

Racism row continues to embroil Britain's Conservatives

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Allegations of racism continue to bedevil Britain's Conservative Party, with the most outspoken attacks on the party's extreme right coming from within the party itself.

Conservative leader William Hague had hoped that his "ultimatum" to the party on Monday April 30 would end the row that had broken out after retiring MP John Townend complained that immigration was undermining "homogenous Anglo-Saxon society" and turning Britons into a "mongrel race".

Despite protests from the Commission for Racial Equality, Hague had initially refused to take any action against the Yorkshire MP Townend, on the grounds that it would only turn him into a martyr. His ultimatum to Townend on Monday that he should retract his remarks or be sacked was meant to draw a line under the affair.

Instead tensions within the party have been ratcheted up still further. Monday's article in the *Times* newspaper, written by Lord John Taylor, one of the Tories' few black peers, overshadowed Hague's declaration. Taylor warned, "The Conservative Party cannot contain Townend and people like me." Referring to Hague's belated threat to expel Townend if he did not apologise for his comments, Taylor said, "It is at best a belated yellow card issued by a timid referee against a player who has already committed numerous offences. It is a pathetic response and one that is, unfortunately, all too typical of a pattern of weak leadership."

Arguing that the "race issue" would end up burying Hague's leadership, Taylor said the image of the Conservatives had been "battered" by the presence of such open racists and the party would never be able to recruit among ethnic minorities as long as those like Townend remained in its ranks. Rather, "while the likes of Mr Townend are still in the Conservative Party, then the further truth is that the first reaction of a Conservative Association seeing a large crowd of Afro-Caribbean individuals marching towards its offices would be lock them out and alert the nearest police station".

Taylor added that in essence the Tories were "a good

party"—but there was a right wing, racist element of which Hague was "frightened". He would know. In 1992 Taylor had stood for the party in what was considered to be the safe Tory seat of Cheltenham. But a racist backlash, in which some Tories even called on their supporters not to vote for Taylor, helped the Liberal Democrats take the seat by 1,668 votes. Taylor was elevated to the House of Lords under John Major's premiership in 1996, partially to try and overcome the broad perception that the Tories were thoroughly racist.

Taylor's outspoken attack on Hague's weak leadership caused speculation that he may be planning a high profile defection to the Labour Party—a priceless coup just before an election, particularly when Labour's main electoral tactic is to highlight Tory extremism.

In an effort to make such a defection more difficult, Hague had proposed Taylor sign a loyalty pledge to the party. But the row has now drawn in even weightier Tory figures, including former Prime Minister Edward Heath and ex-minister Norman Tebbit, exposing the deep divisions within the party.

It was all meant to be so different. Townend's outburst came as Hague addressed the party's Spring Forum in March. In his remarks, Hague had sought to put "clear blue water" between the Conservatives and Labour, stating that a second term for Blair's Labour government would lead to Britain becoming a "foreign land".

Despite the resulting furore around this assertion, Hague's remarks were not directed specifically at immigration policy, though the previous weeks had seen repeated Tory attacks on Labour for its supposed "softness" on the question of asylum seekers. Rather Hague was condemning Blair's record on the European Union and devolution. According to Hague, Labour's surreptitious support for British adoption of the European single currency, the euro, and the devolution of certain powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were endangering the unity of the British nation state and undermining its traditional institutions of rule.

Parliamentary sovereignty had been compromised by Blair's increasingly presidential style of leadership, Hague

complained, whilst Labour's devolution policies threatened the "survival of the Union". The Conservatives had bowed to the "wishes of the peoples of Scotland and Wales" in accepting separate parliaments and assemblies, but would insist that England had similar rights, he continued. The newly devolved bodies in Edinburgh and Cardiff create an anomaly because whilst certain areas of legislation concerning Scotland and Wales were entirely removed from deliberation in the national parliament at Westminster—and thus from scrutiny by English MPs—areas of English legislation had not been accorded the same right. Consequently, a Conservative government would "change the rules, so that when matters that only affect England come before the House of Commons, only MPs from England will vote", Hague pledged.

The Conservatives would also oppose signing up to the euro, Hague continued, which if adopted would mean "the Royal Mint melting down pound coins" and Brussels taking control "over our economy".

The next election was about "defending the sovereignty of our parliament, we defend the sovereignty of our people. We defend our right to live under our own laws".

With fears developing over the international implications of the economic downturn in the US and Japan, and signs of growing tensions between America and Europe—particularly over defence issues—Hague's speech formed part of a series in which the Tories sought to emphasise their differences with Labour.

Conservative Shadow Foreign Secretary Francis Maude, also speaking to the Spring Forum, not only ruled out British adoption of the European single currency, but also called for a revival of the Commonwealth and firmer ties with the US. The Conservatives will "support our American allies in developing a missile defence system", Maude pledged. Tories would "never allow" the establishment of a European defence force operating outside of NATO command, and would "stop the slide to...[a European] superstate", he said.

Speaking before the right wing Centre for Policy Studies later in the month, Hague enthused that "Policy differences between governments that are all but submerged when the tide is high are often revealed when high water recedes. We have to be sure that Britain is properly prepared for slower worldwide growth."

Hague's difficulty is that Townend is not just a lone voice, but represents a substantial body of opinion within the Conservative Party, associated particularly with its Thatcherite wing, for whom any reference to things foreign calls forth a torrent of xenophobia. To "expel racism" from the Tory party, as several senior party figures have demanded, would therefore threaten his own survival.

Having succeeded in getting Townend to back down and

withdraw his offending remarks, the row over Conservative racism was immediately reopened when another Tory backbencher, Laurence Robertson, asserted that his colleague had been "basically right" on race.

Several Conservative elder statesmen entered the fray. Leading Thatcherite Lord Norman Tebbit said he supported Townend's positions, claiming that the backbench MP had been arguing for "cultural integration". The issue was "how quickly and how thoroughly those who come into a country are absorbed into the mainstream culture", Tebbit said, adding, "I do not know of any happy multi-cultural society". Four years ago, Tebbit was publicly rebuked by Hague after he had attacked the concept of a multi-cultural Britain and proposed a "cricket test," in which the loyalty, and therefore "Britishness," of ethnic minority citizens should be measured by whether they supported England or the West Indies and Pakistan during test-matches.

In contrast, the Tory Reform Group, chaired by former Chancellor Kenneth Clarke and including former cabinet ministers such as Michael Heseltine, Lord Hurd and Chris Patten condemned Townend. In a coded criticism of Hague's refusal to take action against Townend, the group issued a public statement insisting that the Conservative leadership must be seen to stand full square behind Lord Taylor.

Former Tory Prime Minister Edward Heath was the most explicit, contrasting Hague's kid gloves approach to Townend with his own sacking of right wing MP Enoch Powell from the front bench for his racist "rivers of blood" speech in 1968. That Hague had not taken similar action was because the party had now been placed on the "extreme right", Heath said.



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