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Asylum Seekers: Sangatte and the Channel Tunnel

Liza Schuster

'Police on alert to stop invasion by immigrants' (Telegraph 29.12.2001)

Migration crises were a recurrent feature of the 20th and look set to continue in the 21st. They share certain common features: they usually focus on the arrival of people fleeing conflict and or persecution – the Jews, East African Asians, the Tamils, Vietnamese, people from the former Yugoslavia, Roma from Eastern Europe, among others. Often there is British involvement in these areas; there is usually an hysterical media campaign in which tabloid newspapers use the language of war – ‘invasion’, ‘assault’, ‘storming the Tunnel’, ‘staging post’ and ‘jumping off point’. There is a political response that is at best pusillanimous and at worst exploitative, where either the agenda of the press is accepted and a quick solution so as to remove the issue from the front pages is sought, or there is an attempt to capitalise on the ‘crisis’, frequently leading to its escalation. Finally, the crises are most often marked by the failure to identify or resolve the real issues behind the arrival of these groups of people. Sangatte is a textbook example of a British migration crisis with an added twist – the role of Eurotunnel. This article begins with a brief description of the reception centre at Sangatte and its short history. The problem as it was construed by a number of different actors, and their relationship with the media, is then outlined. These include Eurotunnel and the cross-Channel carriers, the Conservatives and Labour in Britain. Although the focus of the article is the British government’s handling of the ‘crisis’, the role of the French authorities and their responses to the British government are important and will also be examined. The shifts in the approaches of the two governments are examined, before the final solution is evaluated.

The centre at Sangatte – a brief history

There are a number of ports along the French coast running ferries to Britain but Calais is the largest, and for someone trying to enter without documentation one of the best because of the volume of traffic and because it offers a range of possibilities.



One can try using either the docks or the Tunnel, and either try to board a train or a truck. If using a truck, with or without asking or paying the driver, one could try to board at the docks in the P&O ferry terminal or at Coquelles (see map), the Eurotunnel terminal for passengers, cars and Eurotunnel's own traffic. If using the freight trains, people try to break into the depot at Fréthun, where the international trains change locomotives before entering the Tunnel, without stopping at Coquelles. At the start of January 2002, there were also attempts to slow and stop the trains after they had left Fréthun and before they entered the Tunnel, so that

people could board there (those using passengers train tended to board in Paris and so were not resident at Sangatte). It was these possibilities that brought people to Calais rather than the camp at Sangatte.

During the winter of 1998/1999, a number of Kosovans arrived in the area around Calais hoping to travel onwards to Britain. In response to the visible plight of these people, a night shelter was opened so that they would have somewhere to sleep. As more people arrived, and the original shelter was shut without warning, local voluntary organisations demanded somewhere better suited to their needs, in particular the needs of the families with children. A few miles from Calais, near the Tunnel entrance at Sangatte, was a large hangar owned by Eurotunnel, which originally housed the building and excavation equipment. On 24 September 1999, it was requisitioned from Eurotunnel and approximately half the space was opened as a shelter, initially for about 400 people. Some portakabins were provided inside the hangar for families, others slept in tents. The conditions were very basic, offering no more than a roof over one's head, no heating, showers for which there were long queues, toilets and basic meals twice a day. According to a report by the Fédération Internationale des Ligues des Droits de l'Homme, by June 2002 conditions had deteriorated very badly and the noise and stench inside the hangar had become unbearable.

The opening of a shelter for 209 Kosovans, including 59 children, was initially a humanitarian response that excited little opposition or notice in France. There was local support for the initiative, with volunteers helping to clean the hangar and to play with the children. Some local people donated food and clothing, although there was also some resentment of the foreigners, even though their presence was a boon to the town's small businesses. The camp was run by the French Red Cross and there was an open-door policy until November 2002,

when the Red Cross agreed to register those already present so that they could refuse admittance to newcomers. Although there was usually a police presence, for most of the period of Sangatte's existence, the police did not restrict the movement of the residents, and would bring them back to the camp when they failed in their attempts to cross the Channel. The costs of running the camp, including 85 staff, were borne by the French Ministry for Labour and Solidarity's population and migration section.

For the first eighteen months after the camp opened its doors, it received little attention from the public, the media or the government. Over the following three years, the Kosovans, who were the original residents of the camp, were joined by others, mostly Iraqi Kurds and Afghans, but there were also a few people from Eastern Europe and from Africa. The nationalities coincided with those of the largest asylum-seeking groups in Britain at the time and their countries of origin were countries in which there were either conflicts or grave human rights abuses, including persecution. Numbers increased from the initial few hundreds to over a thousand by summer 2001, often reaching 1,600 during the following year. The goal of the overwhelming majority was to reach Britain. Every afternoon, many, including women and children, would head for the port at Calais or the Tunnel terminal at Coquelles or the rail depot at Fréthun and attempt to cross the Channel. Most would fail and try again repeatedly; each night some would succeed, to be replaced in the camp by new arrivals.

