

Britain: Leading Labourites play the race card

Chris Marsden, Julie Hyland
4 May 2006

After a decade in which the term “working class” has been virtually expunged from official political discourse, it has recently been rediscovered by sections of the Labour bureaucracy. However, the apparent revelation that the working class still exists is raised only in an attempt to provide Labour’s anti-working class agenda with a populist veneer of the most right-wing character.

Leading representatives of New Labour, such as Employment Minister Margaret Hodge and MP John Cruddas, who backed Prime Minister Tony Blair when he announced he would “take class out of British politics,” now say the party has lost touch with the working class, or more specifically the “white working class,” raising the danger of significant gains by the fascist British National Party in local authority elections on May 4.

Hodge made her claim in an interview with the *Sunday Telegraph*, long considered the mouthpiece of the Conservative right. In it she asserted that as many as eight out of ten people she had spoken to whilst she was campaigning in her east London constituency were considering voting for the BNP.

White families in east London “can’t get a home for their children, they see black and ethnic minority communities moving in and they are angry,” Hodge said.

Whereas 10 years ago her Barking and Dagenham constituency “was a predominantly white, working class area,” now it was similar to other parts of London, such as “Camden or Brixton”—i.e., racially mixed areas.

She complained about a “lack of leadership” from her party on race, and said the “political class” was frightened of the issue. “Part of the reason they switch to the BNP is they feel no one else is listening to them,” she concluded.

Although Hodge subsequently issued some platitudes about the benefits of “multiculturalism,” the underlying message was received loud and clear. Politicians and media commentators lined up to express their own concern for the fate of the “white working class,” while black workers were generally referred to as immigrants, asylum-seekers or as members of one or other ethnic “community.” Even when media pundits decried the BNP’s overt racism, they still managed to blame every social problem from the shortage of council houses to hospital waiting lists on allocation criteria that supposedly discriminates against whites. Moreover, the growth of racist sentiment was portrayed as the product of legitimate anger over this and other forms of political correctness associated with “multiculturalism.”

There is no reason to deny the possibility that the BNP will win

council seats. A report by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation on “The Far Right in London,” which coincided with Hodge’s interview, indicates that the collapse in support for the traditional political parties, particularly Labour, and declining voter turnout, has worked to the electoral advantage of the BNP in some areas. In addition, the BNP has been able to capitalise on the fact that its own attempts to demonise immigrants and asylum-seekers are echoed by mainstream politicians and the mass media. Indeed, in a recent court trial against BNP leader Nick Griffin for incitement to racial hatred, Griffin successfully argued that many of the party’s provocative statements against racial minorities were based on press reports.

However, Hodge’s remarks and the supportive manner in which they were taken up across the political establishment are more than simply an opportunist, knee-jerk response to an electoral challenge by the BNP.

There is a striking parallel between the warnings now being issued about the BNP and the response to the growth in electoral support for its predecessor, the National Front, in the late 1970s. Then the soon to be Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made the claim that Britain was being “swamped” by immigrants a central feature of her election campaign in 1978—adopting the NF’s line as her own.

The difference between then and now is that her remarks were framed as a criticism of a Labour government and succeeded in winning the allegiance of NF’s electoral base to the Conservatives. This time it is a caucus within the Labour Party that is seeking to cultivate support by pandering to ignorance and racial prejudice and in the process ideologically justify a further shift to the right.

Once again, the argument goes that, in order to tear the political ground from under the fascists, it is necessary to be seen to be tough on immigration and asylum-seekers. And, more important still, it is necessary to overhaul the welfare system to address the supposedly justified grievances which the BNP exploits.

Cruddas was Blair’s deputy political secretary from 1997 until 2001 when he became MP for Dagenham. On every major issue, from the Iraq war to foundation hospitals, he has backed the government. However, Labour’s loss of support and the electoral challenge of the BNP in his own constituency have convinced him that it is not enough to focus exclusively on middle class swing voters, while ignoring the working class.

Aside from this observation one searches in vain for how

Cruddas would alter Labour's policies. But he mixes in intellectual circles that gravitate around *Prospect* magazine, the Young Foundation and other semi-official think tanks of New Labour that are far more explicit in their prescriptions.

The core of those who are newly enamoured with the white working class consists of a layer of careerist politicians and advisors who owe their positions and influence to the emergence of New Labour as a right-wing bourgeois party.

