

THE DOUBLE LIFE OF TARGETS IN PUBLIC POLICY: DISCIPLINING AND SIGNALLING IN UK ASYLUM POLICY

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Performance targets tend to be depicted as management tools, designed to improve public policy outcomes. Yet targets also have a symbolic function, signalling commitment to and underscoring achievement of political goals. This article explores the tension between these 'disciplining' and 'signalling' functions, looking at UK targets on asylum, 2000–10. Attempts to combine the two functions led to three types of problem: (1) technical targets designed to steer organizational performance lacked political resonance, prompting politicians to resort to top-down, political targets; (2) the imposition of unfeasible political targets created distortions in the organization, encouraging forms of gaming; and (3) the political risks of adopting stretch targets were not offset by the dividends of positive attention when targets were met: the government was unable to establish targets as the predominant mode of assessing its performance. The failed attempt to marry these functions suggests the need to decouple political and management targets in public administration.

INTRODUCTION

Targets have become an important component of governance and public sector management across OECD countries. The public administration literature depicts them as management tools, designed to improve the performance of public services through what we might term their 'disciplining' function (James 2004; Boyne and Law 2013). 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 public political contestation, and that of organizational management.

The existence of such a dual role was especially evident under the UK Labour government of 1997–2010. Indeed, the targets set as part of the government's new system of Public Service Agreements can be seen as an experiment in attempting to marry two distinct objectives: the goal of galvanizing 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 ten or so key targets that the Prime Minister 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 publicize because of the possibility of failing to achieve them. On the other

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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 galvanize action to try to meet high-profile targets, but this will not necessarily result in genuine or sustainable organizational reform (Brunsson and Olsen 1993); indeed it may engender various kinds of gaming (Hood 2006).

This article explores the tensions between disciplining and signalling through examining the development and implementation of targets in the area of UK immigration and asylum policy between 2000 and 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. The Labour government was also keen to demonstrate its credentials as being robust in controlling immigration and asylum. This would suggest that targets might play an important signalling role, demonstrating that the government was managing the problem. At the same time, the Home Office, the government department with responsibility for immigration and asylum, was widely acknowledged to be overwhelmed by the increased number of applications. Consecutive Home Secretaries 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, for examining the types of tensions that emerged, and how they were handled (or mishandled).

The research draws on a range of data, namely: 26 semi-structured interviews with officials, politicians, and special advisers involved in immigration and asylum policy over this period; government documents (Public Service Agreements (PSAs), Service Delivery Agreements, annual departmental reports, and PSA reviews); transcripts and reports from the Public Accounts, Public Administration, Treasury, and Home Affairs select committees; and political memoirs, diaries, and autobiographies of senior politicians closely involved in immigration and asylum policy-making over that period.

The article 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. Drawing on literature from public administration and organizational sociology, the article then sets out some expectations about the sorts of problems or tensions that might emerge from trying to combine these two functions. In the third section, I explore these expectations through looking at the case of immigration and asylum policy over the period 2000–10, when the government set out a number of targets on performance. The fourth section offers a discussion of the findings, tentatively suggesting some broader ramifications for theorizing the relationship between performance measurement and political legitimation.

TARGETS IN UK GOVERNMENT

UK governments have been deploying targets on a large scale since the early 1980s, when the Thatcher administration rolled out a series of performance indicators and targets across sectors (Smith 1990; Carter 1991; Carter *et al.* 1992). This trend was very much in line with the rise of New Public Management across many OECD countries, which involved forms of light-touch or arm's-length governance to steer policy-making and implementation in newly privatized areas of public service, or semi-autonomous government agencies (Hood 1991). One of the most important techniques for ensuring performance and accountability within this looser, decentralized structure was to monitor activity through measuring and

assessing performance. The 1980s and 1990s saw a huge increase in the use of tools such as audit, performance measurement (Talbot 1999), and targets as tools of managerial oversight. Under the Thatcher government this was accompanied by a concern to rein in public spending, hence an emphasis on the 'three E-s': economy, efficiency, and effectiveness (Carter 1991, p. 86).

The emphasis on monitoring was reinforced after 1997 following the election of a Labour government. In 1998 the government conducted a Comprehensive Spending Review, which introduced performance requirements for government departments. 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 comprehensive set of 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' (HM 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 (the UK's ministry of finance) and each department, which set out more specific, lower-level targets and milestones to support delivery of the PSA performance targets.

