a more technocratic approach”, with less public resonance (Interview, Feb 2014). Thus targets as signalling devices in asylum had their heyday in the early 2000s; but by the second half of the decade, they were being more narrowly deployed as management tools.

4. Discussion

The targets developed by the Labour government in 2000-2010 were certainly devised as boundary objects, whose purpose was to steer organizational behaviour while demonstrating improved performance.. Yet the fate of asylum and removals targets suggests that even in their prime, targets were never able to couple disciplining and signalling functions in a satisfactory way. Three tensions between the two functions emerged as particularly problematic.

First, targets never achieved much resonance in public debate, a finding that echoes with some of the public administration literature on the limited impact of PSA targets on broader political scrutiny (Pollitt 2006; Johnson and Talbot 2007). Instead, senior political figures resorted to creating new targets outside of the PSA system to create more visible political signals. There is broad consensus that Blair’s unilateral political intervention through the Newsnight target had by far the most traction. Similarly, Reid’s backlog pledge was an influential political target, again set without any consultation or understanding of how it might be delivered. Meanwhile, the more managerial PSA targets – especially from the mid-2000s onwards – garnered far less political attention and became more technocratic organizational tools, largely foregoing their signalling role. Arguably, more carefully chosen PSA targets might have better served political goals. But there is no reason to

suppose that targets generated as part of an attempt to improve productivity could be formulated in a way that would be appealing or digestible to a broader public.

Thus in the case of asylum and immigration, at least, the government was unable to convince its various audiences of the efficacy of the target system as a means of monitoring performance. The media, political system and, we can infer, the general public, had their own way of observing and assessing how government was performing. The reluctance to take on board the government's preferred mode of monitoring may in part reflect a perception of Labour's all too slick spin machine. But it might also suggest a wider problem with attempts to measure performance through technocratic tools of measurement. Especially in policy areas characterised by more populist narratives, such as immigration and asylum, anecdote and focusing events may be more powerful in constructing policy problems and government performance than dry data and figures.

Secondly, we saw that when political leaders found the PSA targets wanting, they resorted to setting targets outside of the PSA structure. And these more political promises often involved setting ambitious targets. Yet as we discussed in section two of this paper, public-facing targets create a number of political risks for governments. Ambitious "stretch" targets in particular expose them to the danger of being seen to fail. The Blair government had a certain amount of luck in meeting the Newsnight target; but was less fortunate with removals and clearing the backlog. Yet even where it was able to meet targets, the government found that it was not politically rewarded. As one former advisor put it,

targets can be useful to help you get there and focus people's attention... Whether that helps you over here with what you say to the public and whether they actually believe you or not and whether they're going to vote for you again, those are two separate things in my book. I think there's a big distinction, because I think most people think, in politics, well if we show progress with certain things then that's going to translate into those, but it doesn't (Interview, Feb 2014)

This asymmetry in the political capital accruing from public targets was one of the reasons Labour retreated from their use as a signalling device. An initial enthusiasm for targets as a tool of legitimation was dampened by the dawning realisation that the media and other political actors simply were not interested in reporting on successes. There was no "air time" for broadcasting news about government achievement of targets.

Thirdly, we also saw that the attempt to conjoin signalling and disciplining functions created a number of organizational problems. This was especially the case where politically driven targets were set in a top-down manner, without due regard to organizational capacity. In line with the literature on decoupling, our study found that politically motivated targets tended to be based on a limited understanding of organizational action; indeed, in some cases they were based on aspiration, at best informed by a superficial reading of macro-trends. Such targets tended to treat the organization as a black box. While such top-down interventions certainly galvanised action, the changes they effected were arguably short-term, highly localised, and tended to produce a number of distortions. Thus the Newsnight target to halve asylum applications did produce a flurry of activity in the Home Office, largely effected through robust Delivery Unit intervention. But as Barber himself concedes, such No.10 driven interventions had a limited impact on wider organizational culture (Barber, 2007:). And in this case, the narrow focus on applications diverted attention from longer-term trends such as slow processing and rising backlogs which would subsequently undermine the credibility of the asylum system. In the case of Reid's legacy backlog target, as we saw the target was

never close to being met – indeed by October 2013, over two years on from the original target date, the backlog still stood at almost 34,000 (Home Affairs Committee 2013). The manner in which Reid set the target, combined with his scabrous attack on the organization, meanwhile left a serious dent in Home Office morale, contributing to problems with recruitment and retention (Boswell 2009). Thus some political targets either proved to be unfeasible. In other cases they were met, but largely by happenstance. And in yet other cases targets were driven through by quite intrusive and resource-intensive interventions. As expected, such interventions led to various kinds of distortions and gaming (as charted in the public administration literature), and arguably had rather limited influence on organizational processes and structures.

Conclusion

This article explored the tensions between two different uses of performance targets: their deployment to signal political commitment to particular goals, and their use as a lever to effect change in behaviour. It analysed these tensions in the case of targets in immigration and asylum policy under the Labour government between 2000-2010. Immigration and asylum presents an interesting case, as its political salience and the perceived inefficiency of the Home Office would imply that targets might be adopted to serve both disciplining and signalling functions.

The analysis did indeed find that targets were developed to serve both of these functions. However, it proved difficult to produce targets that fulfilled both functions simultaneously. The more managerial PSA targets that were designed to improve organizational efficiency proved inadequate as political signalling devices. While top-down political targets to halve asylum applications or eliminate the backlog of legacy cases were not informed by a realistic appraisal of organizational capacity to deliver these goals. Moreover, the use of highly visible and ambitious targets to signal robust action created political risks that were not offset by political rewards when targets were met. This partly explains the demise in the use of targets as political tools in immigration and asylum policy in the latter part of the decade.

More generally, the findings suggest that targets had limited success as an exercise in deriving political legitimacy. They failed to convince the public of improved performance, nor were they widely adopted (in the media or political debate) as a trusted tool for measuring government achievement. The effectiveness of targets as a means of driving through reform is more open to debate. When coupled with highly visible political targets, they certainly galvanised action; but the momentum was short-lived and produced various distortions. Perhaps the most successful use of targets was as a more low profile, technocratic management tool, with just enough transparency to motivate action; but foregoing the political signalling function that initially appeared so promising to the Labour administration.

The lesson from this one (albeit limited) case seems to be that there are good reasons to decouple disciplining and signalling functions in policy making. Talking about what you are (really) doing does not offer a sufficiently compelling narrative. While steering action on the basis of appealing rhetoric appears to create innumerable problems in public administration. This echoes Brunsson's insights about decoupling in organizations: as he puts it, "rituals and double talk are often important and even necessary ingredients in any modern organization that wants to act according to current

demands for rationality” (Brunsson 2002: 7). That said, combining the two in the form of high-profile targets can appear to bring immediate political dividends that outweigh the longer-term risks – the Home Office’s net migration target being a notable example. So despite their problems, we should expect such boundary objects to keep cropping up in political debate and policymaking.

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