

# The UK's “Rwanda” policy

A study using systems thinking

Notes to accompany the Systems Dynamics Society's Practitioner Networking  
webinar given by Dennis Sherwood, 27 June 2024

This document has been compiled by Dennis Sherwood, and represents the views and beliefs of the author only.

The intention of the document is not to present ‘the right answer’ or ‘the truth’, but rather to stimulate debate and discussion. It should therefore be expected that any reader of this document will think “I don’t agree with that”, or “no, the system doesn’t work like [that], it does [this]”.

Splendid. That’s exactly what debate and discussion is all about.

And systems thinking causal loop diagrams are a great way to help make that debate and discussion happen.

# The UK's "Rwanda" policy



Home Office 14 April 2022

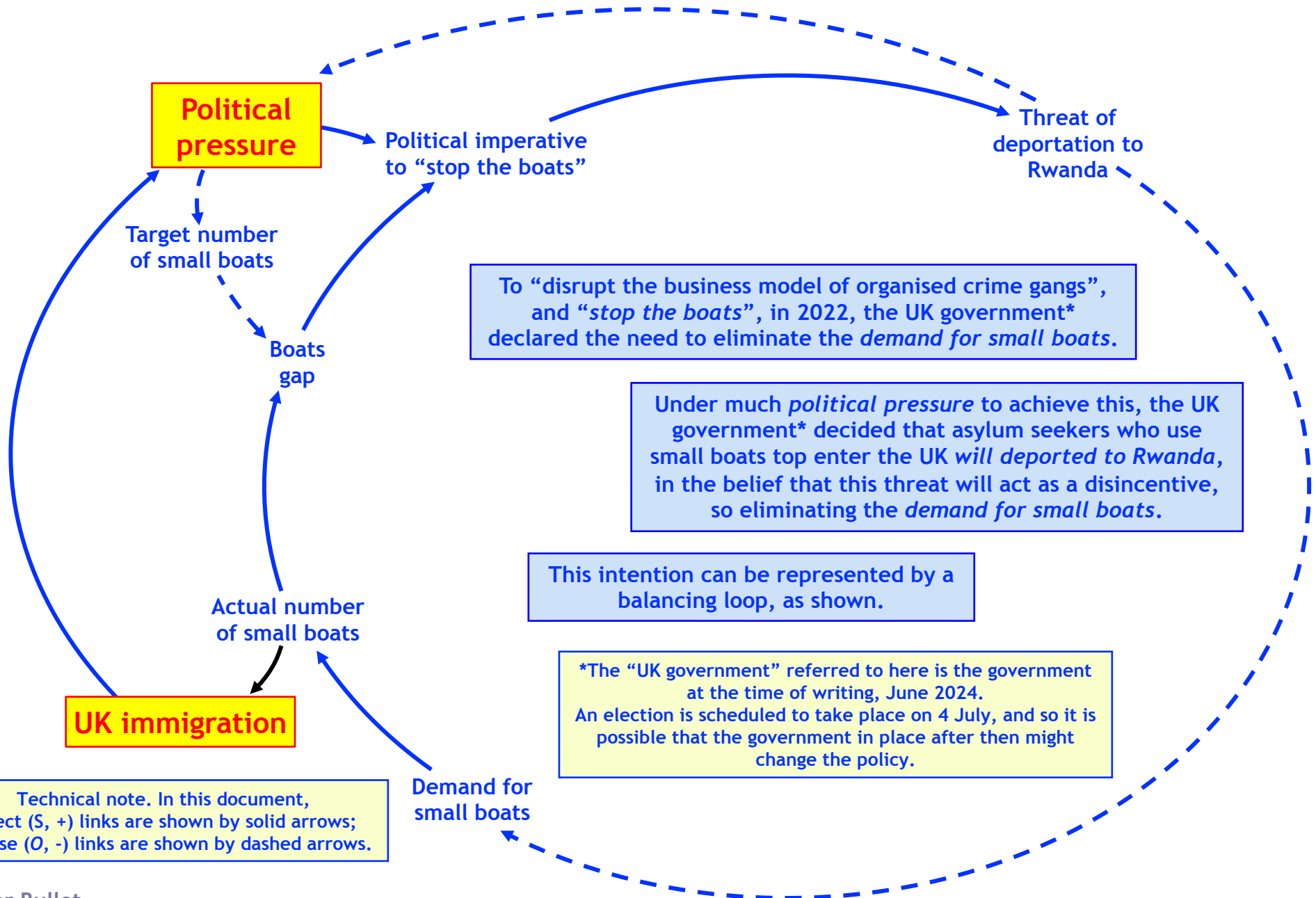
On Thursday 14 April, the UK and Rwanda announced a new Migration and Economic Development Partnership to redress the imbalance between illegal and legal migration routes.

