Deportation targets in the Home Office: a long and troubled history

*While the government has apologised for the treatment of Windrush citizens, Amber Rudd has resigned over her lack of knowledge about the Home Office's removals targets. **Christina Boswell** provides some context to recent events. She concludes that although deportation targets are a problematic tool of performance measurement, the culture that exists within the government makes it very difficult to go without it.*

The recent scandal over removals targets has focused attention on the so-called 'target culture' that is rife in the Home Office. In fact, the organization has been driven by targets since the early years of the Blair administration. A series of ambitious 'stretch' targets were rolled out as part of the system of Public Service Agreements as early as 2000.

Initially, the targets were focused on making the asylum system more efficient. A target on the processing of asylum applications aimed to speed up the turnaround of decision-making on cases. While a further target on removals (yes, they go back that far), aimed to increase the number of rejected asylum seekers who were removed from the country. In this initial phase, the targets were largely about managing internal performance within the Home Office – what I've called the 'disciplining' function of targets. And they were not popular within the Home Office – officials talked of targets as a 'necessary evil' for securing resources from the Treasury.

However, as asylum numbers continued to increase in the early 2000s, Tony Blair came under severe media and political pressure to show he was managing the problem. In February 2003 he announced a target of halving the number of people seeking asylum in the UK – a high-profile target, aimed at signalling the government's commitment to tackle the issue. It was also a controversial target, as it implied deterring or preventing asylum-seekers from coming to the UK (rather than streamlining asylum procedures once they were here). And it was a hugely ambitious target, greeted with scepticism and derision by the press – the left objecting on ethical grounds, the right on grounds of its feasibility.

David Blunkett's Home Office did go on to meet the target – though how far this was a result of changing conditions in countries of origin is still debated. However, its success received a lukewarm reception in the media, teaching the government that targets do not always serve well as tools of political communication.

Targets were again deployed in 2006, to address criticism of the Home Office in the wake of the 'foreign national offenders' scandal. This was the revelation that a hundred or so non-UK nationals had been released from prison after serving their sentence, without being considered by the Home Office for deportation. Removals were once again in the spotlight, with officials and ministers grilled by select committees over their failure to remove around 400-450,000 rejected asylum applicants. John Reid, newly instated as Home Secretary, introduced new targets to clear the asylum 'backlog', including an ambitious removals target.

In the second half of the 2000s, asylum figures were declining and the issue began to recede from media and political attention. Yet by then, the target culture had taken a firm grip on the Home Office and the UK Border Agency. As one former special advisor told me, it had 'morphed into a more technocratic approach', with a very complicated architecture'.

As these targets became increasingly complex and technical, they began to lose their purpose as tools of political communication – or 'signaling' function – becoming more about internal organization. Indeed, they became a thoroughly normal tool of Home Office management. One senior official told me they had tried to do without targets for asylum processing, but quickly reintroduced them as they had lost they 'didn't know what success looked like'.

By the end of the decade, targets were falling into disrepute. They were criticised as clunky, distorting and simplifying; they encouraged gaming, and their centralising tendency stifled initiative. The Conservatives and their Lib Dem coalition partners vowed to eschew targets – especially as a signalling device.

Of course, there was one prominent exception: the net migration target, announced by David Cameron in early 2010. This target, as is well-known, has been a ruthless driver of immigration policy, affecting all aspects of immigration policy that might have a bearing on the numbers admitted, as well as those leaving the UK. Thus it has affected policies on family migration, foreign students and labour migration, as well as, of course, influencing the decision to leave the EU.

It was natural that the net migration goal would be codified as a set of more specific targets – the Home Office's go-to tool for performance management. And also to be expected that the targets would extend to implementation of the 'hostile environment' – Theresa May's policy of enforcing immigration controls through outsourcing checks to a range of service providers, including employers, landlords, banks, education and health providers.

For me, the surprise is more in the way the media and parliamentary system has reacted to target-gate. We have had almost two decades of opposition parties, select communities and the media grilling governments on their failure to meet removals targets. This criticism has now been turned on its head: the fault lies in setting such clunky and unethical targets in the first place – not in the failure to meet them.

This is a welcome development, casting the spotlight as it does on the distorting effects of Home Office targets. It implies that politicians may in the future be more cautious about their use of targets. Unfortunately, though, I suspect that targets will continue to drive internal performance systems within the Home Office. Once you're hooked on this tool of performance measurement, it proves very difficult to go without it.

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Note: You can read more about the target culture in UK government in Christina's new book; more information on the ESRC project underpinning the research is available here; and a blog summarising the project findings is available here.

About the Author

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