In contrast to the previous Conservative government's more cautious approach to targets (Flinders 2003), these new PSA targets were intended to drive tangible improvements in the delivery of public services. Many of the targets were therefore set as stretch targets, what Oliver James has referred to as a 'detector and effector tool' (James 2004). The 'effector' aspect reflected the confidence and ambition of the Blair administration (Barber 2007, pp. 81–82). As Michael Barber put it, 'nothing is inevitable: "rising tides" can be turned' (p. 193).

The prominent role of targets under the Labour administration has been much scrutinized in the literature on public administration. With a few exceptions (notably Boyne and Chen 2006), most studies have been critical of their impacts, in particular focusing on their distorting and unanticipated effects on public sector performance and policy-making (Hood and Peters 2004). Christopher Hood (2006) identifies three different types of gaming engendered by targets: ratchet effects, whereby managers artificially constrain performance so that they can subsequently demonstrate improvement; threshold effects, whereby those already performing at or above the target lack incentives to improve performance; and output distortion – that is, the manipulation of results to imply that targets have been met. He finds evidence of 'nontrivial amounts of gaming' of all three types, across multiple policy sectors in the UK (Hood 2006, pp. 516–17).

Similar types of gaming are observed in research by Oliver James, who shows how managers engage in blame shifting and blame avoidance to avert criticism or sanctions (James 2004). Other scholars have suggested that target systems narrow down political and organizational attention, diverting resources from other important goals (Boyne and Law 2013; Bevan and Hood 2006; Pidd 2005). This crowding-out effect is exacerbated by the need to focus on those goals that can be measured and monitored in the requisite way, with the implication that targets frequently capture only a small part of those processes or outputs that are important for public sector performance (Pidd 2005; Diefenbach 2009, pp. 899–900).

These contributions are important in assessing the effectiveness and suitability of targets as a tool of public sector management. The focus of this article, however, is on a

somewhat different question: the aptitude of targets in combining different objectives. Right from the outset it was clear that PSA targets had a dual function. The Treasury characterized the PSAs as 'a major agenda to deliver *and demonstrate* change in the commissioning, management and delivery of public services' (HM Treasury 2002, p. 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' (p. 12).

This dual purpose of steering performance while also demonstrating improvement conforms to insights from the literature about targets and indicators as 'boundary objects' (Turnhout 2009, p. 405). On the one hand, targets may be 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 goals. Targets thus need to operate as management tools, providing relevant and practical guidance for steering policy; but at the same time, they are designed to resonate with or 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, it is worth noting that 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' (HM Treasury 2000). 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' (HM Treasury 2000).

The House of Commons Treasury Committee, which monitors Treasury policy, reported in 2000 that most of the targets under the 1998 PSA had been process targets (51 per cent) or output targets (27 per cent), with only 11 per cent 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 68 per cent of the targets adopted in 2000 as outcome targets (National Audit Office 2001, p. 1). In short, the selection of targets and performance indicators 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 important 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 (Campbell 2008; Blair 2010; Painter 2012). 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 galvanize improved performance, while also creating a new way of measuring and publicizing 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, the literatures on public administration and organizational studies would advocate scepticism about this neat ‘win–win’ formula. Indeed, drawing on this literature we might expect three types of tension to emerge.

First, it is by no means evident that targets designed to steer *administrative* processes would be well attuned to conveying *political* messages to a broader public. Here it is useful to introduce a distinction between the logics or rationalities prevalent in the political and administrative spheres. Politics is largely concerned with the competitive mobilization of electoral support, through framing rival demands for state action (Poggi 1990, p. 138). This often takes the form of symbolic, declaratory politics, designed to resonate with public beliefs and values (Edelman 1999). Deployed in the context of such political contestation, targets might be expected to respond to more popular constructions of policy problems. The administrative system, by contrast, is concerned with the elaboration and implementation of collectively binding decisions. Its actions are loosely based on the broad policy goals or programmes set out in declaratory politics.

But organizations in the administration are also preoccupied with developing roles, routines, and operating procedures that motivate members and enable the organization to accomplish a range of operational tasks (March and Olsen 1976). The types of targets appropriate to steering these processes may be quite distinct, in terms of their focus, level of technicality, and detail. They frequently need to revolve around inputs, processes, and outputs rather than outcomes; and they need to be broken down into quite detailed, narrow, and technical units that reflect actual operational tasks and routines in different parts of the organization.