Though there had been occasional flurries of interest, particularly in the lead up to the 2001 British general election, attention really began to focus on the centre at Sangatte from about July 2001, when a series of attempts to enter Britain featured on the front pages of British and French newspapers. Attention abated a little through the autumn, only to erupt again in December 2001 when a group of Sangatte residents staged a break-in at Coquelles and

managed to get several miles down the Tunnel before being caught, in the process severely disrupting services through the Channel. Sangatte stayed on the media agenda throughout most of 2002, until finally the last of the residents left, the centre was closed and the building was handed back to Eurotunnel in December 2002

Eurotunnel's tale

Initially, the camp at Sangatte was not a problem for either the British or the French government. Complaints came occasionally from local people, but overwhelmingly from Eurotunnel. For the British government, Sangatte was for a long time an irrelevance. According to Blair and Blunkett, it was 'a matter for the French'. The people who were staying there only became a problem if they reached in Britain. In order to reduce the number of asylum seekers and undocumented migrants the Labour government progressively extended carriers' liability for undocumented entrants. In this way, border controls could be moved across the Channel and the task of preventing undocumented entry would be passed largely to private companies, supported by a cohort of immigration officers. This meant that it was taking people longer and longer to find passage across as time went on, and so more people were hanging around in Calais. Opening the camp at Sangatte allowed the French authorities to tidy these people away.

The companies were unhappy with both governments' approach to the issue of stowaways. The UK carriers liability legislation penalised the carriers while creating a market for the services of traffickers and smugglers. By opening the shelter at Sangatte, the French government created a gathering space for buyers and sellers of these services to meet. The truck driver/owners were both victims and beneficiaries of the trade in migrants. Beneficiaries in that if one is prepared to risk having one's truck impounded, £2,000 per head fine or

imprisonment, it is a relatively quick and painless way to make a few hundred pounds a time. Victims in that investing in security measures to prevent people stowing away is costly, and being caught carrying a stowaway, however unwittingly, meant a fine each time. While some individual drivers might sell space on their trucks, there were no such benefits to the companies, to whom the costs of migration controls had largely been transferred. Faced with mounting fines, the various carriers and port authorities had all invested heavily in security. P&O employed an additional forty security staff, announcing this would cost an extra £500,000 per year – a cost that would be passed on to the ferry operators. Nonetheless, the carriers and their representative organisations, the Road Haulage Association and the Freight Transport Association, were clear that Sangatte itself was not the problem and focused their attention on fighting the fines through the British Courts, lobbying government and opposition shadow ministers, and putting pressure on the French government to improve security.

While Eurotunnel also lobbied hard against the extension of carriers liability, it decided that the camp was acting as a magnet, drawing people to the area, and facilitating the planning and execution of assaults on their terminal and that it should therefore be closed. It enlisted the support of the press, opposition parties and the public. The story of Sangatte is the story of the Eurotunnel's fight against government policies, against traffickers, and against the migrants who were construed as the enemy by most of the actors in these events. In January 2001, Eurotunnel announced that it had spent £2m on improved inspection methods. Although access to its Coquelles terminal was monitored by over 200 CCTV cameras, every gate had a 24-hour guard and the site was surrounded by a 20 miles double perimeter fence of razor wire, people were still cutting through the wire and making it to the mouth of the tunnel. The company blamed the costs of the security operation, the disruption to services caused by

people walking along the tunnel and hiding in trucks, and the loss of freight business due to hauliers being frightened off by the danger of fines, for some of its financial difficulties. It was particularly incensed by the fact that, when people were discovered and handed over to the police, they were taken back to Sangatte, where they would prepare their next attempt.

Barbara Roche, the Immigration Minister, praised Eurotunnel for its efforts in improving security, before announcing that new penalties for rail companies which fail to stop stowaways on freight wagons should help stem the flow of migrants breaking into the terminal ([BBC News Online](#) 22.3.01). When it was announced in August 2001 that Eurotunnel would also be subject to fines from October 2001, the closure of Sangatte became an imperative for the company. It followed a dual strategy, using the courts and the press. In August 2001, it initiated a legal challenge against the British government in an attempt to block the plans to extend fines and a week later went to the French courts to challenge the legal basis for the camp at Sangatte, hoping to have it closed and the building returned. Describing the situation as 'urgent and intolerable', it said it that the number of migrants targeting Eurotunnel had increased fivefold to 18,500 between January and June 2001 and demanded that the original order by which the French government requisitioned the building be suspended while judges consider the case for the centre's permanent closure.

