

Britain: Labour whips up anti-immigrant prejudice

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Once again, a desperate Labour government, fearing electoral meltdown, is responding by mounting a xenophobic campaign against immigrants. And once again, the *Guardian* and the *Observer* newspapers, the supposed bastions of liberal opinion, have come forward as conduits for government propaganda and apologists for the most venal right-wing sentiment.

On April 18, Immigration Minister Liam Byrne declared that immigration was harming Britain's poor and had deeply unsettled the country. While publicising his own contribution to a pamphlet—"Rethinking Immigration and Integration"—published by the Policy Network think tank, he announced that new immigration controls would begin in the UK next year.

His statement comes against a background of the fascist British National Party (BNP) mounting a major election campaign for the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly as well as in English local council elections. Just days before he spoke, many workers were horrified by an example of the appalling racist sentiments that have been whipped up by the political establishment and the media, when an Algerian asylum seeker and her one-year-old son were sexually assaulted in a racially motivated attack. The 33-year old woman was verbally abused, pelted with stones and kicked by a group of young men as she walked her child in his pram in Glasgow. One man exposed himself to the mother and sexually assaulted both the woman and her son.

During the same week, the release of official figures showing net migration to Britain of 185,000 in 2005 had occasioned David Conway, from the right-wing think tank Civitas, to accuse the Blair government of permitting "unending mass immigration" by abandoning the goal of limiting new workers arriving from the new eastern European EU member states. Britain was losing its identity as a nation and faced "political disintegration," he said.

Not much distinguishes the claims of Byrne from Conway's ravings, other than his acceptance of industry's demands that some immigration is vital for economic growth. Aside from those considered necessary for the UK's labour market, however, he insists that immigration must be curbed.

What makes Byrne's statements even more grotesque is that his argument is framed in terms of a "concern" for working people.

"Migration has to support Britain's national interests," he declared. "A new Australian-style points-based system will be simpler, clearer and easier to enforce," giving the government "the best way of letting in only those people who have something to offer Britain."

In his pamphlet, Byrne adds, "We also have to accept that laissez-faire migration runs the risk of damaging communities where parts of our anti-poverty strategy have come under pressure."

Sudden increases in immigration into poor parts of Britain hit government attempts to improve life for the indigenous population, he said, ignoring the fact that the government has pursued a deliberate policy of dispatching asylum seekers to these same deprived areas so as to lessen its costs and placate the prejudices of its better-off supporters.

A five-tier points-based system was the answer, he said, with highly skilled workers in tier one being allowed into Britain without a firm job offer. Qualified workers such as nurses and teachers would only be allowed in to fill shortages, and low-skilled workers would only gain entry to fill specific job vacancies for fixed periods. In addition, Byrne is in favour of measures to ensure that immigrants assimilate "British culture."

The *Telegraph*, long associated with the Conservative Party, was suitably impressed by Byrne's conversion to its views. Columnist Alice Thomson tracked Byrne down in China after he had first expounded his views in Australia, noting that "He laughed when I suggested that he has now left both [former Conservative Party leaders] William Hague and Michael Howard way behind in discussions about immigration. The person he now cites most often is Sir Andrew Green from Migrationwatch, the think-tank once vilified by his party."

Byrne warned Thomson that unchecked immigration would "severely damage our country." He advocated a "much sharper attack on illegal immigration, they are the ones undercutting wages. It means stopping illegal journeys by creating an offshore border control. It means shutting down illegal jobs and it means the introduction of ID cards."

He called for a re-examination of "how people can earn their citizenship" and that "[i]t is essential that they integrate." The *Telegraph* noted approvingly that he also "wants to introduce a national day to celebrate what is best about Britain. "Everyone should sit down once a year and think how lucky they are to be British."

In a final flourish, Byrne attacked the Conservatives from the right, complaining, "The way the Tories used to talk about immigration was deeply irresponsible, it was all scaremongering. *But now they barely talk about it at all.*" [Emphasis added]

Byrne is no maverick. Labour's leader-in-waiting, Chancellor Gordon Brown, has already stated that migrants should be forced to do community work as part of their reorientation to British society. And following on from Byrne, the *Observer* reported former Home Secretary David Blunkett stating that council housing should be set aside for Britons in order to "help tackle rising anger at immigrants and single mothers perceived to be jumping the housing queue."

The *Observer* not only reported Blunkett without comment but

praised Byrne's supposed bravery. Calling for an "open debate" on immigration, it insisted, "Not everyone who thinks immigration is an important political issue is a racist."

"Mr. Byrne is right to address the social effects of immigration," it continued, before adding the caveat, "He is wrong, however, to fall back on the refrain that 'tough' controls are the answer.... Fear of immigration is best tackled with action to target those who are thrust into competition with migrants. That means more affordable housing and skills training."