Second is the related problem of attempts to steer behaviour in the administration, or what we could term the problem of implementation. 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 (March and Olsen 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Brunsson 2002).

Indeed, as Brunsson and Olsen 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 (Brunsson and Olsen 1993, p. 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 2002).

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 distinct informal structures and routines. This form of decoupling has been noted in studies on the impact of new monitoring systems. For example, Jeanette 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 Vakkuri 2010; Walshe *et al.* 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. They imply that government rhetoric needs to be tightly coupled with administrative action. 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), or serious confrontation between government and the civil service, as observed by Nils Brunsson and Johan P. Olsen in the case of Thatcherite reform of the British Civil Service (Brunsson and Olsen 1993, p. 30).

The third point flows partly from the question of steering capacity, and it concerns the relationship between targets and political legitimacy. Much of the literature on policy-making has emphasized how governments derive legitimacy largely from symbolic politics: rhetoric and cosmetic adjustments rather than achieving particular social and economic outcomes (Edelman 1977; Gusfield 1981; Majone 1989). Yet in setting measurable targets, governments are effectively making assessment of their performance contingent on 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), in which they derive support based on what they do, rather than what they say (Brunsson 2002). 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 relying on rhetoric alone (although of course, this is another form of symbolic legitimation based on a promise of action). And clearly, if a government is successful in realizing the target, then it might expect to be rewarded by public support (Hood and Dixon 2010). But of course, there is a risk that further down the line the government will be unable to deliver, especially if the target is ambitious.

But the possibility of failure creates clear political risks. Matthew Flinders (2003) describes how just such concerns about feasibility prompted the pre-1997 Conservative administration to be cautious about going against the advice of its senior civil servants in setting targets. As one of his Home Office interviewees noted, 'It would take a brave minister to enforce a change in targets which the Permanent Secretary said was unrealistic and could have dangerous consequences' (cited in Flinders 2003, p. 282). Similarly, Michael Barber, the architect of New Labour's methodology for implementing targets, observes how the Australian government avoided stretch targets, instead opting for an 'underpromise and overdeliver' approach (Barber 2007, p. 81). Not so the Labour administration which, as we saw, set a number of ambitious and arguably highly politically

risky targets. This creates a puzzle for theorists of political rationality – a point we shall return to later.

In what follows, the article will explore how far these three types of tension emerged through looking at the case of targets on asylum.

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

Asylum applications

Targets on immigration and asylum were originally set as part of the 2000 Public Service Agreements (PSAs) between the Treasury and the Home Office. From the outset, two main considerations appear to have 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 in immigration and asylum control rising from £357m in 1998–99 to around £1.6bn in 2001–02 (Home Office 2003, p. 92) – a sizeable increase, even taking into account the roughly two-fold rise in the number of asylum applications over this period. 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, that is, the determination of whether an applicant was entitled to asylum; and an increase in removals of rejected asylum applicants from the UK.

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, February 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 in the UK 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 the Prime Minister’s office, or ‘No. 10’ (Barber 2007). So there were clear political reasons to focus on asylum, as opposed to other areas of immigration. And yet in 2001–02 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 incentivize 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 adviser 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, February 2014). So while it was a sensible management target from the perspective of Home Office reform, it was not delivering as a political target.

The gradual side-lining of PSA asylum targets was abetted by more personal considerations: the political rivalry between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer oversaw the Treasury’s PSA targets. David Blunkett, who was Home Secretary from 2001 to 2004, was a firm ally of Blair, and an influential Labour Party figure with the clout to resist pressure from Brown. This enabled Blunkett to largely bypass the PSA target on asylum processing in his discussions with 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 ten or so targets. It exerted enormous influence on government departments, through its unique methodology of setting targets, defining detailed 'trajectories' for meeting these, and assessing implementation through 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 Prime Minister was poring over the minutiae of offshore processing and procuring travel documentations. As one official put it, the Delivery Unit was 'all over what the IND was doing' (interview, February 2014).