At the same time, Eurotunnel allowed news teams into the terminal to film the migrants' attempts to cut through fences and board trucks or trains. The British tabloid press has a tradition of migrant baiting, and throughout 2001 and 2002 it attacked asylum seekers generally; but Sangatte became a favourite target, with attention first peaking in August and September 2001, just as Eurotunnel was fighting the extension of carrier's liability, and increasing again in December 2001. During August/September 2001, every paper, broadsheet

and tabloid, carried reports on Sangatte. These were augmented by televised cover showing dozens of young men and some women cutting and crawling through fences, scrambling down railway embankments and running along the lines. Every major British newspaper sent a reporter to Sangatte. At least a dozen stories were filed by reporters who visited the camp and then had themselves smuggled into Britain on the back of trucks. Blunkett was attacked for not having heeded the warnings and not responding to the crisis sooner. The Daily Express, following an approach from Eurotunnel (Guardian 20.8.01), demanded a strengthening of Britain's borders, running the headlines 'Stop the Invasion', 'We can't take any more asylum seekers', 'Asylum invasion reaches 12,000 a month', 'Asylum: we're being invaded', and 'Refugees, run for your life'. The Mail took up the demands of a Tory MP to send British troops to patrol the French coast.

Following a period of intense media attention over the next couple of weeks, Blunkett agreed to try and persuade the French to close Sangatte. Meanwhile, security staff at Coquelles was increased from 100 to 370, reinforced fences were constructed, and the Home Office dispatched an extra 174 immigration officers to the terminal. Although the court at Lille rejected Eurotunnel's petition in September 2001, attempts to enter the Tunnel through the terminal there dropped as a result of the increased security measures. Philippe Lazare, Eurotunnel's chief executive, announced an increase in freight traffic shortly afterwards and said that the problems posed by potential immigrants to Britain were under control. The tighter security at Coquelles led to increased pressure on Fréthun, about 4km away. At the end of October, 300 people cut through the fence there and 154 were taken into custody. In November, 74 managed to get through the Tunnel via Fréthun before being picked up in Folkestone. This was severely disrupting services and the number of trains dropped from a potential 15-16 per day to between seven and ten. In each case, the people were picked up and

brought back to Sangatte. This time, the Rail Freight Group's chairman, Lord Berkeley, demanded that the British government 'send in 1,000 soldiers with a few miles of barbed wire and orders to keep people out of the tunnel at all times' ([BBC News Online](#) 22.11.01).

The next major incursion occurred on 25 December as approximately 550 people tried to enter the Tunnel. This excited particular attention because it had been carefully planned and because the manager of the centre knew of the plans but chose not to share his knowledge with either Eurotunnel or the police. However, Inspector Adrian Allen of the Kent Police said that 'no illegal immigrants had managed to breach the international frontier and enter the UK side of the Tunnel' ([BBC News Online](#) 26.12.01). Nonetheless, the anger and frustration of Eurotunnel, the French railways and the carriers' associations were considerable. Eurotunnel was forced to suspend its hourly services through the Tunnel for ten hours, and hundreds of paying passengers had to be put up in local hotels on both sides of the Channel. Once again media attention focused on the damage to British business and the costs to the companies – English, Welsh and Scottish trains, for example, claimed that from November it had only been able to offer 40% of its services, while the disruption to services had cost it £10m. Although the Red Cross manager at Sangatte said that he thought the intention of the people who planned the breakthrough was to get publicity, that they didn't really expect to get through the Tunnel, Eurotunnel again applied to the courts at Lille for the camp to be closed. The new year began with stories of Romanian gangs changing the points on the railway lines to stop or slow trains so that people could board them.

In February, the French court again rejected the application to have the camp closed. However, Eurotunnel achieved an important victory: Blunkett decided not to impose the civil

penalties of £2,000 per stowaway on Eurotunnel, or on the French railways and British freight company EWS, because of a ‘dramatic’ fall in the number of asylum seekers using the trains to try to enter the UK. In March the companies were nevertheless again reporting a sharp drop in services and traffic as trains were halted because of sightings of migrants in the Tunnel or on the top of containers. One person died in a knife fight at the camp in April and for a long weekend the French police left the depot at Fréthun unguarded. These incidents persuaded Eurotunnel, if not the other carriers, that even if the government was no longer threatening them with fines, the proximity of the camp at Sangatte was still a direct threat to its business.