This innovative, ambitious, and long-term agreement sets a new international standard to:

- support those fleeing persecution, giving them the best possible chance to rebuild their lives;
- **disrupt the business model of organised crime gangs**, making them unable to fulfil their contract to smuggle people across borders and thereby preventing loss of life;
- enhance economic prosperity in the region by investing in upskilling, development and projects which will benefit both migrants and their hosts.

<https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2022/04/14/factsheet-migration-and-economic-development-partnership/>

# The UK government's perspective



# The asylum seeker's perspective

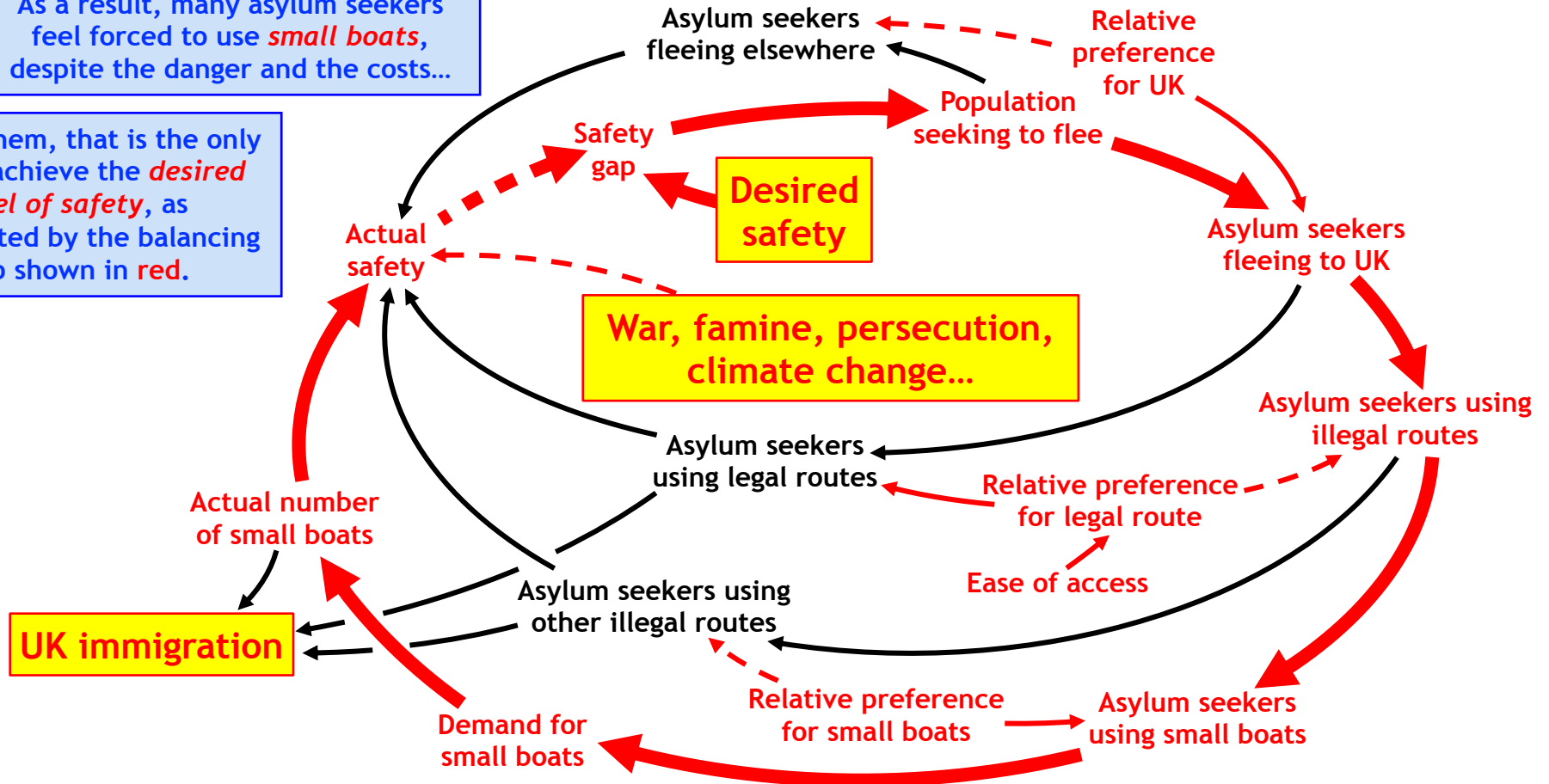
Driven, for example, by *war or famine*, asylum seekers are forced to *flee for safety*.

