

Britain: Blair pledges anti-immigrant clampdown

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Prime Minister Tony Blair's April 27 speech on asylum and immigration to the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) was a cowardly capitulation to the xenophobia being pumped out by the media and the Conservative Party.

It is not the first time. Only last week Blair suddenly announced that he would support a referendum on the European Union constitution in the next parliament, just three weeks after he had led Labour MPs in a parliamentary vote against such a possibility.

News analysts were clear—Rupert Murdoch had threatened the prime minister that unless he agreed a referendum, he would switch the support of his newspapers behind the Conservative Party who were only too willing to make anti-European prejudice central to their campaign in the upcoming local authority and European parliamentary elections on June 10.

Blair's latest declaration on immigration was similarly dictated by the billionaire media magnate and his counterparts, whose newspapers have been leading a vicious campaign over the issue for months.

For Murdoch and others of his ilk, the struggle over asylum and immigration policy combines several of their key concerns. In the first instance, it is bound up with their hostility to the European Union, which on May 1 will admit 10 new, and significantly poorer, members states including Poland, Slovenia, Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania.

According to the *Sun*, this means that some 40,000 foreign “shirkers” will “invade” Britain in order to claim welfare benefits and hospital care. On April 29, the newspaper carried a purported timeline of “invasions of Britain” throughout history—from the Romans in 43 AD through to Nazi Germany's efforts in 1940. Alongside Hitler's armies, the newspaper bracketed the “invasion” of West Indians who migrated to Britain between 1948 and 1970, before warning that “now there could be a mass

movement of Roma gypsies.”

The *Sun*'s objective is not only to whip up hostility against the EU in particular, and immigrants in general. It is also aimed at pushing the government's domestic agenda further to the right. A vociferous opponent of democratic rights, Murdoch has been demanding that the government enforce tougher measures to prevent immigrants and asylum-seekers entering Britain, including stricter border controls and the overturning of legal norms aimed at protecting those seeking sanctuary.

Whilst accepting that there is some need for the “managed migration” of skilled workers, the *Sun* insists that there is no case for low skilled migrants—those employed on the most menial and lowest paid jobs such as farm labouring, for example—because British workers can be made to do them instead.

According to the newspaper there are “7.8 million people of working age not working” in the UK who could easily fill such vacancies, 25 percent of which are under the age of 25. This figure indicates Murdoch's motives, in that it can only be concocted by including the infirm and the disabled, while the figure on youth must also include those involved in further education. In effect he is arguing for the dismantling of all welfare provisions in order to force people into low-wage employment.

The government has done its best over the past months to meet such demands. Like Murdoch, it recognises the value of using immigrants as scapegoats for the social devastation that its pro-business policies have created. But it has run up against certain legal limitations, which cannot simply be overturned overnight. On the issue of EU expansion, for example, citizens of the new member countries have the legal right to move across the continent freely for work.

And so Blair used his speech to the CBI to throw himself on Murdoch's mercy. The prime minister officially sanctioned the racist diatribes being poured

forth by the media, insisting that they were not racist at all.

“We cannot simply dismiss any concern about immigration as racism,” he said. If there was hysteria over the matter this was the outcome of “real, not imagined abuses of the system that [have] led to a sense of genuine unfairness.”

In Blair’s scenario, the media is simply responding to popular concern rather than what is taking place in reality—manufacturing such concerns in order to suit its own agenda. Similarly, the government would now “respond to their [people’s] worries,” Blair continued.

“The public quite rightly expects us to deal with” its concerns, he said. Coming from a government that refused to listen to mass public opposition to the war against Iraq, this is cynical in the extreme. But by invoking the popular will, Blair hopes to give his government carte blanche for what he described as a “top to bottom analysis of the immigration system”—the repercussions of which are a fundamental attack on the civil liberties of every person in Britain.

Immigration has reached “a crunch point,” Blair lyingly claimed, before extolling the draconian measures already taken by his government to restrict immigration.

Under Labour, the numbers of people denied entry clearance had trebled, he said. More people than ever were being turned back through “stringent border controls,” including searches of all haulage entering Britain by sea, and checks by airline liaison officers which had stopped more than 30,000 “suspect” passengers travelling to the UK in 2003.

Asylum applications had fallen by more than a half to 3,500, the lowest since 1998, Blair boasted, and four times faster than in the rest of Europe. And the government would do its utmost to cut that back still further, he promised.

Britain was still overwhelmingly white, he reassured his audience, with just 8 percent of the population comprised of ethnic minorities, and one of the “lowest levels of foreign-born nationals as a proportion of our total population” of the industrialised countries.

Some level of migration was necessary, he reasoned, from amongst foreign professionals, such as those working in IT and finance “who have driven London’s growth as the financial centre of the world in a highly competitive global market for financial services.”

Large swathes of Britain’s public services—where wages have been held down for years—are dependent on foreign labour, he continued. One quarter of all health

professionals are from overseas, and a similar percentage in higher education. Moreover, the labour market was so tight that there were half a million job vacancies that require filling.

Although there was not much that could be done to prevent people from the new EU member states travelling to work in Britain, the government would “significantly reduce the quotas of non-EU low-skilled migrants coming in to fill labour shortages in the agriculture, hospitality and food-processing industries—to take in account the impact of EU free movement of workers,” he pledged.

In addition, there would be no state assistance for people who were not working. Everyone would have to be “self-sufficient,” he warned.

To top it off, Blair insisted that compulsory ID cards were “on the horizon.” Successive governments have tried, and failed, for years to bring these in, but have had to back off because of intense public opposition. Now Labour intend to utilise hysteria over immigration to stifle opposition.

Finally, Blair pleaded that immigration should not become a “party-political issue,” especially as “that would do real damage to national cohesion. It is above all an issue to deal with, not exploit.”

His entreaties fell on deaf ears. Whilst Blair insists that in order to stop the march of the far-right it is necessary to adopt their clothes, in reality every concession only emboldens them. And so it was with Blair’s speech. The Conservatives declared it proved that the government was not in control of immigration, and attacked Blair as a coward for not having acted tougher earlier.

For its part, the *Sun* pronounced its delight at what it described as “another massive U-turn” from the prime minister, running Blair’s pledges over a two-page spread. But it made clear that he was not off the hook and that the racism and xenophobia would continue to be churned out. The paper’s political editor, Trevor Kavanagh, wrote, “Mr. Blair may now have regrets. But the pass had been sold. The face of Britain has changed before our eyes, thanks to New Labour.”



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