The opposition’s tale

The Conservative Party has traditionally been seen as tougher on immigration into the UK than Labour, although the latter has brought in some of the most draconian legislation on the statute books, including the 1999 and 2002 Acts. Nonetheless, the Conservatives have been happy to exploit Labour’s perceived weakness in this area and kept up the pressure during the 2001 elections by focusing on the failings of the asylum system. In a tactic used in many previous elections, there was a concerted effort to put immigration and asylum at the top of the agenda despite criticism from the Commission for Racial Equality, the Liberal Democrats and Labour, who accused the Conservatives of playing the race card.

Sangatte was a safer issue, with clear potential for damaging Labour. During the 2001 election campaign, Michael Howard, former Home Secretary, declared ‘I have visited the centre at Sangatte and it exists simply and solely to provide food and shelter for people who want to enter this country illegally’ ([BBC News Online](#), March 2001). Anne Widdicombe, the then shadow Home Secretary, made headlines to when she visited Sangatte but was refused entry to the centre. The Conservatives maintained the pressure after the election, with Clarke,

Widdicombe and Duncan Smith all condemning the government handling of the crisis. Former Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke declared that the 'immigration system had totally collapsed because of ministerial incompetence at the Home Office' (Telegraph 4.9.2001). The crux of the problem for the Conservatives, and the tabloid press, was that too many people wanted to get to Britain because it was a 'soft touch'; they got in because immigration controls were too lax and, once in, they weren't deported because of ministerial failings at the Home Office.

The fact that people were travelling through other European countries, such as France where they could have applied for asylum, fed this perception that Britain was the 'most attractive asylum destination in Europe' and that everyone wanted to get to Britain. This was the line pursued by the tabloids without exception, by some of the broadsheets and by various Conservative spokespersons. Although most of the press and Conservative MPs, as well as the French government, argued this way, the reality is more complex. The better conditions cited included the possibility of finding work, the absence of internal checks/identity cards, the likelihood that one would not be deported even if one's claim had failed, refugee recognition rates, welfare benefits and housing. There are elements of truth in those claims. Until July 2002, after six months, an asylum applicant in Britain could apply for, and would usually be granted, a work permit, while asylum seekers in France are not allowed to work. Though many asylum seekers in Britain find it difficult to get properly documented work, for most this was a secondary consideration – the most important fact was that they would be able to work and earn money to send home. In Britain there are no compulsory identity cards and it is unusual for anyone to be stopped and ordered to show their papers. While the existence of identity cards in France may make life more difficult for migrants, it has not stopped them from coming to and settling in France. Nonetheless, ID cards are currently under discussion in

Britain. In terms of deportations, the Labour government has certainly tried to increase the rate at which failed asylum seekers are deported and has extended detention in order to facilitate this process. However, France also has a large number of people subject to removal but unlikely to be returned unless crime or misfortune brings them to the attention of the police.

Certainly, there are differences between the two countries. France does have fewer asylum seekers than Britain, but this is because it is easier to enter the asylum process in Britain. If it were easier to apply in France, perhaps more people would stay there –this view was certainly supported by some of the staff at the camp. It may also be the case that many of those who find it difficult to apply for asylum in France choose to stay there as ‘sans papiers’, rather than travel to Britain. Contrary to the expectations of many would-be asylum seekers, the rates of recognition in France are only marginally less than in Britain. In both countries, refugee status is granted to about 10% of applicants. In France about 10% are granted the lesser status of ‘asile territoriale’, while in Britain grants of the (very approximately) equivalent status of Exceptional Leave to Remain had fluctuated between 10 and 20%. And it is also true that housing and benefit provision in Britain is marginally better than in France.

However, a number of studies have underlined that most people entering Britain are ill-informed about such benefits and are far more concerned with finding work, a process that is facilitated if one has contacts, friends and family. This is the single most important factor in the choice of destination (where people have a choice). Many of those who made their way to Calais had friends, relatives or contacts in Britain. Those whose contacts are in France presumably do not go to Calais and so it would be a mistake to assume that those who go there are representative of migrants in France or elsewhere in Europe. Despite these facts, the

Conservatives and the tabloids agreed with the French authorities that people were congregating around Calais because Britain was an El Dorado, a magnet for migrants everywhere: by offering succour to the migrants on their journey, Sangatte was facilitating the process.

