

# Britain's Conservative Party leader Hague plays the "race card"

Julie Hyland  
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Britain's Conservative Party leader William Hague used his speech to the right-wing Social Market Foundation think tank this week to hammer home his party's racist and authoritarian credentials.

Claiming that Britain's immigration system was being subjected to "organised abuse", Hague demanded the rounding up and detention of all asylum-seekers in army barracks, and the establishment of a "removals agency" to get failed applicants out of the country.

Hague's speech came just days after an internal memo said that the party—reduced to a rump concentrated in the English shire counties—presently had no chance of winning the general election, which will probably be held next year.

His speech was clearly designed to garner support on the most right-wing policies in the upcoming local elections. Ever since their spectacular defeat in the 1997 general election, the Tory Party has been thrashing about in an attempt to define a policy that can win back former voters who transferred their allegiance to the Labour Party. Their problems have been compounded by the fact that Prime Minister Tony Blair has stolen most of their political clothes—recasting the Labour Party as business friendly, tough on crime and committed to cutting public spending.

Hague's initial response to the widespread anti-Tory mood following that defeat was to toy with the idea of presenting himself as more "caring" and "in touch" with the people. He even took a somewhat "softly-softly" approach to the most divisive issue within the Conservative Party—whether Britain joins the European Union's (EU) single currency, the euro—in an effort to reach some kind of consensus.

There is no middle ground on the question of the euro, however, and Hague's apparent backtracking provoked a furious reaction from the Thatcherite wing of the party. He had secured the leadership of the party with Thatcher's

backing, but was only regarded as a caretaker figure due to the absence of the right wing's favoured candidate, former Defence Secretary Michael Portillo. Portillo's return to parliament last year, together with the party's continued inability to revive its political fortunes, has intensified the pressure on Hague.

With an eye to the recent success of the neo-fascist Austrian Freedom Party of Joerg Haider, and with opinion polls showing that a majority of people believed immigration to be an area of legitimate concern, the Tory Party has decided to cast itself as the true home of British nationalism. It has taken a more aggressive line against Europe, backing the "Save the Pound" campaign. No prejudice is now beyond Tory bounds and Hague's anti-immigrant rhetoric is part of this.

Playing the "race card" has been the traditional response of the Conservative right at times of growing social tensions—from Enoch Powell's infamous speech warning of "rivers of blood" should more blacks and Asians be admitted to Britain in the 1960s to Thatcher's talk of immigrants "flooding" the country in the 1980s. Hague is also aware that anti-immigrant rhetoric is popular with the right-wing tabloid press, who have led demands for curtailing the right to asylum in recent months.

The *Sun*, once one of Thatcher's most strident supporters but generally supportive of Blair, opined that Hague's speech was "NOT racist. It is REALIST" and claimed that "his decision to ignore the forces of socialism—as opposed to the forces of conservatism—and state hard truths on asylum seekers will resound around the country". It praised Hague for "maturing into a politician of stature", but warned that his real test was yet to come. "The single currency—and, indeed, much of the EU—is beginning to fall apart. If Hague grasps THIS nettle, he will not regret it. Stand up for Britain, William. And ignore the opinion polls."

The *Telegraph* headline was "The resilient unexciting

man from Yorkshire is taking on the establishment". The *Evening Standard* admitted that "There is an ugliness about Mr Hague's scheme that makes us uneasy. But he is perfectly entitled to put it forward, without being abused as a racist, fascist, populist or any other sort of '-ist'". Some of the local press was much worse. The *Yorkshire Post* praised Hague for taking on "the race lobby" and "political correctness".

Both the *Post* and the *Times*, however, called on the main parties to admit that the issue was not asylum-seekers in general, but poor ones. Their concerns were partly influenced by an EU estimate that the continent will need 40 million immigrants over the next 25 years to maintain the ratio between workforce and dependants. The German parliament has agreed to relax its own stringent immigration rules to recruit 20,000 Information Technology specialists from India and Eastern Europe. They will be admitted through a "green card" fast-track immigration process, in an attempt to fill the hole many businesses face recruiting specialised workers. German Conservative's in the Christian Democratic Union have responded by launching a "Kinder statt Inder" campaign ([German] Children not Indians).

With an education system already run into the ground, there are concerns that British businesses could face similar problems to their German counterparts. Britain could lose out against its continental rivals if immigration laws are tightened indiscriminately, preventing skilled specialist workers coming from abroad.

The *Times* said, "the vital question is whether this [the need for labour] will be recognised and organised, or whether 400,000 economic migrants a year will go on paying traffickers to smuggle them in. The record is that the firmer their legal status, the more these mostly ambitious incomers contribute to national wealth". The *Post* put it more bluntly: "It is not so important to sift the economic migrant from the political one as to sift the hard-working from the freeloading. Migrant labour, after all, has been the engine room of many economic powerhouses, from South-East Asia to the United States, and Britain has benefited from it in the past".

For its part, Labour attacked Hague's speech whilst continuing to insist that it was equally harsh on immigrants. Blair's efforts to accommodate the anti-asylum lobby have created a backlash in recent weeks. The United Nations Refugees Commissioner chastised his government for helping to inflame prejudices. Several charities, including Save the Children and Oxfam, have boycotted the government's introduction of vouchers for

asylum applicants, provided instead of cash benefits. They complained that since shops where the vouchers were used would not be required to give back any unspent amount in cash, this further "discriminated against some of the most vulnerable people in Britain".

Finally, Bill Morris, the black leader of the Transport and General Workers Union, denounced the government for pandering to racial prejudices. Calling for a campaign against the "degrading, divisive and stigmatising" asylum voucher system, he warned that Labour was only one step away from introducing the same system for the unemployed and all those on benefits.

In response, one senior Labour MP complained that the party was being "hamstrung by the bleeding-heart Islington trendies who are making charges of 'racism'". Lady Jay, Labour leader of the House of Lords, subsequently attacked Morris's call, claiming it was motivated by attempts to protect TGWU lorry driver members who ferried illegal immigrants into the country (and who now face fines of up to £2,000).

Following Hague's speech, Home Secretary Jack Straw warned 3,000 mainly Kosovan Albanian refugees, airlifted to Britain during NATO's bombing campaign, that they face expulsion from the country over the next two months. With their 12-month permits coming to an end, Straw threatened that "Enforcement action will be taken in due course against those who do not go back voluntarily."

Finally, Labour's charge that Hague was "opportunistically" stirring up concerns over immigration was undermined by news that the government itself was considering creating new detention centres for asylum-seekers.



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