No. 10's involvement was to become even more intense. By January 2003, with asylum figures still rising, Tony Blair proposed that asylum should be treated as what was termed in Delivery Unit jargon a 'Level 3 emergency' (Barber 2007, p. 171). This was soon followed by a characteristically personal intervention by the Prime Minister: in February 2003 he announced on the flagship BBC television news programme 'Newsnight' 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, February 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, February 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 back down to manageable levels. 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 more stringent visa requirements and better off-shore border control – was the main driver. Research comparing asylum trends across Europe and the USA has suggested that these measures account for around one-third of the reduction, with the main determinant being the incidence of 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, February 2014).

Whatever its cause, 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 adviser 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,

February 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 still did not have a grip on the asylum system.

Removals

As we saw, the first asylum PSA targets had included the goal of increasing the number of removals of failed asylum seekers from the UK. 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 that this target was too ambitious (Home Office 2003, p. 23). In a scathing critique, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, the parliamentary committee responsible for scrutinizing Home Office performance, 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, p. 23)

In the new 2004 PSA, this target was adjusted from a specific numerical target back to a 'directional' target – that is, to remove a greater proportion of failed asylum seekers in 2005–06 compared to 2002–03. The idea was to address concerns that the target was overly ambitious. 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 recognized as nationals by their countries of origin. No. 10, meanwhile, felt that IND officials were making excuses, and were not using all possible means to realize the target (Barber 2007). Indeed, there was growing impatience with IND and the Home Office more generally over this period, over its poor management and performance (Painter 2008).

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, p. 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 was intended to articulate existing goals in a pithier 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, though as a result of declining applications rather than improved performance in carrying out removals.

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 on foreign nationals serving out sentences in UK prisons. This line of enquiry exposed what was seen as the fiasco of hundreds of foreign nationals who had committed crimes in the UK not being 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, p. 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 400,000–450,000.

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 radical changes to the Home Office, including the creation of a new Border and Immigration Agency (subsequently renamed the UK Border Agency) to replace the IND. He also declared that he would clear the asylum backlog in five years, by July 2011 – a target which even at the time was widely seen as unrealizable (BBC Online 2006). But it put the new agency under intense pressure. 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, February 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 welcomed by many senior officials as a more sensible indicator, 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 per cent of cases within 6 months, by December 2011. And then a series of ‘milestones towards this target’, with 24 per cent to be concluded within 6 months by April 2007, 40 per cent by December 2007, and so on. But most of the targets were not met; and nor was the five-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 asylum case processing. Moreover, the completion target had led to widespread gaming, with officials focusing on more easily removable cases to meet phased deadlines, creating a backlog of intractable cases (UKBA 2009).

By this time, though, asylum was no longer in the public spotlight. To be sure, parliamentary select committees continued to scrutinize UK Border Agency performance on the issue, and the Treasury retained a concern about Home Office efficiency. But political debate had moved on to concerns about the rising level of labour migration to the UK, and its perceived social and economic impacts. Government objectives in this area were not codified as targets. Asylum became far less prominent and contested. The PSA targets on asylum processing and removals remained in place, but from around 2007 onwards they were functioning largely as management tools, used to improve organizational performance rather than to signal government achievements.

Indeed, the whole PSA target 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), (b) and so on. As a former special adviser 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, February 2014). So by the mid-2000s, 'it had morphed ... into a more technocratic approach', with less public resonance (Interview, February 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.

DISCUSSION

The targets developed by the Labour government in 2000–10 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. Let us explore these problems by revisiting the three sets of tensions we expected to emerge between their disciplining and signalling functions.

First, as expected, it proved nigh impossible to identify targets that could serve both political and management functions. The PSA targets which were developed through a process of consultation largely between the Home Office and the Treasury never achieved much resonance in public debate. This finding echoes some of the public administration literature on the limited impact of PSA targets on broader political scrutiny (Talbot 2000; 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. Targets generated as part of an attempt to improve organizational performance lacked broader public appeal.

It is worth noting that the disconnect between political and managerial target-setting processes may well have been augmented by the 'TB-GBs': the now well-documented political rivalry between Tony Blair and Gordon Brown. This would imply that the tension between the political and managerial functions of targets was not just a matter of conflicting logics, but in this case reflected contingent personal and organizational factors. Certainly, this added tension may have made the disjuncture between Treasury PSAs and No. 10 targets more visible and pronounced, with PSA targets appearing to be relatively more sensitive to organizational requirements, and the No. 10 ones focused more narrowly on political signalling. But the distinction between targets generated by the Treasury and No. 10 was never altogether clear. Some of the PSA targets became politically prominent goals, and most of No. 10's politically initiated targets were codified as PSA targets.

Indeed, in the second half of the 2000s the Prime Minister's Delivery Unit became increasingly implicated in setting PSA targets. So the key tension being explored here is not so much one between the Treasury and No. 10, both of which generated more or less top-down political targets over this period. Rather, it is a tension between two very different logics of target setting: one designed to steer organizational behaviour, the other to signal political achievements.

Second, we 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 in the phenomenon. Those setting the targets appeared to assume that the organization could take on board and implement political targets in a straightforward fashion.

While such top-down interventions certainly galvanized action, the changes they effected were arguably short term, highly localized, 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 did not always have a lasting impact on wider organizational culture (Barber 2007, pp. 192–94). And in this case, the narrow focus on applications did little to address longer-term trends such as the sluggish processing of asylum claims and the rising backlogs of unresolved cases, problems that would subsequently undermine the credibility of the asylum system. In the case of Reid's legacy backlog target, as we have seen, 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 retention (Boswell 2009).

Thus some political targets 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 – see Smith 1990, 1995; James 2004; Pidd 2005; Bevan and Hood 2006; Hood 2006; Diefenbach 2009), and arguably had rather limited influence on organizational processes and structures.

Third, the creation of public-facing targets generated a number of political risks for governments. Ambitious stretch targets, in particular, exposed 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 adviser 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, February 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 realization that the media and other political actors were simply not interested in reporting on successes. To be sure, the decline in asylum applications was accompanied by reduced political attention to the problem: a 'thermostat'-like response, as observed by Will Jennings (2009). But the achievement was not explicitly notched up as a government success. There was no air time for stories about government achievement of targets. This finding supports earlier studies

showing that meeting PSA targets did not bring clear dividends in terms of increasing public confidence in public services (James and John 2007; Hood and Dixon 2010).

This brings us to a further point about government attempts to control monitoring. 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. Especially in policy areas characterized 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.

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 UK Labour government between 2000 and 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. Meanwhile, 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 commensurate 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 galvanized 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.

We need to be cautious about generalizing on the basis of this one case – because of both the peculiar features of asylum and the Home Office, and the ongoing tensions between the Treasury and No. 10 over this period. However, our analysis does substantiate and help elucidate some of the problems faced in trying to marry disciplining and signalling functions in policy-making. Talking about the nitty gritty of what an organization is doing to

implement policy 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: 'rituals and double talk' are often vital means for organizations to meet external demands for legitimate or 'rational' behaviour (Brunsson 2002, p. 7). There are good reasons to keep political targets at least partially independent of management targets. Unlike Star and Griesemer's boundary objects, targets lack the degree of abstraction and ambiguity that would enable them to operate across the worlds of politics and management. The requirement that the PSA targets be specific, measurable, and outcome oriented rather delimited their flexibility in moving across these spheres.

That said, short-termist political rationality may crowd out such considerations. Combining political and organizational goals in the form of high-profile targets can appear to bring immediate political dividends that outweigh the longer-term risks. Indeed, it is worth noting that in 2010, under a new Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition government, the Home Office committed itself to an even more ambitious and high-profile target of reducing net migration to 'tens of thousands'. As with the high-profile targets set by the Labour administration, this new target appeared to be set without consultation with the Home Office as to what would be feasible; and it implied quite substantial changes to the way the Home Office regulates migration. So despite the multiple problems with combining disciplining and signalling functions, this formula appears to retain its short-term political appeal. The implication is that whatever their shortcomings and political risks, we can expect such boundary objects to continue to crop up in policy-making.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research was funded by an ESRC grant (the Politics of Monitoring: Information, Indicators and Targets in UK Climate Change, Immigration and Defence Policy). I am grateful to Co-investigators Eugenia Rodrigues and Steven Yearley for their input in developing the ideas for the article. Earlier versions were presented at seminars in Edinburgh, Oxford and Sussex, and at the Political Studies Association 2014 conference in Manchester, and the paper benefited greatly from comments received. I am also indebted to Matt Cavanagh, Martin Lodge, and Colin Talbot for their helpful suggestions, as well as to the anonymous reviewers at *Public Administration*.

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