

Britain: Labour and Tories target immigrants in run-up to election

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With a British general election expected in May, New Labour and the Conservatives have gone head-to-head in a reactionary skirmish over which party would impose the most oppressive immigration and asylum policies.

In an attempt to bolster flagging support for his party, Tory leader Michael Howard last week announced that a future Conservative government would place a cap on immigration and asylum. A full-page advert in the January 23 *Sunday Telegraph* called for “an annual limit on immigration and a quota for asylum seekers,” with Howard also promising “24-hour security at ports to prevent illegal immigration.”

According to Howard, “Conservative proposals for an Australian-style points system for work permits will ensure that priority is given to people with the skills Britain needs.”

With the Tories languishing in the opinion polls, and having suffered losses to the anti-European Union UK Independence Party (UKIP) in last year’s EU elections, Howard hopes that by playing the “immigration card” he can win back former UKIP voters and gain ground on New Labour.

Howard’s citation of a government report on the 2001 Bradford riots to justify his own reactionary proposals testified to how far New Labour itself has moved to the right. “Inward immigration does create tensions.... [C]ommunities will perceive that newcomers are in competition for scarce resources and public services,” he quoted.

Howard’s answer: “Firm immigration controls are essential for good community relations. They are vital for the management of public services. And they are critical for the maintenance of national security.”

But it is the Labour government and its Tory predecessor (in which Howard was Home Secretary)

that are to blame for the “scarce resources and public services!” It was not immigrants who were responsible for the 2001 civil unrest, but years of unrelenting cuts in social spending, the privatisation of vast swathes of the public sector and the gutting of more progressive education and welfare policies. The British National Party and National Front have fanned the resulting social tensions.

Adopting the arguments of the far right, the so-called “mainstream” parties are scapegoating immigrants for the problems created by their own policies.

The Tories’ *Sunday Telegraph* advert was followed the next day by a policy speech at Conservative Central Office redolent of the infamous 1978 remarks made by former Conservative leader Margaret Thatcher, when she warned that Britain faced being “swamped” by immigrants.

In lurid terms, Howard claimed there were “millions of people in other countries who want to come and live here” and that “nearly 160,000 people now settle in Britain each year—that is a city the size of Peterborough.”

Even if one accepts such grossly inflated figures, this represents barely one quarter of 1 percent of the entire population of the UK. Moreover, according to official figures, the largest numbers of migrants now come from other European Union countries. With freedom of movement and settlement guaranteed to all EU citizens, Howard’s proposals to place an arbitrary limit on such migration would put Britain in breach of its EU treaty obligations.

Predictably, the response by Tony Blair’s Labour government was to try to outflank the Tories from the right. In the *Scotsman* newspaper, political editor Fraser Nelson wrote, “Mr. Blair has ordered his ministers not to criticise the Tories for being too harsh, and instead

compete with Mr. Howard.”

Education Secretary Ruth Kelly claimed that Howard was addressing “realistic concerns about controlled immigration,” whilst Labour MP Roger Godsiff told Radio 4’s *Westminster Hour* that all foreign workers should be banned entry to the UK.

Godsiff told the programme, “I don’t believe economic migration is any longer necessary, and I also don’t think it’s going to be good for the future of race relations in this country.” Any skills shortages should be dealt with by encouraging workers to retire later, he told the *Independent* newspaper.

More recently, the *Sunday Times* revealed that Home Secretary Charles Clarke plans to “steal part of the Tories’ immigration policy by announcing a new Australian-style points system for economic migrants.”

With both Tories and Labour looking to Australia for its policy direction, the future for both immigrants and refugees does not bode well. The Australian government presides over one of the world’s most repressive refugee and asylum-seeker systems and has been repeatedly censured by the United Nations and human rights organisations.

The Tories’ attack on immigrants follows the recent appointment of Lynton Crosby as the party’s campaign director. Crosby is the former federal director of the Australian Liberal Party and played an important role in coordinating the Australian government’s scapegoating of refugees, particularly during the 2001 election campaign, when the government falsely claimed that refugees had thrown their children into the Indian Ocean.

Like the war against Iraq, immigration and asylum constitute an issue on which the positions of both main parties rest on spin, media manipulation and downright falsehood.

For example, when Howard appeared on BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme to promote his policy announcement, he claimed that only two out of every ten asylum seekers were genuine. However, the Information Centre about Asylum and Refugees in the UK (ICAR), an independent body based at Kings College London, noted, “What the Conservative leader does not mention is that another two in ten applicants are granted permission to stay (‘leave to remain’ or ‘humanitarian protection’).”

ICAR also explained that more than 10 percent of the

2002 asylum applications upon which Howard had based his claim were undecided: “Asylum statistics are often quoted out of context and sometimes it is only the refusal rates for initial applications that are highlighted, whilst the number of successful appeals is disregarded.”

In an analysis of Howard’s speech, the ICAR web site (<http://www.icar.org.uk/>) points to academic research showing the effects of such anti-asylum rhetoric: “Politicians are not merely responding to the attitudes of a xenophobic public but that they are actively encouraging the negative attitudes that result in poor community cohesion.

“ICAR’s research has shown that unbalanced and inaccurate media images of asylum seekers are frequent and powerful, with the potential to increase community tension.”

Official figures show a decline in applications for asylum, and immigration into the UK is relatively modest. The choice of this issue as the opening salvo in the upcoming general election heralds a campaign in which Labour tries to trump each reactionary policy announcement by the Tories, and vice versa.



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