

Britain: Labour and Conservative parties compete over anti-immigrant measures

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The British Labour and Conservative (Tory) parties are ratcheting up their campaigns against immigrants and asylum seekers as the general election, expected May 5, approaches.

That they should choose to centre their prospective election campaigns on the issue says much about the nature of official politics in Britain. Both parties are fully committed to the type of right-wing, big-business policies that are responsible for growing inequality, the dismantling of public services and welfare provision, and the undermining of civil liberties.

Consequently, neither party can make any appeal for support by addressing the real concerns of working people. Their resort to anti-asylum propaganda represents an attempt to win popularity by an appeal to the most backward and reactionary sentiments.

The Conservatives kicked off the campaign. At the end of January, Tory leader Michael Howard announced that his party was proposing to impose an annual limit on immigration, which would allow people work permits only if their skills were considered to be beneficial to the country. A quota would also be imposed on those seeking asylum in Britain, Howard said. Once these limits on migrants and asylum seekers had been reached, no others would be allowed into the country, regardless of their circumstances.

Howard also proposed establishing 24-hour security at ports to prevent illegal immigration. Acknowledging that his proposals would be in breach of international laws governing the right to asylum, he said that any future Tory government would withdraw Britain from the 1951 United Nations convention on refugees.

Howard further demanded that all non-Europeans seeking to reside in Britain should be subjected to medical tests to establish whether they are carrying infectious diseases such as AIDS or tuberculosis.

The proposals have been denounced by the medical journal, *The Lancet*. In its February 25 editorial, the journal said that Tory plans to implement checks on certain travelers for disease were discriminatory.

It further noted that a UK public inquiry into such checks had previously concluded that “there is no evidence to suggest that such a policy would be effective at protecting public health.” The All Party Parliamentary Group on AIDS, which had conducted the inquiry, had expressed grave concerns at efforts to “exclude vulnerable individuals on the basis of poor health.”

Just days after Howard’s announcement, the Labour government unveiled its own plans to scapegoat immigrants.

Whilst acknowledging that some migration was necessary, Home Secretary Charles Clarke said, “What is wrong is when that system is not properly policed and people are coming here who are a burden on the society. It is that we intend to drive out.”

The government’s proposals similarly entail the restriction of immigration to those whose skills are required. To ensure that this is strictly monitored, Clarke proposed that everyone granted a visa to enter Britain would be required to have his or her fingerprints recorded.

Clarke further proposed speeding up the deportation of failed asylum seekers, and the establishment of electronic border controls. Prime Minister Tony Blair said that these measures were necessary because “The fact of the matter is the public are worried about this; they are worried rightly because there are abuses of the immigration and asylum system.”

The Labour government has already severely curtailed the right to immigration and asylum. The latest figures show that 34,000 people sought asylum in

the UK in 2004, compared with 49,000 in 2003. Nonetheless, Immigration Minister Des Browne has announced a further crackdown to increase the number of deportations. This is to be aimed against young asylum seekers.

The Home Office will shortly introduce a trial whereby failed asylum applicants below 18 years of age will be sent back to their home countries, even if they have no family to go to. It is expected that teenagers who have arrived from Albania will be expelled first.

The anti-immigrant campaign by the official parties has provided succor to the extreme right. Following the announcement of Howard's proposals, British National Party (BNP) leader Nick Griffin said that the Tories' plans were "a definite move onto our turf." He added, "I quite freely accept that on a nationwide basis, the Tories will con enough people to make a significant hole in our vote."

According to a briefing document sent to Labour MPs, the BNP intends to stand between 100 and 120 candidates in the forthcoming election, including seats held by members of the Tory Party shadow cabinet. This is three times as many as it stood at the 2001 general election, and will allow the BNP to broadcast a nationwide televised election broadcast.

At the same time, Veritas, the political grouping recently founded by Robert Kilroy-Silk following his defection from the anti-European UK Independence Party (UKIP), floated its demands that all migrants be subjected to health checks.

The complaint of the extreme right is that Labour and the Tories' measures do not go far enough in restricting immigration.

Recent statistics reveal why the main parties are not prepared to close the door entirely on immigration, however. While they are only too willing to use migrants as scapegoats for the social devastation caused by their own policies, they also want ready access to a plentiful supply of skilled cheap labour.

Statistics released by the Home Office on February 23 revealed that 133,000 workers from eastern Europe have applied to work in the UK following the admittance of the 10 "accession" countries to the European Union last year. Some 83 percent of these applicants are single people, aged between 18 and 34 years, and 80 percent of the total number earn between £4.50 and £5.99 an hour.

The Blair government is targeting professional migrants as part of its effort to fill the widespread skills shortage in the UK, particularly in the National Health Service (NHS). England currently has a shortage of 1,850 dentists, for example, and the government has pledged to recruit an additional 1,000 dentists by October, most of whom will be brought in from eastern Europe, particularly Poland.

On February 22, a report entitled, *Whose Charity? Africa's Aid to the NHS*, issued by the Save the Children organisation, found that recruiting doctors and nurses from Ghana has saved the National Health Service £65 million in training costs since 1999. More than 1,000 Ghanaian nurses are now employed in the NHS.

The charity wrote that "Health services in the UK are benefiting from the collapse of health services in some of the poorest countries of the world due to the widespread and increasing migration of health professionals. Children in these countries are unable to obtain the most basic health services and many die as a consequence".



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