

Britain's general election: Labour and Conservatives vie over which has toughest asylum policy

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22 May 2001

On Sunday, the United Nations issued an unprecedented appeal for Britain's Labour and Conservative parties to drop their crude politicking on the issue of asylum seekers. Hope Hanlan, the UK representative of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, called it "very dangerous electioneering tactics on all sides."

The UN intervention came after a weekend in which senior Labour and Tory leaders competed for who could advocate the most oppressive refugee policy in the run-up to the June 7 general election.

Last Friday, Conservative Party leader William Hague travelled to Dover to deliver a speech on asylum. Trailing way behind Labour in the opinion polls, the Tories are appealing to racist prejudice on an issue they believe to be a vote winner. The southern port of Dover has been the scene for a sustained xenophobic campaign, spearheaded by the Conservative-led Kent County Council, against so-called "bogus" asylum seekers. Numerous marches have been organised in the city by the fascist National Front, encouraged by the overt anti-foreigner sentiments espoused in official political circles.

In his speech, Hague claimed that under Labour, Britain was a "soft touch," with genuine asylum seekers being "elbowed aside" by those seeking to "play the system". The Tories' answer was to lock up all those who claimed asylum in "secure reception centres," with a new Removals Agency being established to ensure all those whose applications were then refused are "removed quickly from this country".

Tearing up the established *individual* right to asylum, the Conservatives would draw up a list of countries from which all claims would automatically be rejected,

turning back all those who had travelled to Britain from a so-called "safe country".

Not to be outdone by the Tories, Blair immediately went before the TV cameras to boast of the many measures Labour had introduced to curb asylum applications and ensure the swift removal of those whose applications have been rejected. On Sunday, Home Secretary Jack Straw upped the ante. He told the *Observer* newspaper that Labour was in favour of introducing a rigid quota system restricting the number of asylum seekers that would be admitted, regardless of the individual merits of their case. "There is a limit on the number of applications, however genuine, that you can take," Straw said, "There is a ceiling and it has to be measured in thousands, and people have got to accept that."

Both Hague and Straw's comments have elicited criticism from refugee organisations. Nick Hardwick from the Refugee Council said Labour's quota system "would be more harmful to refugees than even the current Conservative proposals." Union leader John Edmonds, clearly embarrassed by Labour's right wing demagoguery, felt compelled to distance himself from Straw's plan saying, "we can't win a Dutch auction with the Tories on who can be more brutal to asylum seekers and we shouldn't even be trying."



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