

Britain: Labour government and Conservative opposition reported for stoking up anti-immigrant prejudices

Julie Hyland
12 April 2000

Britain's ruling Labour Party and the Conservative Party opposition were referred to the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) for making allegedly anti-immigrant statements in the run-up to next month's local council elections.

The home affairs spokesman for the Liberal Democrats, Simon Hughes, said he had made the referral because he believed the Labour and the Conservatives had broken an agreement drafted by the CRE not to "use problems in the immigration and asylum system to damage community and race relations", signed by all three main parties the previous year. Hughes, a former human rights lawyer, said the Conservative Party local election manifesto and remarks made by Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw in the wake of the Stansted hijack crisis, when Afghan hostages applied for asylum in the UK, breached this agreement.

In his complaint Hughes said, "There is growing concern that the struggle by the Conservative and Labour parties to be seen to be tough on asylum and immigration issues is motivated by short term party political advantage, rather than any objective of longer term racial and national tolerance."

The referral came just days after the United Nations Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) had also attacked the Conservative election manifesto for claiming that racketeers are "flooding our country with bogus asylum-seekers". Such language plays into the hands of racists and xenophobes, the UNHCR said, and amounts to Conservative attempts to whip up fear to win votes. The UNHCR also criticised the Blair government for doing nothing to combat the current climate of hostility that has been created towards

asylum-seekers.

Anti-immigrant propaganda has reached a crescendo over the past month, as both parties compete to prove they are harsher on immigration. Politicians, and much of the press, have scapegoated asylum-seekers for the running down of health, education and social provisions carried out by both Conservative and Labour governments over the past two decades.

For the Conservative Party, anti-immigrant propaganda is a means through which they hope to rebuild their political support based on the most reactionary and backward prejudices. The Tory election manifesto concentrates on the issue of asylum-seekers, claiming that council tax bills—used to finance local services—are increasing because the Labour government has allowed bogus refugees to flood into Britain. The manifesto also claims that the average household pays the equivalent of up to £160 in tax a year to finance "bogus" asylum-seekers.

The Conservatives responded to the CRE referral by aggressively defending their campaign. Ann Widdecombe, Conservative Shadow Home Secretary, said the party's manifesto reflected "the gravity of the situation. We have a very serious problem in which the asylum system is out of control and everybody can see it is out of control." Conservative Home Affairs spokesman David Lidington said the UNHCR had made a "foolish" intervention. "What we're doing is giving expression to the genuine feelings of anger among very large numbers of British people at the fact that our immigration controls and our tradition of giving hospitality to genuine refugees is currently being abused, and that the Labour government has taken insufficient action to bring this crisis to an end,"

Lidington said.

Although dismissing Hughes' referral as a "political gimmick", Labour was deeply embarrassed by it. Prime Minister Blair has sought to portray his government as "inclusive" on racial and sexual issues, but the longer the controversy over asylum-seekers goes on, the more Labour's own racist immigration policies are exposed.

Reflecting their own electoral considerations, Labour has conducted "private polling" sessions to assess their target voters' attitudes towards asylum-seekers.

The increase in asylum claims over the last year—to approximately 74,000 individuals and families—is mainly attributable to the war in Kosovo. NATO's exploitative use of Albanian refugees fleeing Kosovo in order to justify its bombardment of Serbia saw Blair forced to allow a number of them into Britain for a limited period. Outside of this, Labour has pursued a draconian offensive against the right to asylum.

This week saw the start of a system, adopted from continental Europe, where those awaiting the outcome of their asylum claim receive vouchers rather than cash benefits. The government has also introduced a "fast track" system of assessing asylum claims, in order to remove immigrants as quickly as possible. For the first time in over two years, those whose applications are turned down now outstrip the numbers seeking asylum.

But even this is not regarded as enough to discourage refugees—fleeing terrible conditions in their own countries—from entering Britain. To do this, it is necessary to prevent admittance to the country in the first place. New legislation has been introduced in which lorry drivers arriving from Europe can be fined up to £2,000 for each "illegal immigrant" their vehicle is found to contain. This is in addition to fines already in place against airlines if they carry passengers without proper entry documents.

Both Labour and Conservatives have helped stoke up the current anti-immigrant hysteria and emboldened the extreme right. At the weekend, the fascist National Front organised a demonstration in Margate, Kent to protest against the number of asylum-seekers being housed in the seaside town. Scuffles led to several arrests of anti-racist protesters. Kent has led protests by various Local Authorities against government proposals that asylum-seekers should be dispersed across the country rather than concentrated in London. The predominately Conservative-dominated local councils

in Kent complain that immigrants are disturbing the area's "racial balance"—it is overwhelmingly white—and demand they are housed in more "appropriate" places. Their campaign, fuelled by the local press, led to a series of violent assaults and confrontations between local youth and immigrants last year.

Despite the smallness of the National Front protest—anti-racist protestors outnumbered approximately 100 fascists—Straw responded by saying that he accepted Kent had taken "more than its share" of asylum-seekers. From next week all those entering Britain would be barred from living in the region and compulsorily bussed around the country. A further 20 Local Authorities responded by demanding that they too should be declared "full up".



To contact the WSWs and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact