Britain's Conservatives spout racist law and order rhetoric

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Britain's Conservative Party leader William Hague has set out his stall for the General Election—expected early next year—with an open appeal to racial prejudice and demands for more aggressive law and order measures.

In a speech to the right-wing Centre for Policy Studies last week, Hague blamed Britain's "condescending liberal elite", represented by the Blair Labour government, for creating an atmosphere of "political correctness" that has allowed crime to flourish.

The pretext for Hague's remarks was the apparent stabbing of 10-year old Nigerian born Damilola Taylor, who bled to death on a south east London public housing estate in Peckham last month. Hague blamed a lack of "visible policing" for Damilola's death and linked this to changes in police practice following the official inquiry into the failed police investigation of the 1993 racist murder of black teenager Stephen Lawrence.

By convening the inquiry under Sir William Macpherson, Labour hoped to draw a line under a case that had contributed to widespread mistrust of the police, particularly amongst black people, and reinforce its efforts to create a "New, inclusive Britain". Stephen's parents, Doreen and Neville Lawrence, had conducted a popularly supported campaign against racism and indifference within the police, which it held responsible for enabling Stephen's killers to escape justice.

Macpherson decried "instutionalised racism" for being partially responsible for the failed criminal investigation into Stephen's death. "Unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping" within the police force were disadvantaging "minority ethnic people", the inquiry stated. It questioned whether this could also be involved in the disproportionately high number of "stop and searches" of black males by the police. The inquiry showed that in London, proportionately six times as many black people were subjected to stop and search as whites.

Notwithstanding its liberal rhetoric, the Macpherson inquiry provided an apologia for the police. The charge of "institutionalised racism" meant that no police officer has ever been held accountable for botched investigation into Stephen's death. Macpherson never questioned the abuse of democratic rights embodied in the use of "stop and search". He only advocated it be applied equally to black and white and that police officers should record each stop and give a written reason for it in order to combat charges of racial discrimination. Despite this, Hague complained that by making concessions to racial sensitivities, Labour unleashed a crime wave and caused a collapse in police morale. Police officers were so afraid they would be branded "racist", Hague said, that the rate of "stop and searches" had fallen and crime had gone up.

The rot had not simply occurred in the period since the Macpherson report, Hague continued. It was the result of "decades of liberal thinking on crime". Hague claimed that over the past 40 years, virtually all forms of crime had increased significantly. A Conservative government would "challenge and replace" such liberal thinking, he went on, and "wage war against crime like no other government in the history of our country has ever done".

Hague's figures on "stop and search" are wrong, but his remarks were disingenuous for more than that. The Conservative Party was in power for 27 of the 40 years cited by Hague during which the "criminal justice system" was "brought to its knees". Given the Tory record in attacking social programmes and democratic rights during the 1980s in particular, such a statement appears ludicrous. But its broader theme is clear. Hague is signaling a renewed offensive by the Tory right against the Blair government and the so-called "wets" within his own party.

Ever since Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was ousted from office in 1990 by a palace coup, divisions have raged within the Tory Party. These have encompassed a wide-range of issues—most notably that of Britain's relationship to the European Union—but at the center has been the disputed political trajectory of the party. Should the Tories attempt to win back the so-called "middle ground" now occupied by Blair's Labour Party, or set out on an even more right-wing course.

Immediately following Thatcher's ejection, her successor John Major tried to rebrand the party as a more compassionate and less dogmatic entity. However, widespread popular hostility to the Conservative government only inflamed inner-party divisions, contributing to its spectacular wipe-out in the 1997 General Election.

Thatcher called on the party to recognise that Labour's adoption of her policies had shifted politics permanently to the right. The Tories should not try to compete with Labour for the new political centre-ground, she argued. Instead they must use a probable two terms in opposition to regroup and shift further to the right—thus putting "clear blue water" between the parties.

Her prescription wasn't immediately adopted. Labour's election victory expressed a widespread revulsion against Thatcherism—a factor that Blair, despite his open adulation of the former Prime Minister—has had to take account of and many Tories could not

ignore.

The Tories had lost many well-known and experienced politicians in the electoral drubbing, and had to fall back on a virtual unknown as party leader. Although Hague was a pro-Thatcherite, the right wing still hoped that he would be a caretaker leader, until a more substantial figure, such as former Cabinet minister Michael Portillo, could replace him. For a brief period Hague attempted a similar course to that of Major, making a point of appearing at the Notting Hill carnival—the country's biggest West Indian festival.

Right-wing dismay was compounded by the apparent transformation of Portillo. Seemingly chastened by the party's 1997 election debacle and his own loss of a seat, by the time he returned to parliament last year Portillo had evolved from a hard-line Thatcherite into a “compassionate Conservative”. This change of tack, together with revelations of Portillo's homosexual experiences in his youth, now seems to have conspired to finish Portillo as Thatcher's heir elect.

Hague's law and order speech marked an aggressive drive by the Thatcherite right to mould the party finally, and completely, in their own image. His anti-Macpherson remarks follow others touching on all the right's favourite themes—pledges of huge tax cuts, promises to slash public spending and welfare, anti-immigrant policies and vociforous opposition to the European Union.

The Conservative leader made plain that he will continue this course, regardless of the frictions it is generating internally. Hague's message to Tory “wets”, and other liberal “whingers” is to shut up or push off. He followed up his speech with a personal column in the *Sunday Telegraph*, in which he insisted he would continue to confront the "crisis in law and order". Earlier this week, only hours after Damilola's parents attacked the Tory leader publicly for using their son's death as a “political football”, Hague hit back stating that another Labour government would lead to similar tragedies.

Several commentators have opinioned that Hague's unvarnished Thatcherism is electoral suicide. Despite growing disillusionment in Labour, the Tories have barely made up any ground. Reports indicate that much of the party expect to lose the next General Election, the only question being by how much.

But the Conservative leaders' strategy is governed not so much by immediate electoral considerations, as the need to consolidate a vocal and strident right wing party that can be relied upon to exert maximum pressure on Blair and, more importantly, to take over when he falters.

Hague knows he can rely on the backing of significant sections within the establishment. His remarks were backed by Fred Broughton, chairman of the Police Federation, and the pro-Thatcherite press. The *Daily Telegraph* described Hague's remarks as “brave and right; it will surely also be popular”.

The Tory right have been emboldened by the success of their Republican counterparts in the US in stealing the presidential election for George W. Bush. Of particular note will have been the ease with which America's liberal establishment relinquished any fight to defend democratic rights, effectively handing victory to Bush.

In this respect, the response that Hague's speech has won from a section of Britain's liberals is significant. The *Independent* newspaper has been particularly forthright in defending Hague's remarks. In an article on December 16, regular columnist Michael Brown enthused that Hague's speech marked “one of those rare occasions where a politician has been prepared to say something that breaks out of the normal modern taboos”. The real problem was the “white middle classes”, Brown went on, who cry racism whilst ignoring “the reality of life...in the black sink estates”.

Writing in the same newspaper two days later, Bruce Anderson argued that, “By upholding law and order, William Hague is also promoting human rights”. Anderson continued that crime represents "the principal threat to the quality of life” in Britain's cities. The danger comes from a growing “underclass”, both black and white, on which governments devoted “many billions in welfare expenditure”, he complained, before asking, “Why should beggars be allowed to turn London into a Third World city? Why cannot we have the zero tolerance regime, which has done so much to reduce the crime problem in New York?”

Anderson's comments epitomise the social outlook of a privileged section of the middle classes. Behind all their affectations of progressive views, this is a layer that is completely indifferent to growing levels of poverty and whose sole concern is protecting their "quality of life" amidst a sea of social misery.

The Blair Labour government is the political representative of these layers. Having used Damilola's death to launch its own law and order agenda, the government initially responded to Hague's speech by complaining that he was playing the "race card". Within hours, however, Labour was arguing that it could not be accused of being soft on crime because although the number of "stop and searches" had decreased, the number of arrests made as a result had risen. Even more grotesque were the figures released by the government to prove that the number of black people "stopped and searched" had increased. Prior to the Macpherson inquiry, 4,593 Afro-Caribbeans had been stopped and searched by the Metropolitan police out of an 18,518 total. In October this year, Afro-Caribbeans made up fully 4,794 out of 15,136 stop and searches.