Britain: Racism row continues in run up to general election

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Accusations were made this week of political collusion between the Commission for Racial Equality (CRE) and the Labour government, aimed at discrediting the Conservative Party in the expected June general election.

The government-funded CRE issued a document in March setting out guidelines of "good practice and conduct" for election candidates, which it requested all parties to endorse. The document calls upon the signatories to represent the interests of all constituents "regardless of race, sex, colour, religion or any other discriminating factor, and promote good race relations." It further requires election candidates to "reject all forms of racial violence, racial harassment and unlawful racial discrimination" and calls on parties not to "publish, or seek to have published by others...material...likely to generate hostility or division between people of different racial, national or religious groups, or which might reasonably be expected to do so."

The Westminster party leaders signed up to the pledge, but a number of leading Tories refused arguing that the CRE was engaged in a politically motivated action aimed at suppressing debate on the issue of asylum.

Writing in the *Sunday Telegraph*, Conservative leader William Hague said, "Labour politicians try to censor any discussion [of asylum] by labelling all who raise the issue as racist. It is a shabby and contemptible ploy.

"I will not be brow-beaten or in any way discouraged by the insults thrown at me."

Last week, shadow Chancellor Michael Portillo refused to sign the CRE pledge, the most senior Tory to do so. In refusing to sign, Portillo said "MPs are bedevilled by early-day motions, questionnaires, pledge forms and everything else from pressure groups and they mainly arrive in the form of 'When did you stop beating your wife?' questions."

This week, shadow Home Secretary Ann Widdecombe signed up saying she had done so "for one reason, which is that I, more than anybody in this campaign, will be talking about asylum and immigration and those types of issues." She told the BBC's *Breakfast with Frost* programme, "I simply don't want the distraction, every time I want to debate what we should do about the fact that the asylum system is out of control... of being asked why I haven't signed this silly pledge."

The mouthpiece of the Tory right, the *Telegraph* editorialised: "It is like telling members of a bridge club to sign a formal undertaking that they will not cheat at cards, or making teachers swear an oath that they will not abuse the children in their charge. The nasty suggestion is that, if it were not for the CRE's piece of paper, candidates would rampage around the country, whipping up racial hatred."

This argument would be more plausible were it not for the fact that the Hague leadership is incapable of preventing the racist underbelly of the Tory party from showing itself.

The latest in a series of embarrassing incidents involves an election advertisement in the constituency of former Home Secretary Michael Howard. Tories in Kent had placed a newspaper advertisement seeking to cultivate fears of so-called "bogus" asylum seekers flooding the area. Under the heading "Common Sense," the advertisement asks voters: "What matters most to you? Bogus asylum seekers?" It then promises that the Conservatives "reduced the number before. We will do so again. Conservatives will get it right."

One does not have to subscribe to any conspiracy theories in order to recognise that the actions of the CRE constitute a factional political attack upon the Conservative Party. The CRE knew that a substantial section of Tories would be unwilling to make such a pledge; racism has always been a significant factor in the Tory right wing.

Since suffering an unprecedented election rout in 1997, the party has faced the problem of where to place itself politically. With Labour having stolen its clothes on a host of issues, a section of the Conservative Party has sought a shift away from the openly right wing policies associated with Thatcher. Portillo, once the darling of the Tory right, has made this project his own.

The *Guardian* newspaper points out that Portillo has tried to present his refusal to sign the pledge as "a libertarian stand against stereotyped, politically correct politics. More plausibly it is an attempt to shore up his support in a party in which the right has become too strong to be openly challenged... large numbers of Tories in the constituencies have retreated into an imagined and—if you scratch beneath the surface—ethnically charged Englishness. These are people whose support Portillo cannot do without if he is to win in the postal ballot of party

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members that will finally decide the leadership, in the event of a challenge to Mr Hague after the election."

The embarrassment of Tory leader William Hague as a result of the CRE pledge served Labour very well. Moreover it did, as the Tories allege, aim to bar a discussion on asylum—an area where Labour was considered to be at its weakest. For this reason, Labour's initial reaction was to say nothing and let the Tories tie themselves in knots.

According to a report in the *Telegraph*, Labour would have preferred things to stay that way. But then Foreign Secretary Robin Cook made a speech attacking Hague's claim that Britain was becoming a "foreign land" and his inability to deal with racism in the Tory party. The *Telegraph* said although this had been cleared by Blair's senior advisers and was shown to the private office of Home Secretary Jack Straw, it was not shown to Gordon Brown, who is running the party's election campaign. "Their plan had been to avoid direct involvement in the controversy within the Tory Party over whether individual MPs should sign a compact drawn up by the Commission for Racial Equality to avoid using race as an election issue," the paper wrote.

Whatever the truth of this, in the event, Cook's speech helped Hague and the Tories more than it hindered them. It enabled Hague to claim that allegations of racism against a section of the Tory party were simply a factional attack by Labour.

Moreover, in everything that has been said on the issue up until now there is a distasteful acceptance that it is alright to be nationalist and anti-immigrant, as long as the parties undertake not to be openly racist, and even then, only for the duration of the election campaign. Indeed, one argument made by the Tories is that their campaign against asylum seekers cannot be labelled racist, because a majority of "bogus asylum seekers are white."

For this reason, the CRE has come in for criticism not only by the right wing *Telegraph* but the liberal *Independent* newspaper. The April 22 issue says, "The CRE has over-stretched its case. Messrs Gummer and Portillo have a point in criticising the CRE's finger-wagging tactics as blackmail... the dissenters are right to warn the CRE that no unelected organisation—however right-thinking—should be in the business of blackmailing candidates."

For its part, the CRE has sought to distance itself from the political mudslinging. Spokesperson Vicki Kennedy said there had been no intention to make MPs feel pressured into signing the document, and they were free to publish their reasons for not doing so on the CRE website. She said the commission had merely acted as a "mediator" between the parties, and the pressure to sign had come from opposition politicians and the media.

CRE chairman Gubux Singh said he was "deeply saddened" that an attempt to take race out of the election campaign had backfired. He said the compact had degenerated into parties "squabbling with each other to establish who is more or less racist than each other."

Moreover, Singh said, "In the course of the week the debate has shifted to something that is not particularly helpful. What I want to see is a positive discussion about race relations in this country, as opposed to political parties throwing mud at each other."

The fact the CRE felt it necessary to ask the major political parties to refrain from racist comments or actions for the duration of the election says something very real about the debased character of official politics in Britain.

However, if it was meant to contrast the attitude of the Tories with that of Labour, it has backfired badly. Labour's record of clamping down on asylum seekers and immigration is as appalling as that of the Tories. The Home Office website boasts, "Asylum backlog at 10-year low as new technology to tackle illegal immigration announced". Last year some 10,000 failed asylum-seekers were forcibly removed. The number of initial decisions refusing asylum leapt from just over 11,000 in 1999 to nearly 77,000 last year, with many being held in atrocious conditions in prisons or special detention centres prior to deportation.

Labour will undoubtedly go further in the coming weeks, so as not to be outdone by the Tories' hardline stance on asylum and immigration. Although trailing far behind Labour generally, in this area the Tories are deemed as more representative of popular sentiment by Britain's tabloid press—which misses no opportunity to whip up anti-immigrant sentiment in order to scapegoat them for rising unemployment, crime, housing shortages, decaying education and health facilities.

Yesterday the *Guardian* newspaper reported that the Home Office had secretly ordered the expulsion from Britain of Iraqi Kurds seeking asylum. The move was considered embarrassing because of the West's long-running efforts to undermine the regime of Saddam Hussein. In the past, this has meant Britain was forced to acknowledge his persecution of the country's Kurdish minority. Between 70 percent and 90 percent of asylum applications by Iraqi Kurds are now being refused, compared with just 14 percent in July last year.

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