The government's tale

The first surge in the Sangatte crisis occurred during the first few months of Blunkett's tenure at the Home Office. Under Jack Straw, the position had been that Sangatte was a matter for the French; and that, if the cross-Channel carriers did not want to pay fines for stowaways, they should increase the security at the French terminals - i.e. there was no Sangatte crisis. For Straw, and initially for Blunkett, the crises were elsewhere, for example in Britain's northern towns. Between May and July 2001, sparked by racists in Oldham, gangs of white and British Asian youths clashed, resulting in scores of arrests, hundreds of injuries and considerable damage to property. Though Conservative attacks during the election on Labour's competence with regard to asylum had no great impact on votes, they heightened the sense of crisis around the issue. When Blunkett became Home Secretary, he made migration and asylum a priority area and quickly announced plans for a new migration bill, just two years after the Asylum and Immigration Act (1999).

The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act (2002) acknowledges Britain's need for skilled and unskilled migrants (with the Highly Skilled Migrants Programme and the Seasonal Agricultural Workers Scheme) but reinforces the government's capacity to choose who may or may not enter and under what conditions. Asylum undermines this power in that once someone arrives in Britain and asks for asylum, they are entitled to remain until their application is decided and until any appeals have been heard. Blunkett set about addressing

this 'problem' and some of the difficulties arising out of the previous legislation (Straw had already acknowledged that there were problems with e.g. the dispersal and voucher schemes and the latter was ultimately scrapped). The policy of dispersal, which was designed to relieve pressure on the South-East where many asylum seekers arrived, was running into difficulties, with racist attacks increasing sharply in Glasgow and Hull, for example, as asylum seekers were placed in largely white, socially disadvantaged areas. This continues to be a problem.

Occupied with these challenges, the Sangatte camp only forced itself onto the government's agenda at the end of August 2001. On the night of 29/30 August, 44 people had been picked up several miles inside the Tunnel (requiring its closure overnight) and returned to Sangatte. 300 others had been picked up at the entrance. A Home Office spokeswoman that day repeated the line that airlines, ferries, road hauliers and train operators were all liable for penalties 'if they don't take responsibility for putting in place effective measures to prevent people travelling to the UK illegally. We see no reason why Eurotunnel should be treated any differently to anyone else.' (Guardian 31.8.01) The next day, eighty people were picked up having cut through the Coquelles terminal's perimeter fence and made their way to the train platforms before being intercepted by security guards. The Home Office's response was to condemn Eurotunnel's security measures as 'ineffective' and to stress that 'it is their responsibility to make sure people do not get through to Britain from their tunnels'. A spokeswoman said the Home Office was 'doing everything possible to help Eurotunnel but the company is still failing to stem the flow of refugees' (Guardian 1.9.2001). Because of pressure on the government for failings in the asylum system generally, and the perception that it had lost control, Blunkett was forced to respond to an agenda driven, not by numbers or facts but by Eurotunnel, the press and the opposition.

Given the coverage, one might expect that the numbers of asylum applications had increased sharply, and perhaps that during July, August and September that there would have been a distinct bulge. While the number of people applying in the third quarter of 2001 (c18,800) increased by more than 3,000 compared to the previous two quarters, it was still considerably lower than the same period in 2000 (c20,400) and 1999 (c20,900). The number of applications increased again in the following quarter by 355 (19,200), but again it was lower than the same period in the previous two years (20,800 and 19,900). It is hard to tell from the Home Office figures whether these increases were due to arrivals from across the Channel, much less specifically from Sangatte. Although a break down of applications according to whether they were lodged in country or at port is available, it does not tell us a great deal. There is no way of telling how many of those who applied in country came from Sangatte, and no way of telling how many of those who applied at port came from elsewhere. However, a comparison of the total number of applications in 1999, 2000 and 2001 reveals a surprise. Overall, excluding dependents, the number of applications received in 2001 was 71,365, 11 % less than in 2000 (80,315). If dependents are included, the drop is slightly less dramatic, 7% (from 96,900 to 92,000), but nonetheless significant. In comparison with 1999, the difference in numbers is negligible – 205 more than 1999 excluding dependents, 800 more including dependents. It is true that the numbers of people applying for asylum increased in 2002 to over 85,865, but the increase came after, not before, talk of a ‘crisis’, and it was only towards the end of 2002, i.e. after a solution to the problem had been decided, that it became clear the numbers would exceed 100,000.

The numbers coming into Britain in 2001 did not warrant the hysterical reaction of the press or policy-makers. All that had changed that year was that the media spotlight had been focused on Sangatte. In spite of an article in the Guardian where Blunkett said the agenda would not be set by the press, and under pressure to be seen to do something, closing the

camp must have seemed the quickest and easiest way of appeasing his opponents - far easier than taking on the combined might of the media, Eurotunnel, the Conservative party and a public that believed what it read in the papers. Blunkett promised to get a grip on the situation and to work towards the closure of the camp. On 2 September, he phoned Vaillant, the French Minister of the Interior and asked him to close it. Nonetheless, little progress was made between Vaillant and Blunkett over the following months, in spite of a number of meetings, including one the day after the 11 September attacks in New York. Emphasis continued to be on improving security, with most of the costs transferred to hauliers, rail companies and Eurotunnel. Security was at the forefront of the Home Secretary's mind that autumn, both international and domestic, and in October he announced new anti-terrorist measures that would affect asylum seekers, proscribing 20 'terrorist organisations', membership of which would mean detention for an indefinite period, without charge, and would exclude someone from the asylum process. He also challenged British ethnic minorities to declare their loyalty to British values. It would seem that Blunkett saw the marginalized and alienated young British men of Asian origin in Oldham, Burnley and Bradford, as well as the Afghans and Iraqis of Sangatte, as fertile recruiting ground for Al-Qaida.

The events in and around the Tunnel, and their widespread media cover over Christmas, increased the pressure on the Home Secretary. There were further meetings and calls for meetings. The French government was accused of lax policing, and relations between London and Paris appeared strained. May marked a significant change in the history of Sangatte. Concerned by BNP successes in the British local elections, by Le Pen reaching the second round of the French presidential elections and by the success of the far right in the Netherlands, Tony Blair announced that he was taking charge of the issue. In a memo leaked to the Guardian, among the ideas he was considering were sending Royal Navy ships to the

Mediterranean to stop boatloads of 'illegal immigrants', using the RAF to deport failed asylum applicants, and tying aid for developing countries to their willingness to take back their citizens. The result of the shock to the French political system caused by Le Pen's success and the increased pressure from London, as well as a desire to deal with Sangatte 'which had become a festering sore', made Sarkozy, the new Minister of the Interior, somewhat more amenable to British demands.

French tales

The frenzy in the press over Sangatte across the Channel had not gone unremarked in France, although the majority view seemed to be that the problem was Britain's and that the solution had to be a British one, i.e. Britain should bring its treatment of asylum seekers into line with the rest of Europe by making conditions less attractive. The camp was a response to the visible needs of people who had been sleeping on the beach and park benches in Calais and the surrounding villages, as well as a way of maintaining some control. With the camp open, people were less visible and, from the perspective of the French police, less of a threat to public order. This view was not shared by successive mayors of the small town of Sangatte (conservative and socialist), who had called for the camp to be closed, usually after outbreaks of violence there. Certainly, some of the local population also wanted it closed and took to the streets on at least one occasion. However, for the French authorities in Calais and Paris, there was for a long time no question of closing it down.

The deputy mayor of Calais said closing the refugee camp would have no effect on stopping illegal immigration into Britain: 'Calais has become a natural and inevitable crossing point. The problem is a political problem. France and Britain are passing the buck' ([BBC News Online](#) 6.9.01). It may be that his view was coloured by a preference for keeping the residents

of the camp within the jurisdiction of his colleague at Sangatte, rather than on the streets of Calais. There were also differences before the 2002 French presidential elections between Daniel Vaillant at the Ministry of the Interior and Elisabeth Guigou at the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs. They agreed that Sangatte was a necessary evil and should not close, but Guigou wanted to relieve the pressure on the camp, which by that stage had become squalid and unmanageable, by opening others, suggesting one at Bailleul, 40km from Dunkirk. According to Vaillant, the suggestion was ‘inopportune’, and according to the Home Office ‘unhelpful’ – unsurprisingly since it came just as Blunkett was publicly engaged in negotiations with Vaillant to close the camp. Although assurances were given that a second centre would not open, Guigou got her way in December 2001 and opened a smaller centre for families at Cayeux-sur-Mer in the Somme.

Vaillant was reluctant to close the camp because it would send people back on the streets of Calais since they wanted to go to Britain whether or not there was somewhere in France where they could shelter temporarily. The French perspective on Sangatte was changed by the presidential elections, when the voters of the Boulogne-Calais region punished the Socialists by putting Jean-Marie Le Pen ahead of Lionel Jospin. The Front National and the press had taken up the issue of Sangatte, especially after a number of people were injured in violent incidents, which the CRS (the French riot police) were sent to the camp to deal with. Le Pen had raised the issue in February, promising to use the French navy to deport the residents of the Sangatte camp (Le Monde 19.2.02); preparing for the general election in June, the National Front’s general secretary and candidate for the area, had promised to make Sangatte a national issue for his party. The successes of the far right across Europe concentrated minds. The responses of the two governments were the traditional ones – a shift to the right and the acceptance of some elements of the far right agenda. Both the British and the new French

governments decided that the far right could only be fought by responding to the electorate's fears in relation to immigration. However, rather than allay fears by initiating factual discussion, the reaction was to come down quick and hard on undocumented migrants and asylum seekers and to press for the removal of Sangatte – a visible symbol of policy failure on both sides of the Channel.

