

Britain: Blair government lurches to the right in wake of French presidential elections

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Britain's Labour government initially responded to National Front (FN) leader Jean-Marie Le Pen's success in the first round of the French presidential elections with a cynical mixture of complacent self-congratulation and a further lurch to the right.

A spokesman for Prime Minister Tony Blair opined that the British government trusted the French people to reject extremism of any kind in the second round. The prime minister himself went on to pronounce that a similar fascist success would not be repeated in Britain.

According to Blair and much of the British establishment, the vote for Le Pen resulted from the fact that France's ruling left coalition, led by Socialist Party leader Lionel Jospin, had not been sufficiently right-wing. In contrast, by taking up issues such as law and order and cracking down on asylum-seekers, the Labour government was really responding in a responsible way to the issues that would otherwise be exploited by the deeply unpleasant populism characterised by the FN, Blair said.

With just days to go before a potential 22 million electors were to go to the polls for local authority election ballots in the UK on May 2, Blair underscored his point by announcing a series of draconian and anti-working class policies, centring on crime and asylum policy.

Police officers are to be drafted into problem schools, whilst teachers have been directed to implement programmes aimed at identifying potential troublemakers amongst children as young as three years of age. Proposals have also been floated to deprive parents of their already measly state-funded child benefit payments, if they fail to control their children.

The government's *piece de resistance* has been a series of anti-immigrant measures—the character of which was highlighted in a vicious outburst by Home Secretary David Blunkett blaming asylum seekers for the poor state of schools and health care in inner city areas. Interviewed by Radio 4's *Today* programme last week, Blunkett announced that he was introducing measures to prevent asylum-seekers swamping doctors' surgeries. His statement was a deliberate echo of that made by Margaret Thatcher, who as Conservative Party leader in 1978 had declared that Britain was being swamped by an alien culture. Her claim was used to consolidate the Conservative Party's place on the right of British politics—a

position confirmed by an influx of members from the fascist National Front.

Despite complaints from anti-racist groups, Blunkett reiterated his provocative remarks the following day, claiming that not only were health facilities in danger, but that schools were also being swamped by the children of asylum-seekers. In a statement, Blunkett arrogantly declared that people were being too sensitive towards his choice of words. "Frankly, I am not worried who is or is not in favour of me using the word swamped," he said. "What I am interested in is getting the issue right."

The immediate reason for Blunkett's provocative statement was to justify the government's decision to educate the children of 3,000 asylum-seekers separately from British schoolchildren. The move is in line with government policy of locking up asylum-seekers in accommodation centres—in reality little more than glorified prisons—whilst awaiting the outcome of their asylum claims. But Blunkett's deliberate invocation of anti-immigrant prejudice as a scapegoat for all of society's ills is more generally in line with Blair's insistence that Labour must meet the right wing on its own ground.

This stance won the support of the Conservatives and much of the press. The *Daily Mail* claimed that Blunkett's honesty and plain speaking is the best defence Britain could have against extremism and social unrest. The liberal *Guardian* newspaper assured its readers that, unlike the Jospin government, the Blair government has never been one to let the extreme right run away with issues such as crime and immigration.

For his part, Le Pen felt strengthened by Labour's efforts, using them to reject the charge that he is an extremist. Proclaiming himself to be no more racist than Tony Blair, he threatened to dispatch hundreds of asylum-seekers to Britain in order to prove it.

Within days of claiming that its anti-immigrant binge would save the country from extremism, the Blair government made a dramatic volte-face—declaring that the presence of candidates from the fascist British National Party in the local council elections represented a grave threat to the body politic.

Blair's top spin doctor, Alastair Campbell, broke his usual public silence to appeal on BBC Radio 5 for people not to vote

BNP. Le Pen's success in the first round of the French presidential elections should give pause for thought to electors in Britain, he said. Addressing his remarks to the electorate in Burnley, northwest England, where the BNP are standing 13 candidates, Campbell appealed for them to reject the "racist misfits" in the local elections. He felt very, very strongly about the situation in Burnley, warning, "lots of major local employers are saying that if we wake up next Friday with BNP councillors, then it's going to be disastrous for jobs and investment in the town."

Later, Blair himself took the unprecedented step of urging people to vote for the Conservatives or Liberal Democrats in order to stop the BNP. Warning that businesses and house prices would suffer if extremists were elected, he continued, "People have to think very carefully before they go out and vote. I hope they do go out and vote, I hope they vote Labour, but I hope also they vote for mainstream parties."

At first glance, such appeals appear out of all proportion to the actual danger posed by the BNP. Without minimising the ugliness of its racist xenophobia, and its success in exploiting social grievances and backwardness to win support in one or two council wards last year, the group hardly constitutes a popular social movement, even when compared with the FN. The BNP's 68 candidates represent only a tiny percentage of the tens of thousands of candidates standing in the 5,899 council wards open for election.

The Labour government's concern for the stability of British democracy is motivated not primarily by the possibility of electoral success for a handful of fascists, but by the reality of widespread disaffection and alienation from the official political structures. A series of opinion polls, published last weekend, have forecast record levels of abstention in the local elections, with turnout anticipated to fall to an all-time low of approximately 26 percent. Whilst Labour's vote is expected to be hit hardest, particularly in inner-city areas, support for all the official parties is expected to decline as voters find little to distinguish between them.

This is the real similarity between the political situation in Britain and that in France. Contrary to Blair's claim that Jospin alienated voters by being too left-wing, Le Pen's entry into the second round of the presidential elections was cleared for him by the right-wing political agenda shared by all the major parties, which has enabled the governing left coalition headed by Jospin's Socialist Party to work alongside Gaullist President Jacques Chirac.

Placed in office in 1997 on a wave of popular opposition to the Gaullist regime of Alain Juppé, which had sought to carry through a programme of privatisation and gutting welfare, the Jospin government promised to improve the living conditions of working people through a programme of limited social reforms. Instead it had tailored its programme to suit the requirements of big business and, in collaboration with the conservative parties, presided over a dramatic increase in

poverty and economic insecurity.

Deprived of any progressive outlet for their concerns within the official political set-up, social discontent amongst the French working class found its expression in the highest level of electoral abstention in 50 years and a collapse of support for the Gaullist and Socialist parties—opening up a political vacuum that Le Pen was able to exploit by posturing as the saviour of the little man against an indifferent political establishment.

Whilst parting from Jospin on the use of traditional social democratic rhetoric, the Blair government also won power on the back of popular anti-Tory feeling five years ago, claiming that New Labour would improve living standards within the context of a commitment to a free market economy.

But Blair's Third Way has turned out to be much the same path trodden by his Conservative predecessors. Rejecting any connection between rising levels of social inequality and the growth of social problems such as school exclusions, truancy, joblessness and crime, it abandoned Labour's previous programme of limited social reforms in order to finance tax breaks for the wealthy. Consequently, despite working longer hours, and struggling to provide the best for themselves and their families, millions find they are no better off than before Labour came to power.

Should the BNP prove able to increase its vote, then it is Labour's own resort to anti-immigrant rhetoric and law-and-order measures, whilst eroding the living standards of working people, which is to blame.

Whatever Thursday's results, Labour's appeal for people to vote mainstream cannot offer a progressive way forward. It is only the British equivalent of the French social democrats' call for a vote for Chirac in the second round. Blair's call serves as a last-ditch effort to bolster the existing political set-up, by attempting to utilise workers' opposition to racism and fascism in order to give a clean bill of health to the official parties. Far from averting the danger posed by the growth of neo-fascist parties, all such measures to subordinate the working class to Labour—let alone the Tories—only allow the extreme right to exploit social and political discontent. Just as in France, the central issue is to mobilise the working class against the parties of big business, based on its own independent socialist programme.



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