Britain’s political and media establishment promotes anti-immigrant sentiment

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A survey commissioned by the anti-fascist group Searchlight has been given saturation media coverage in Britain. Banner headlines have claimed that the level of support for the far right in the UK could outstrip that in Holland, France and other European countries—provided only that the far right groups such as the British National Party, the English Defence League or some new variant somehow break their association with fascism and violence.

This is no small caveat to place, given that the vast majority of working people rightly associate the far right with fascism and violence. Just as importantly, neither the survey, nor the response to it by the media can be accepted at face value. Both represent a conscious political intervention at a time of worsening economic crisis and mounting social antagonisms aimed at legitimising the scapegoating of immigrants and Muslims in particular for society’s ills.

According to the poll, 48 percent of the population would consider supporting a new anti-immigration party committed to challenging Islamist extremism. Searchlight proclaimed that the lower level of support for anti-immigrant movements in the UK compared with France, home of the National Front, and the Netherlands, home to Geert Wilders Party For Freedom, is “not because British people are more moderate, but simply because their views have not found a political articulation.”

Searchlight is a pro-Zionist group, which is keen to portray Islamic extremism as one of the central problems in the UK. It has the support of key Labour Party figures, former Foreign Secretary David Miliband and Labour MP Jon Cruddas, who officially unveiled the report and will, reports the *Daily Mail*, “launch Searchlight’s *Together* project to tackle extremism among white and Islamic-communities with the slogan: ‘A plague on both their houses’.”

Cruddas has argued for some time that Labour should respond to the growth in support for the BNP and the emergence of the EDL by adopting a supposedly “inclusive nationalism”. He wrote last year in the *Times* that the EDL is “anchored in English male working-class culture—a people who believe they have been robbed of their birthright and who are in search of community and belonging.”

Cruddas is writing a book with Searchlight leader Nick Lowles “about Identity, Englishness and class.” According to Lowles, “In our view the BNP [British National Party], and now the EDL, are engaging in a cultural war and giving a new sense of white nationalist identity to many people.” He told the *Sunday Mirror*, “The harsh truth is we are in danger of losing touch with the public on race, immigration and multi-culturalism.”

There is no reason to accept the claims of the survey as to the extent of anti-Muslim or anti-immigrant sentiment. It was carried out by the polling group Populus, who asked 91 questions which were confusing enough to produce a greater degree of opposition to immigration amongst Asian rather than white respondents. Populus Strategic Director Andrew Cooper is Prime Minister David Cameron’s Director of Political Strategy.

As always, the invoking of the threat from the far-right becomes an occasion for the “respectable”, official parties to make their own tack to the right—all in the name of taking the ground from under the far right’s feet. The survey, as is inevitably the case, portrays anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment as a popular view of the “lower orders,” who are somehow defying the “multi-cultural”, progressive, tolerant message of the political class. This turns reality on its head. Anti-immigrant rhetoric, particularly targeting Muslims, is the constant resort of the major parties and the media.

The Searchlight survey comes only weeks after Cameron’s speech to the Munich Security Conference, claiming that the “biggest threat” to security was terrorist attacks by “young men who follow a completely perverse, warped interpretation of Islam”. The root cause of such support, he insisted, was neither social deprivation nor hostility to “western foreign policy” but “state multiculturalism”. “Passive tolerance” must be replaced by “muscular liberalism,” he demanded.

Immediately after the report’s publication, Labour leader Ed Miliband chose to declare that the last government had

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been “wrong” on immigration, had underestimated the number of immigrants that would come from Eastern Europe and blamed this entirely for the fall in workers’ living standards—rather than Labour’s deliberate policy of waging economic and social warfare against the working class on behalf of its big business backers.

The central propaganda message of the far right is that the shortages of jobs, housing and the growing strain on the National Health Service means that they should be reserved for citizens who have “paid in”. This is usually accompanied by fictional stories of asylum seekers and immigrants receiving special treatment or queue jumping. But this too is the central message of the entire establishment, liberal or otherwise, with Labour MP Margaret Hodge’s demand that established families be prioritised over immigrants for public housing immediately prior to British families with a “legitimate sense of entitlement” only one of the more notorious examples. It provides the perfect cover for their own responsibility in imposing cuts on behalf of big business—the real source of society’s problems—while lending credence to the overtly racial and nationalist arguments of the fascists.

In this instance, however, something more drastic than the major parties tacking right is being considered. Searchlight’s report reads like an appeal for the establishment of a Wilders-Tea Party-type formation in the UK, complete with a list of policies: the creation of an English parliament, making it compulsory to fly the St George flag over public buildings, and restricting the building of mosques. An incensed BNP leader Nick Griffin—evidently fearing the emergence of a competitor on the far right—said it was an appeal for the EDL to constitute itself as such a party.

This is a distinct possibility. The mass circulation tabloid, *The Daily Star*, is all but openly championing the transformation of the EDL into a party. On February 9 it led with a near full front page, “English Defence League to become political party”. It quoted the “party’s boss” Stephen Lennon (aka) Tommy Robinson stating, “We aren’t ruling it out… My hope is still that the Tories will take a tougher stance... we would rather have a dialogue with the other political parties—but that could change.”

An accompanying editorial, “Don’t dare ignore EDL”, stated: “There is a visibly growing support for the EDL. It is attracting people across Britain to its ranks who feel the same way… If the Tories, Labour and Lib Dems don’t heed this and address key issues they could soon become a political force.”

Cruddas said of the Searchlight report, “The political class has been warned.”

In reality, the political class needs no warning that it has lost all support amongst broad layers of the working class, but it is not the BNP or EDL’s growth that it fears.

Sections of the ruling elite are actively contemplating and even seeking to engineer the creation of a more “respectable” nationalist, anti-immigrant party because they are acutely aware of the social and political chasm that has opened up between the super-rich elite they speak for and the vast majority of the working population. As is the case throughout Europe, the political class is seeking to fill this vacuum with a party espousing right-wing populism, channelling social discontent into blaming immigrants for the destruction of jobs, wages and the gutting of social services for which the bankers and major corporations are responsible.

This is made all the more urgent by their need to impose austerity measures they know threatens to unleash explosive class struggles. As has been demonstrated in the revolutionary events in Tunisia and Egypt, such an eruption of the class struggle will create a powerful impulse towards the unification of working people across all the divisions of nationality, ethnicity and religion. But just as the ruling class is seeking to build up far right parties to block the emergence of united working class struggle, so too must the working class begin to articulate its own strategy.

Politics abhors a vacuum. It is the responsibility of the most farsighted workers and youth to ensure that the racist and nationalist poison being generated is countered through the building of a mass social and political movement championing the essential social interests of all workers, and guided by the socialist and internationalist principles advanced by the *World Socialist Web Site* and embodied in the Socialist Equality Party.

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