Prospect is edited by David Goodhart, who in 2004 wrote a polemic questioning whether it was possible to preserve a welfare state in an ethnically diverse society, arguing against universal provision.

Other writers for *Prospect* include Cruddas and Geoff Mulgan, a former Stalinist and one-time top Blair advisor who now heads the Young Foundation. Both *Prospect* and the Young Foundation have championed the work of Kate Gavron and Geoff Dench, who together with the late Michael Young (after whom the foundation is named) authored *The New East End—Kinship, Race and Conflict*. The book argues that the welfare state's "preoccupation with the most vulnerable," including immigrants, has marginalised the white working class and fuelled racism.

The authors cite interviews with white residents complaining that Bangladeshis are given priority for council housing and raising other similar grievances. The essential thrust is that the provision of welfare services as a universal right determined by need offends workers' sense of "fair play" by rewarding those who have not paid in to the system.

[Lady] Kate Gavron is the wife of publishing tycoon Lord Gavron, one of the major financial backers of the Labour Party and Blair's private office.

In October 2005, Goodhart, Hodge and Cruddas participated in a *Prospect* sponsored event, "What's left for Labour?—Reviving progressive politics," at which the keynote speech was made by Prime Minister Blair.

Another contributor to *Prospect* is Labour MP Frank Field, who has made a name for himself by arguing for major reform of the welfare state. He seized the opportunity provided by Hodge's remarks and the ensuing debate over racial resentment to argue more generally for an end to universal welfare provision.

Field's article for the *Daily Telegraph*, "Why Labour Is Losing the Working Class," supported the work of Dench and Gavron, but argued that race is only one flashpoint for resentment over allocation policies "that put at the top of the list groups who, in the local community's eye, have less claim than other groups." It was not only favourable treatment of immigrants and asylum-seekers that is provoking "the revolt of working-class voters" against "the hostile social values they see imposed on their lives by the aloof metropolitan elite" with its "foreign idea of individualised rights" that is an affront to working people's "sense of fairness, grounded in a collective social ethic".

In Field's Liverpool constituency of Birkenhead the main cause of anger amongst voters is the "advantage that single parents or the homeless have in sweeping the weekly housing jackpots."

He argued for a three-point plan to ration social provision based on "length of service as good tenants," a "partial freeze on benefit levels for single people" and a "mandatory contributory period

before welfare can be drawn," with health care "strictly linked to people's residency in this country."

Field's argument strips bare the essential political purpose of the recent efforts of the *Prospect*/Young Foundation crowd to "listen to the views of working people."

Their talk of undermining the BNP is founded on the premise that the fascists are in tune with what working people think. To this end, the views of millions of former Labour voters who are bitterly hostile to the BNP are ignored. Instead, the prejudices of a minority that are systematically cultivated by all the major parties and the mass media are given legitimacy and made the touchstone for the development of policy.

None of those bemoaning Labour's loss of touch with the working class has raised the slightest criticism of its pro-business agenda and its ongoing dismantling of public provision. The vast growth of social inequality under successive Conservative and Labour governments has created a situation in which almost one-third of the population are officially classed as poor, whilst millions more live in a state of perpetual economic insecurity.

This has increased the need for social provision, at the very point where it is being cut to the bone, creating a situation in which millions are forced to compete against one another for ever dwindling resources such as council housing. Curtailing access to welfare benefits has nothing to do with a system based on "individual rights," as Field claims. Means-testing has been vastly increased in order to make massive budget cuts, limiting access to the most desperate while depriving working people of their previous social rights.

The real beneficiaries of these policies have been the major corporations, the banks and the super-rich whose wealth has increased exponentially under Blair.

Field's proposals have nothing to do with promoting a "collective social ethic." He and his co-thinkers merely want to divert social grievances into support for measures to further limit public provision.

First, immigrants and asylum-seekers are scapegoated for the government's failure to provide decent housing, health and welfare provision for all. Then come single parents, the homeless, the "work-shy" and others deemed to be "undeserving." In the end, what remains of the welfare state will be finally dismantled and replaced by a contributory social insurance scheme that will leave millions in abject poverty.

Together with a readiness to exploit racial tensions in order to divide the working class, in this area too Labour would then follow a line all but indistinguishable from that of the BNP. Its manifesto argues, "While we do not believe in cutting the welfare state as an end in itself, we will reduce the number of people receiving benefits and reallocate the funds to the truly needy (especially pensioners) and to public services like the NHS, schools, and public transport."



To contact the WSWs and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact