

Blair government endorses Murdoch's anti-immigrant campaign

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In the week commencing August 18, the *Sun* newspaper of billionaire media magnate Rupert Murdoch began an ongoing series of articles that make hysterical attacks on refugees and asylum-seekers. The articles have been particularly sickening even by the standards of a British tabloid press justifiably infamous for its racism and xenophobia.

The paper's lead article set the tone for what was to come. It complained, "The laws aren't tough enough ... the problem of asylum-seekers is out of control." Prime Minister Tony Blair must "stem the flood of people entering Britain illegally." The article stated that an opinion poll conducted by the *Sun* showed that "77 percent think that some parts of our cities are no longer truly British. That is not racism. It is a fear that those who abuse our hospitality are stealing not just our money but our character and our culture."

It is revealing in itself that a mainstream paper could run an opinion poll that asked respondents whether they believed that some parts of cities were no longer British because of the presence of asylum-seekers without being charged with incitement to racial hatred.

Over the next week, the *Sun* turned its attentions to all the areas of British life it deemed under threat from the "asylum tide." It claimed that "foreigners" were costing the health services £2 billion, that 100,000 immigrants receive emergency treatment annually and quoted an unnamed "expert" who complained that "they are depriving the people of this country of the service to which they are entitled."

The paper went on to range far and wide in search of horror stories. "Asylum riot at Butlins" was about a minor altercation between Kosovan teenage asylum-seekers on a local authority holiday and some "British lads." "Our Heritage is Crumbling" was about the fall from fortune of the once plush Nayland Hotel in the

seaside resort of Margate, which was blamed on the replacement of "well-to-do ladies" that "strolled in manicured gardens" with 200 asylum-seekers from the Nayland Rock Induction Centre. One article was headlined "Richest town in Britain swamped by illegals," another "Migrant horde in hospital rampage." At one point, the *Sun* accused asylum-seekers of the crime of eating swans—something that in Britain only the Queen has the right to do!

Such coverage, often over three or four pages, has continued ever since. It is designed to generate the maximum confusion and anti-immigrant paranoia, while dehumanising and demonising asylum-seekers in the eyes of the paper's 3.5 million readers.

Inflammatory headlines and anti-immigrant prejudice are hardly new ground for the *Sun*. But the timing and ferocity of the campaign is significant.

The *Sun* is the main media backer for the Labour government of Tony Blair. Like the rest of the huge Murdoch media conglomerate, it supported the war on Iraq, backed Labour during the huge anti-war protests of earlier this year, and supports the continued occupation by British and US troops. Blair's first interview after the end of the war was given with the *Sun*'s political editor Trevor Kavanagh.

The tabloid has also supported the government in its ongoing battle with the BBC over the contents of the "weapons of mass destruction" dossier which provided the pretext for war. It has dismissed the Hutton inquiry into the death of weapons expert David Kelly as pointless fretting over emails.

So why then did it decide to declare that asylum-seekers represented the greatest danger facing Britain and to launch a veritable blitzkrieg against the government on the issue?

Murdoch's editorial hacks may publicly dismiss the

significance of the daily revelations of government lies that were used to justify war with Iraq, but they know full-well that they have impacted badly on Blair. For the first time, it has now become a serious possibility that Labour may not win the next election because it has lost the trust of the public.

The last thing that Murdoch would want is for Blair to fall as a result of continued hostility to his warmongering under conditions of a deteriorating situation in Iraq and the Middle East, and for this to be tied up with opposition to the attacks on welfare and social services by the government on behalf of Murdoch and his ilk.

That is why Murdoch declared that the government must be judged instead on its supposed failure to clamp down on asylum-seekers with sufficient vigour and that this would be *the question* on which the next General Election is won or lost.

This shift has not come overnight. Part of Blair's New Labour project was to win the support of the Murdoch empire away from its longstanding support for the exhausted Conservative administration of John Major. In 1995, Labour's new leader, Tony Blair, went calling on Murdoch at Hayman Island cap-in-hand. Encouraged by Blair's enthusiasm for increasing corporate profit, the *Sun* backed Labour in 1997, famously claiming, "It was the Sun wot won it" following Labour's victory.

In 1999, Murdoch appointed David Yelland, a close friend of the Blairs, as the *Sun's* editor. The *Sun* again supported Blair in 2001, and in return Labour's 2002 Media Bill sought to remove remaining restrictions on overseas ownership of British newspapers.

By 2003, however, relations had become strained. Faced with falling sales, irritation at Labour's continued support for adopting the euro, and the inability of the Conservatives to advance an agenda significantly to the right of New Labour, Murdoch sacked Yelland and appointed former Young Tory, Rebekah Wade as editor.

As editor of the *Sun*, Wade has been put in charge of a concerted campaign to build a base for policies significantly to the right of New Labour under conditions where the Conservative Party, although still hopelessly divided and with a leader who generally inspires ridicule, is beginning to recover in the opinion polls.

Even if it decides not to break with Blair so decisively, Murdoch knows that he can fire a shot across the government's bows and extract further political concessions in return for his continued support.

For example, an August 27 comment by Trevor Kavanagh acknowledged Blair's loss of political authority in the Labour Party and in much of the population. The consequences of this, Kavanagh noted with satisfaction, was that Blair had been forced to abandon hopes of adopting the euro in the near future.

It was only a matter of days before the government responded to the *Sun's* attack by publicly debasing itself and endorsing the campaign against asylum-seekers.

Home Secretary David Blunkett actually interrupted his holiday to telephone the *Sun's* offices and his remarks were reported the next day, on August 27.

Blunkett insisted that he was "not in dispute with the *Sun* on this week's coverage." He agreed that the country's borders must be made secure and claimed that the judiciary were impeding his efforts to tighten legislation.

Commenting on the "Butlins riot" story, Blunkett agreed that this "adds to the feeling that things are out of control." He also promised that "anyone who commits an offence will lose their right to asylum" and pledged to introduce ID cards, citizenship courses and compulsory language courses at the first opportunity.

Blair chose a visit to Croydon asylum processing centre for his own first public appearance after returning from his own holiday, just prior to his own appearance before the Hutton Inquiry.

The *Sun* welcomed Blunkett's intervention but, emboldened by his grovelling, retorted contemptuously, "The problem for Blunkett is that we lost control of our borders long ago." Clearly Murdoch intends to keep the issue dangling over the government's head like a political sword of Damocles.



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