In principle, asylum seekers have a number of choices, such as *to seek asylum in the UK or elsewhere*, and whether or not *to use legal or illegal routes*. These choices influenced by the corresponding *preferences*.

In practice, however, those choices are heavily constrained, for example, by the *difficulty of access to legal routes*.

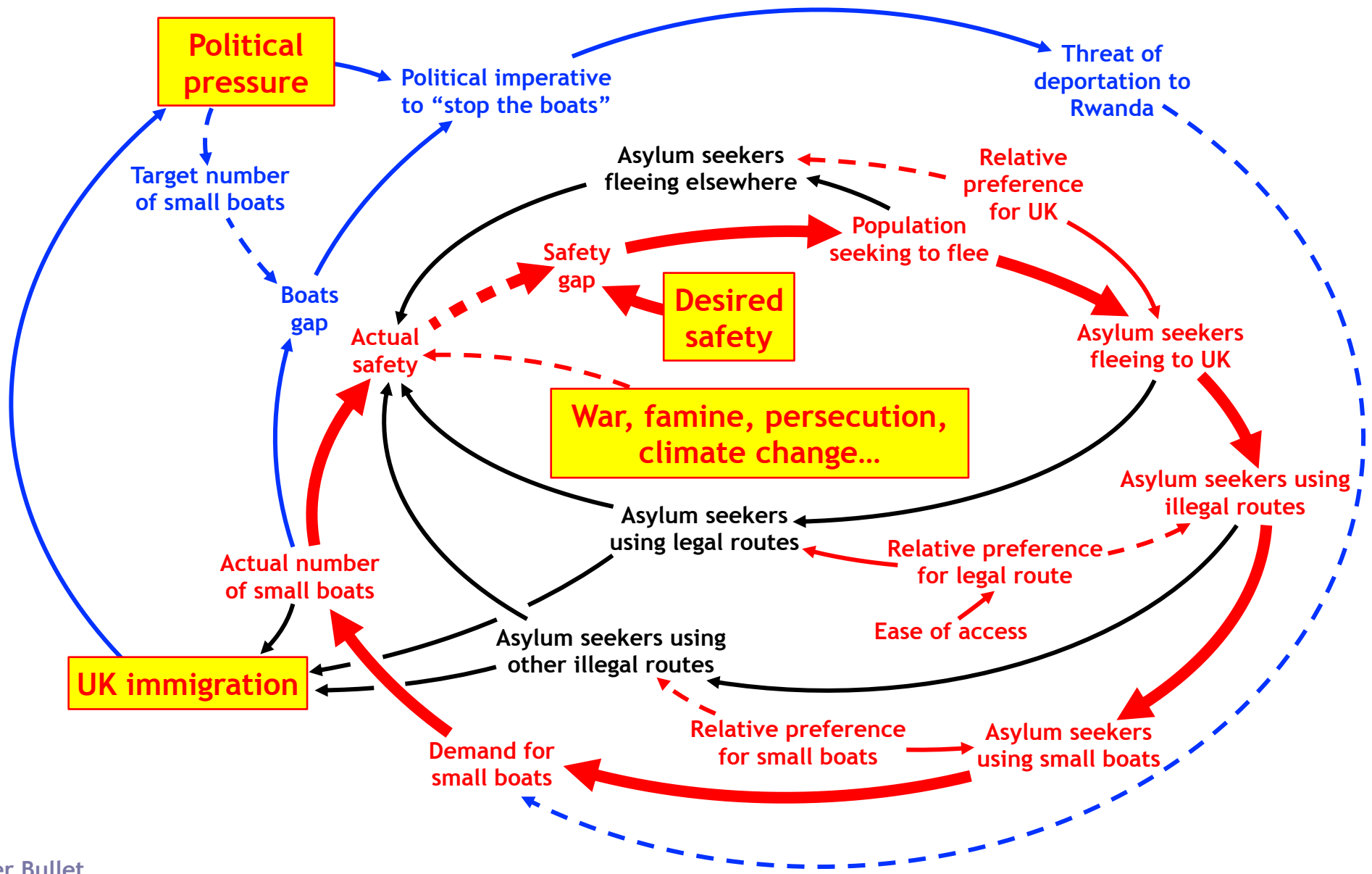
As a result, many asylum seekers feel forced to use *small boats*, despite the danger and the costs...