The *Observer's* disagreement with Byrne's message is just a pose. Together with the *Guardian*, it has both encouraged and promoted Labour's policy shift on immigration. This began as far back as February 2004, when the *Guardian* ran a feature written by David Goodhart, editor of *Prospect* magazine.

Goodhart, a nominal liberal, essentially argued that, thanks to immigration, it is impossible to maintain a welfare state because people are only willing to share material resources with those with whom they share a common culture and values. He complained of having to share public services, "parts of our income in the welfare state" and even "public spaces in towns and cities where we are squashed together on buses, trains and tubes" with "stranger citizens." Then he asked whether one can any longer reconcile a commitment to progressive welfare policies with opposition to strictly enforced immigration controls.

The *Guardian* appealed for a national debate around Goodhart's essay and found a ready response in a tendency in the Labour Party that has specialised in making calls for stronger measures to curb immigration, claiming this is the key to winning back Labour's working class supporters and combating the growth of the BNP. Its most vocal representative is John Cruddas, Member of Parliament for Dagenham and a challenger for deputy leader of the Labour Party. He argues that support for the BNP can be attributed to the legitimate grievances of white workers aroused by illegal immigration and false asylum claims, together with welfare policies that also discriminate against the "white working class."

In this way, the threat of the BNP is being used to argue for the adoption of yet more right-wing social policies by Labour. Immigrants and asylum seekers are offered up as scapegoats for all manner of social grievances created by ever-worsening social inequality; the decimation of social provision such as the National Health Service and council house shortages for which Labour is responsible.

Cruddas and Byrne have both been commissioned to expound their views on the "dangers" of immigration by the *Guardian*. On the paper's *Comment Is Free* website, April 19, Cruddas writes that "In the past few years many communities have experienced extraordinary rates of change through mass migration," with the resulting problems "compounded by the fact that those affected most severely by the rapid demographic changes are the poorest in our society who are least equipped to deal with them."

Three days later, *Comment Is Free* ran a joint piece by Byrne and Jeoren Dijsselbloem, the Dutch Labour Party's home affairs spokesperson. Holland has some of the toughest immigration controls in Europe, including a requirement that would-be migrants pass a Dutch language test in their country of origin costing more than US\$400, and a "test" to determine agreement with Holland's so-called "liberal" culture, involving the showing of a two-hour film featuring scenes of homosexuals kissing and nude bathing. It does not take a genius to see whom the test is set up to exclude—the poor and the devout Muslim.

A flavour of Byrne and Dijsselbloem's message can be garnered by the fact that they feel impelled to declare, "This is not a mad rightwing agenda."

"The Dutch left have made the clear point that if we want to maintain solidarity within our welfare-state, free-riders have to be removed," the two authors insist.

The political transformation of Labour into a vehicle for big business—a neo-conservative party in all but name—is matched by the forced march of a section of the liberal petty bourgeoisie to the right. The *Guardian* and the *Observer* epitomise this embrace of xenophobia and the pursuit of self-enrichment. It is a phenomenon that has been noted by Stephen Glover, writing in no less a publication than the *Daily Mail*, once the bastion of everything that the liberal intelligentsia was meant to oppose.

Praising Byrne under the headline, "At last, a minister being honest about mass immigration's effect on Britain," Glover continues, "Interestingly, the Left seems readier than the Right to tackle these difficult issues.

"I am not only thinking of Mr. Byrne. David Goodhart, the Left-leaning editor of *Prospect* magazine, not long ago questioned the liberal consensus that unlimited immigration is a good thing, while that high priestess of political correctness, Polly Toynbee, wrote a memorable column in the *Guardian* newspaper suggesting that mass immigration makes the rich richer and the poor poorer.

"Even the *BBC* is increasingly willing to let the subject be aired, if its treatment of Sir Andrew Green's Migration-Watch is anything to go by."

The pose of concern for Britain's poor by Byrne, Cruddas and their advocates in the media is entirely cynical. And the measures they advocate are both divisive and self-defeating. The downward pressure on wage levels is very real, as are the shortages in housing and health care. But measures taken against immigrants will not combat this. They will only weaken the working class in its fight against the predations of big business.

Wage levels are forced down by the inexorable logic of global competition and cannot be opposed by battenning down the hatches through national protectionist measures such as immigration controls. Rather, everything depends on a unified struggle by working people that cuts across all attempts to divide them along national or ethnic lines.

In the same way, any defence of the right to free and universal health care and decent housing and education is predicated on opposition to all attempts to scapegoat immigrants—not just by the BNP but also by Labour in its ongoing efforts to legitimise racism and anti-immigrant prejudice.

The Socialist Equality Party is standing in the elections to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly to advance a socialist and internationalist programme against all the advocates of nationalism across the political spectrum.



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