Very soon after hardliner Nikolas Sarkozy took over as Minister of the Interior, he visited Sangatte. His first reaction was that the shutting of the camp would cause more problems than it would solve in the Calais area and that 'Britain must shoulder some of the responsibility for the situation. Immigrants were drawn to Britain by the promise of work and more lax identity rules' ([Telegraph](#) 24.5.02). As with Blunkett, after taking office he quickly changed his mind. When Blunkett proposed deporting people with a failed asylum claim back to safe countries of origin or, where that was not possible, back to the last safe third country from which they had entered Britain – a proposal which would mean returning hundreds, possibly thousands of people to France, Sarkozy's response was: 'Raising the question of carrying out (expulsions) should not be taboo in a state governed by law. We must go forward. When the decision to expel is taken in a country, it must be valid in all the countries of the EU' ([BBC News Online](#) 30.5.02). If the proposal became effective across the EU, obviously France would be able to return people to Spain or Italy. The shared views between the two men made a resolution of the Sangatte situation possible.

A never-ending story

When, in May 2002, the French government first agreed that it would work towards the closure of the camp, it was apparent that the British government would have to make some concessions, and it was clear that this would involve taking some of its residents. The

question was how many and under what conditions - what would the trade-offs be. The Conservative leader, Duncan Smith, immediately asserted in the Daily Mail (24.5.02) that Tony Blair's government would be showing disastrous weakness if it made a deal with France that allowed any of the 1,300 refugees to set foot in Britain in return for closure. The government immediately denied that this was part of the plan. The following month, at the European Summit in Seville, asylum was top of the agenda, but Blair's proposals to make aid for developing countries conditional on cooperation against people smuggling was defeated by other European leaders who argued that the proposals undermined the EU's principles on aid-giving.

Negotiations for the closure of Sangatte were proceeding slowly, with France insisting that Britain take steps to reduce the attraction of Britain to undocumented migrants, including asylum seekers. Otherwise, Calais would find itself in the same situation as in 1999, but with more people on the streets. In July 2002, Blunkett abolished the right to work for asylum seekers, promised to publish a consultation document on identity cards, and to push through the new asylum legislation contained in the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill, and announced that Exceptional Leave to Remain would no longer be routinely granted to people from Afghanistan. All these measures were welcomed by Sarkozy, since they contributed to the dismantling of Britain's image as a 'soft option' for asylum seekers, and would, it was hoped, mean an end to people gathering in the Calais area. Finally, in September a date was set for the closure of the camp. It was agreed that its residents would immediately be registered; that from 15 November no more new arrivals would be accepted; and that by March 2003 the camp would be closed. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees and the International Organisation for Migration would play an advisory role and 'voluntary'

returns would be facilitated, with France offering €2,000 to those who agreed to go back, but where necessary and possible there would also be forced returns.

At the beginning of November, in a last-minute display of sabre rattling, Blair claimed that a series of defeats inflicted on the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Bill in the House of Lords on human rights grounds jeopardised the closure of Sangatte. However, the next day Sarkozy decided to close the camp to new arrivals ten days early. It immediately became clear that the closure would resolve nothing. Within three days, faced with dozens of people wandering the streets without food or shelter, the mayor of Calais was asking for the camp to be reopened. Local humanitarian groups opened a school to accommodate some of them, while about thirty others sought shelter in the local railway station. A church was occupied by a large number of new arrivals, mostly Iraqi, supported by local campaign groups. Finally, on the 2 December, the two governments announced that of the 1,600 people then present in the camp, 1,200 would be allowed to travel to Britain. 1,000 Iraqis would be granted 4 year residence permits and 200 Afghans would be allowed to join their relatives. France would process the claims of the remaining 400 as well as any of the other 3,000 who have been registered at the camp but gone elsewhere. Blunkett explained that the Iraqis were being given work permits and permission to stay so that they would not apply for asylum and become a burden on taxpayers. The irony is that most asylum seekers in Britain, especially now that the right to work in Britain has been abolished for them, would like just that: the security of knowing that they are safe for four years and have the right to work and care for their families rather than be separated from their communities in inadequate housing and be dependent on 70% of income support.

The reaction to the closure of the camp was mixed. While it clearly represented a victory for Eurotunnel, the Freight Transport Association was more muted, saying that whilst the closure of Sangatte would clearly not solve the problem, it would dilute the concentration of people and criminals intent on illegal activity to the endangerment, inconvenience and cost of the UK international transport industry. The Road Haulage Association was dismissive of the closure, arguing that it could only be part of the solution and that only by achieving complete and total security of the port and the surrounding environs of Calais could the problem be solved. Certainly total security is what the different interests in Calais are striving for – by June 2002 the French railway had invested €7.5m at Fréthun, the Port of Calais had upgraded security at a cost of €6.1m for installation and €3m per year running costs; Eurotunnel had spent £3m on fencing and CCTV cameras and £3m per year on extra security guards. For the carriers, more important than the closure of Sangatte was the decision by the court of appeal that fining international hauliers transporting stowaways through no fault of their own was incompatible with the European Convention on Human Rights and the news that international hauliers who still had outstanding penalties would have their fines dropped. The tabloids focused on the concessions that had been made, and reported that it was a victory for the French, who according to the Daily Mail were ‘gloating’ over the ‘shaming defeat’ inflicted on Britain. Having fought for the closure of Sangatte for more than two years, the Conservatives were not pleased with the concessions made by the government. The announcement of the deal in the House of Commons was greeted with cries of ‘disgrace’ from the opposition benches and the shadow Home Secretary, Oliver Letwin, said that giving 1,200 more migrants free access to the British job market was a ‘high price to pay’ for a deal that would do little to ease the asylum crisis.

For the government, the closure of Sangatte is an empty victory. Ministers are clear that it will have little or no impact on people trying to cross the Channel. Policy remains focused on tightening entry controls and making Britain as unattractive as possible to asylum seekers and undocumented migrants. On the 8 December 2002, the Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 increased the carriers' liability fines to £4,000 per stowaway, providing a further incentive for carriers to make sure they are not carrying anyone into Britain. From 2 January 2003, asylum seekers who do not apply immediately at the port are not entitled to any support. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 also reintroduces the White List of countries in which it is claimed there is no generalised risk of persecution that the Labour government had abolished on taking power in 1997 and curtails even further the right of appeal.

In France generally, and in Sangatte in particular, there was relief that the issue had been dealt with, but concerns were expressed 'by the authorities in Calais that closure was likely to lead to the return of the asylum seekers to the streets of Calais' (House of Lords EU Committee, 5.11.02). The press generally approved of the way Sarkozy had handled the deal. Libération commented 'He has succeeded in turning a rotten dossier into a winning ticket. Nicolas owes our neighbours across the Channel a big thank you'. Figaro ran the headline: 'Sarkozy savours his victory'. However, Le Monde pointed out that dozens of newly arrived migrants were already gathering at the soup kitchen of the charity Belle Etoile, before seeking somewhere to sleep in the barns in the surrounding countryside, out of sight of the 700 CRS and gendarmes stationed around Calais.

The Pilgrims' tales

And what of those who make the pilgrimage to Britain via France? Ten days after Blunkett and Sarkozy made the final arrangements for the closure of the camp, twelve men and women were found sealed inside a container truck at Folkestone. They survived the attempt to cross the Channel. In February 2003, a young Iraqi was crushed to death by a heavy goods vehicle in ferry port at Calais. People will always have preferences about where they want to go and will seek to realise those preferences, sometimes at great cost. A continuing difficulty with the old Dublin Convention and with the revised version Dublin II is that it ignores the wishes of asylum applicants. In that, it reflects the views of members states such as Britain. For a variety of reasons (family, friends, language), Britain continues to be the destination of choice for some asylum seekers and although security has been stepped up, people still manage to cross the Channel. Closing the camp at Sangatte was only a temporary solution to a deeper underlying problem caused by the failure of British and French asylum policy.

The Sangatte 'crisis' came about because of the coincidence of interests between the cross-Channel carriers, the Conservative Party and the media. The government accepted that there was a 'crisis' and accepted the solution proposed by those parties, i.e. the closure of the camp and increased security at the port, Tunnel and terminals. The government also understood that Sangatte was only one element of the larger migration challenge it faced. The Nationality, Immigration and Asylum Act 2002 attempts to address the failure of British asylum and immigration policy more broadly. However, since these measures misdiagnose the problem as one of numbers and fail to take account of the reasons why people choose a particular destination, it is unlikely that they will lead to a decrease in the number of people trying to enter Britain through the Channel and other ports, though they will make life more difficult for them. Given that the largest number of applicants in 2002 came from Iraq, followed by

Zimbabwe, Afghanistan and Somalia it is conflicts and persecution around the globe that will have the most significant impact on the continuing 'asylum crisis'.