...for to them, that is the only way to achieve the *desired level of safety*, as represented by the balancing loop shown in red.

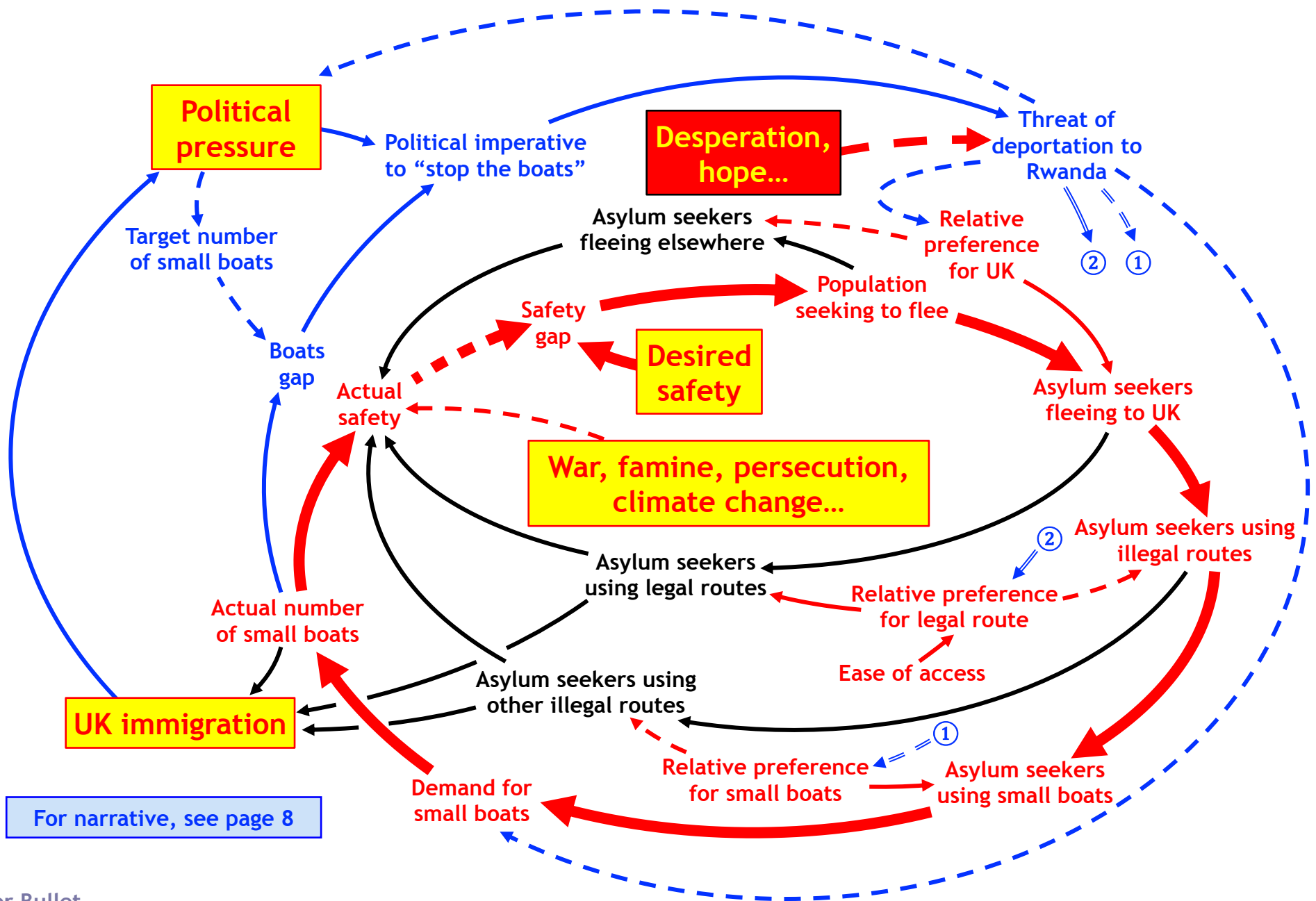


# Bringing the two perspectives together...

Both perspectives operate simultaneously...



# ...and joining them up



# Narrative to page 7

The causal loop diagram on page 7 presents four ways in which the perspectives of the UK government, and of asylum seekers, are 'joined up'.

The first is the (inverse) link from *threat of deportation to Rwanda* to *relative preference for small boats*, as associated with the symbol ①. This represents the UK government's belief that this *threat* acts as a disincentive to the use of *small boats*. However, as the diagram indicates, this could have the 'unintended consequence' of encouraging *asylum seekers to use other illegal routes* - and indeed for criminals to discover new ways to provide them.

The second is the (direct) link capturing the idea that the *threat of deportation to Rwanda* will cause an increase in an asylum seeker's *relative preference for legal routes*, as associated with the symbol ②. This therefore reduces the number of *asylum seekers using illegal routes*, which in turn reduces the *demand for small boats*.

The third is the (inverse) link from the *threat of deportation to Rwanda* to an asylum seeker's *relative preference for the UK*. As a result of this threat, asylum seekers *prefer to flee elsewhere*, once again reducing the *demand for small boats*.

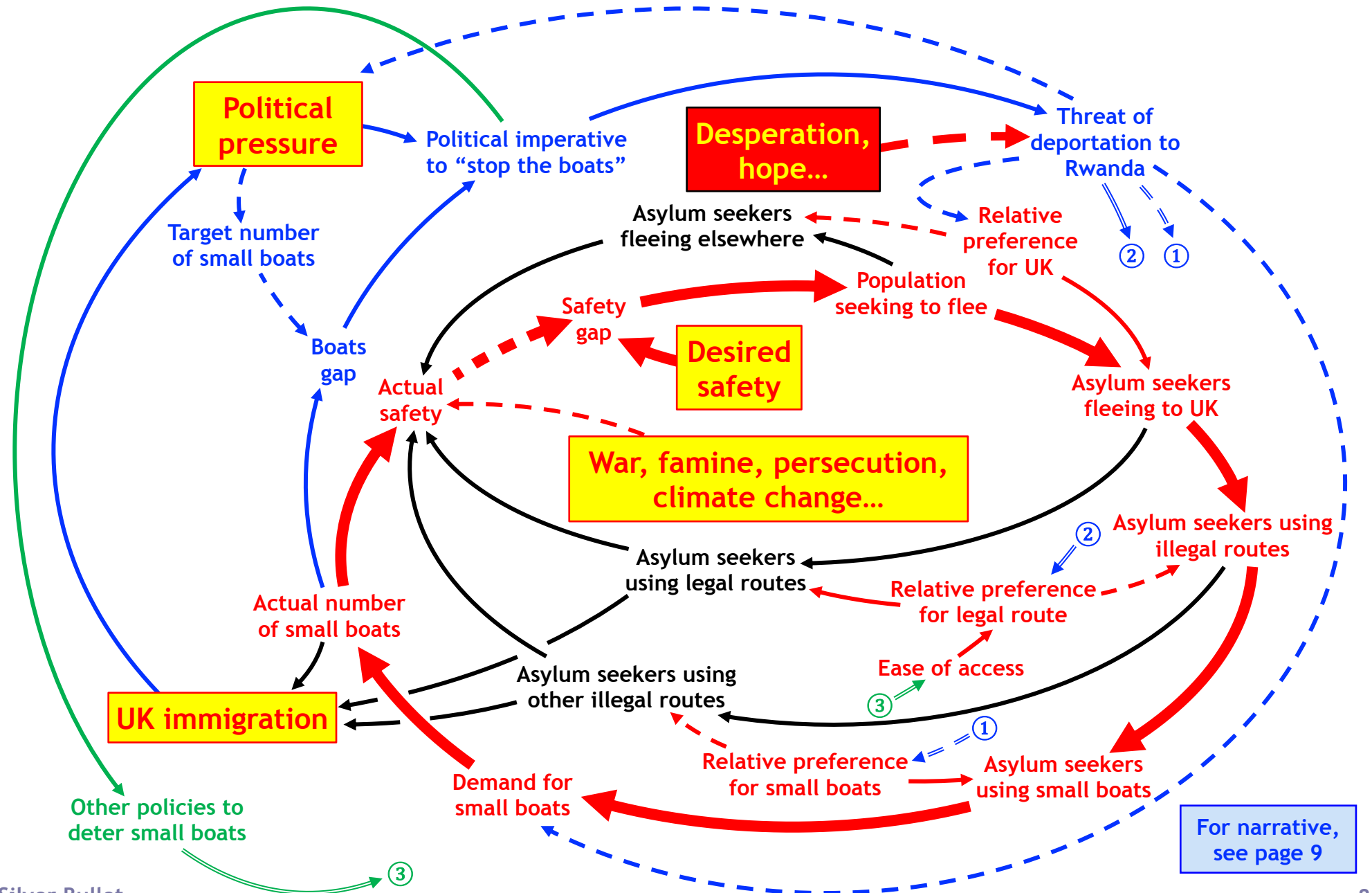
The fourth is the (inverse) link from the *threat of deportation to Rwanda* to *political pressure*. This represents something very different - the possibility that, if the government can be seen (and indeed heard) making a big fuss about its intent "to be tough on immigration", "to clamp down on crime" and "to save lives by stopping the small boats", then that itself might relieve the *political pressure*. Which, from the government's point-of-view, might be what they really want to achieve...

Overall, however, these four balancing loops, each driven the by the UK government's policy to "stop the boats" are 'pushing against' the asylum seeker's balancing loop of using *small boats* to achieve *safety*, to escape *war and persecution*.

Which balancing loop will 'win'? The government's quartet of loops? Or the asylum seeker's *small boats* loop? Especially in the context of the *desperation of the asylum seeker to flee*, and their *hope for a better life*. Does that combination of *desperation and hope* overcome the *threat of deportation*?



# Are there other ways to “stop the boats”?



# Narrative to page 9

If there is a *political* - let alone a humanitarian - imperative to “stop the boats”, then is the *threat of deportation to Rwanda* the only policy option?

Surely not...

...and the diagram on page 9 identifies just one possibility, as identified by the (direct) green link ③, from *other policies to deter small boats* to *ease of access to legal routes of entry*. The idea here is that if it is *easier to access legal routes*, then an asylum seeker’s *relative preference for legal routes* will be strongly influenced towards *legal*, rather than *illegal*, routes, thereby potentially eliminating the *demand for small boats* completely.

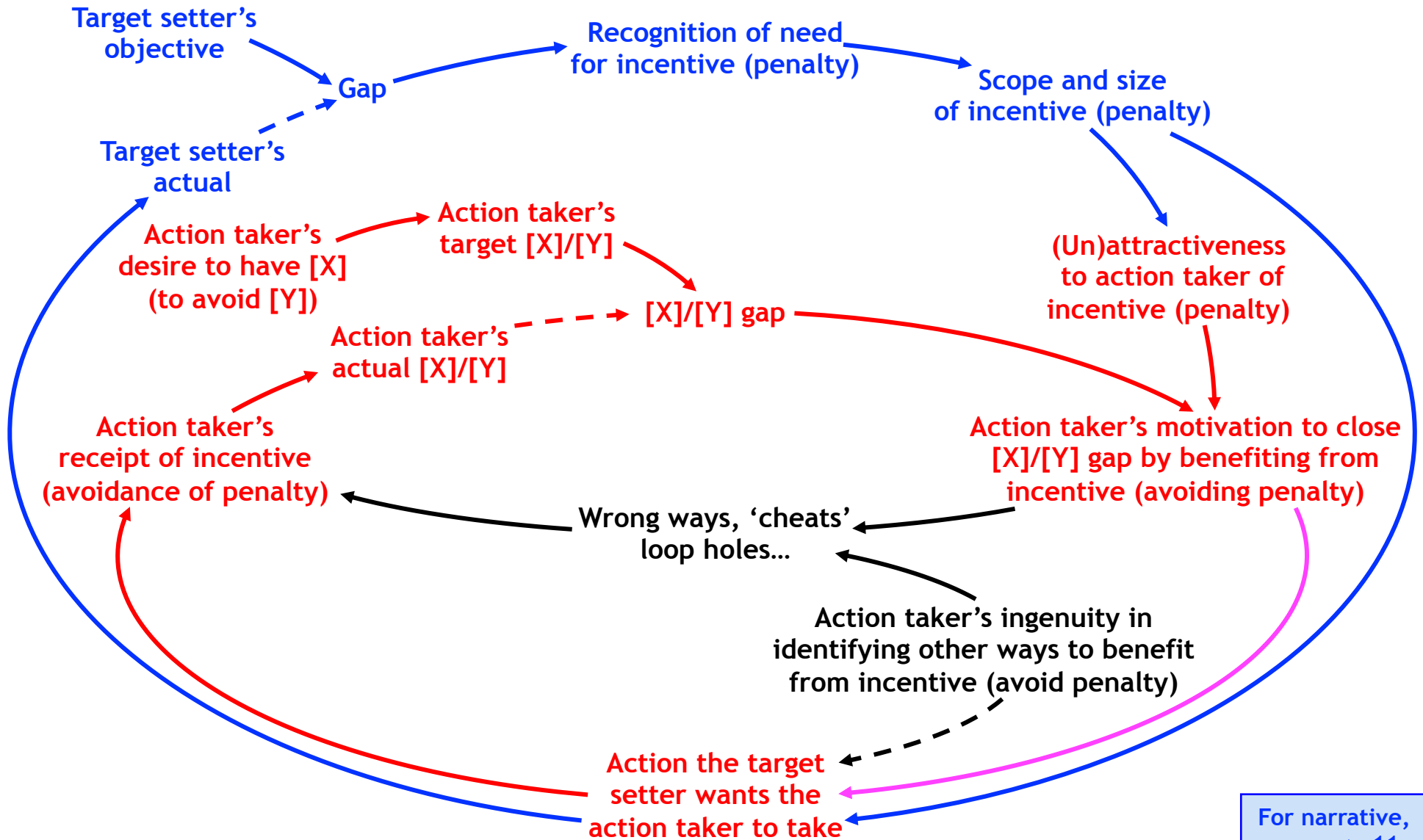
This, of course, is totally consistent with the government’s stated policy objective of “disrupting the business model of organized crime gangs”. Why so? That’s because, if a commercial organisation wishes to “disrupt the business model” of a competitor, then that organisation offers a better product at a cheaper price. In this case, the “product” is safe passage across the dangerous English Channel, and - given that the people smugglers are believed to charge thousands of (UK) pounds - it is very easy for that price to be undercut (the price of a ticket on a scheduled cross-Channel ferry is around £50).

In principle, the government could have an office in Northern France, at which asylum seekers can be given a ferry ticket, and, in groups, escorted across the Channel safely. On arrival in England, they could then be subject to the process of checking their asylum status. That is very likely both to save lives, and to “stop the boats”...

... recognising, of course, that there are many other consequences of this (much more humanitarian) policy, not shown on the diagram. But they could be. What are they? What impacts do they have? How might the diagram on page 9 be enriched?

And overall, what is the wisest policy to “stop the boats”?

# 'Target setters' and 'action takers'



For narrative, see page 11

# Narrative to page 11

The causal loop diagrams shown on pages 6, 7 and 9 share a 'deep structure' of two, linked, balancing loops...

...the first, representing the UK government's policy to "stop the boats", as shown in blue, and...

...the second, that of the asylum seekers, as shown in red, who seek *safety*.

These diagrams all illustrate a special case of a much more general phenomenon: that in which an *target setter* wishes for something to be achieved, but that can only happen if someone else, the *action taker*, actually does what the *target setter* wants. In order for that to happen, the *target setter* offers an *incentive* to the *action taker* in the hope that the *incentive is attractive to the action taker* so that the *action taker* can successfully achieve *his or her target* by 'doing the right thing'; alternatively, the *target setter* can introduce *disincentives or penalties* in the hope that the *action taker* will wish to *avoid being penalised*.

In the particular case discussed in this document, the *target setter* is the UK government, wanting to "stop the boats"; the *action taker* is the asylum seeker, who wants safety. To encourage this, the *target setter's* policy is to use the *disincentive* of deportation to Rwanda, but whether or not this policy will work is - as the diagrams have shown - highly debatable.

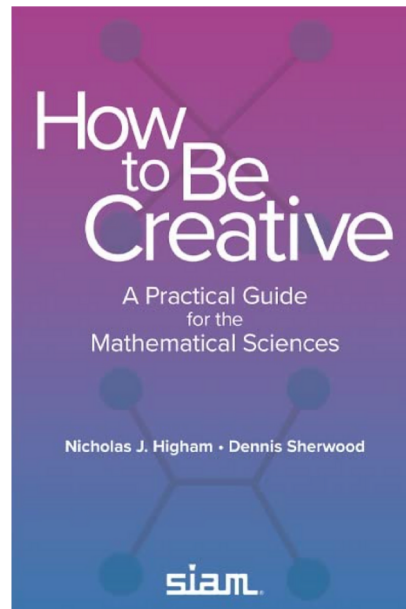
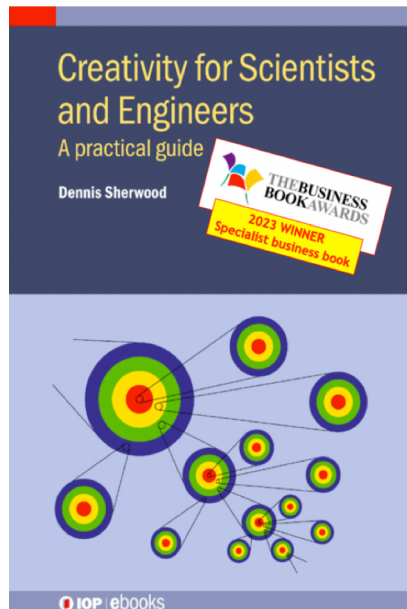
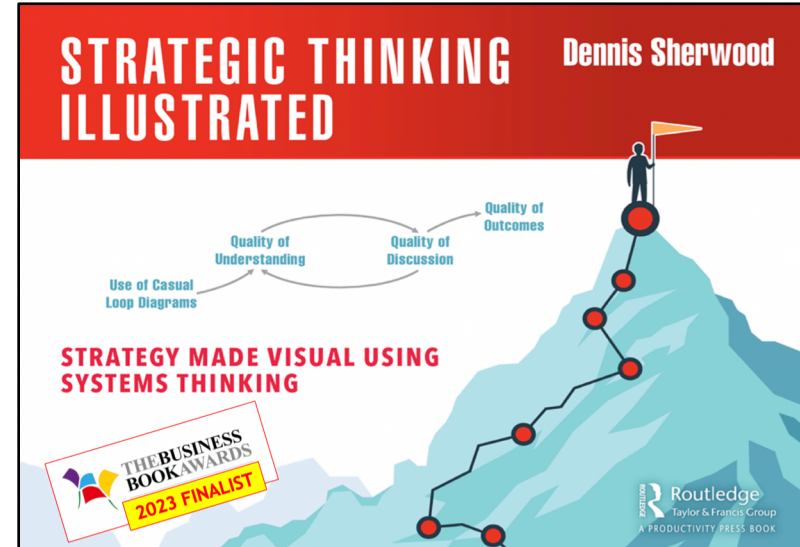
There are many other instances of *target setters*, *action takers*, *incentives* and *penalties*. In the organisational world, senior managers act as *target setters* whenever agreeing budgets or defining performance measures, using *incentives* such as bonuses and the hope of promotion (and the disincentive of firing) to 'encourage' those who actually do the work, the *action takers*, to do their jobs 'properly'; in the political world, governments make widespread use of *incentives* such as tax breaks and grants, and penalties such as fines, to get people to 'do the 'right' thing'.

But as the diagram on page 11 shows, if the *action taker* isn't *motivated to benefit from the incentive (or to avoid the penalty)*, then nothing will happen at all. And if the *action taker* can *discover other ways to benefit from the incentive (or avoid the penalty)*, that will surely happen. In which case, the *target setter* will try to deflect any responsibility for not having thought things through at the outset by referring to 'unintended consequences'.

No. There are no 'unintended consequences'.  
But there is much evidence of poor thinking. Poor thinking that can be protected against by considering a diagram such as that on page 11 for all '*target setter - action taker*' contexts.

# For further reading...

For more on *target setters* and *action takers*, see Chapters 13 and 15 of *Strategic Thinking Illustrated - Strategy made visual using systems thinking*, published by Routledge, 2022.



And for more about how systems thinking is the trigger for creativity, see *Creativity for Scientists and Engineers*, published by the UK Institute of Physics (2022), and also *How to be Creative - A practical guide for the mathematical sciences*, co-authored with Professor Nicholas Higham FRS FREng, published by SIAM (2022).

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E-mail: [dennis@silverbulletmachine.com](mailto:dennis@silverbulletmachine.com)  
Website: [www.silverbulletmachine.com](http://www.silverbulletmachine.com)  
Mobile and messages: 07715-047947  
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