Britain's Independent advocates nationalist populism

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The *Independent* and the *Independent on Sunday* have used a survey they commissioned on "the social attitudes of the declining working class" to urge the formation of a new right-wing political party.

Last weekend, the two newspapers carried no less than five articles on the subject. The *Independent on Sunday's* lead article announced, "the second phase of the most comprehensive study of class in Britain … by the research company BritainThinks."

BritainThinks asserts that the "working class is fast disappearing in Britain." It reports, "Only a quarter of the population [is] now identifying themselves as working class." It claims that "pride in their social position is turning to bitterness" as "manual workers feel themselves squeezed between benefit claimants, immigrants and the expanding middle class."

The first part of the study, published in March, "looked at the attitudes of the 71 percent of people who describe themselves as middle class. Today's report used focus groups in Rotherham and Basildon to probe the attitudes of the modern working class."

These designations are politically loaded, using research criteria designed to first prove the assertion that the working class is disappearing and then to attribute right-wing positions to those deemed to have maintained the status of working class.

In 2007, a survey of social attitudes by the National Centre for Social Research found that 57 percent of adults in the UK claimed to be working class, a statistic it found to be "remarkable". In contrast, BritainThinks conducted what it describes as a "weighted online poll of 2,000 people" that, by asking highly specific questions, managed to find that almost three quarters of respondents—71 percent—placed themselves in "one [N.B.] of the 'middle class' categories."

This poll set out to refute the British Social Attitudes Survey, which the report's authors, Ben Shimshon and Deborah Mattinson complain, "offered three categories (upper, middle and working)" and so produced "a slim majority" that classify themselves as working class. To combat this, BritainThinks offered two additional categories—lower and upper middle. Unsurprisingly, the authors explained in the *Guardian*, that meant "a big majority placing themselves somewhere in the middle".

Focus groups in Basildon and Rotherham set to work to investigate "the views of the 24 percent who identified themselves as working class in the survey.

Rotherham in South Yorkshire would have been picked because it is the county most closely associated with Labour reformism and the 1985-86 miners' strike; Basildon in Essex presumably because it is portrayed as home to the sons and daughters of working class "yuppies" who formed part of the social base of support for Margaret Thatcher during the 1980s.

The *Independent*'s survey comes as the media's propaganda attack against the working class reaches a new level of ferocity and cynicism. There is no end of television programmes and newspaper articles pontificating over the vexed issue of the "fast disappearing working class". Hand-in-hand with this is the continuous stream of vitriol directed at so-called "benefit cheats" and "scroungers". Prime time television slots are given over to drama programmes, such as "Shameless", that seek to portray the whole working class as lumpen, and "reality shows" like "the Scheme" and "Saints and Scroungers", with a remit of uncovering "benefit fraudsters" and contrasting them to those "helping their communities".

The role of such dross is to scapegoat the most vulnerable and cover over for those who are really responsible for the often desperate plight of working people, the financial oligarchy who have systematically defrauded the country of billions of pounds.

Mattinson, joint founder of BritainThinks, was a pollster to Gordon Brown, firstly when he was chancellor of the exchequer, then prime minister. She is a board member of Green Alliance and joint CEO of Opinion Leader Research. Shimshon began his career at the Smith Institute, a pro-Labour think-tank.

The focus groups' answers were predictable, given the rapidly deteriorating social conditions, the political disenfranchising of the working class due to the rightward shift of their old organisations, and above all the nature of the questions put to them. It is hardly surprising that BritainThinks found a high level of anger and

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confusion, along with some backwardness, among those it surveyed.

BritainThinks asserts that the self-designated "working class" are deemed to be particularly anxious to differentiate themselves from a "fourth class"—a "lower class", "underclass", or "chav" class—which is typified by the "scrounger" who "knows more about the benefits system than the rest of us put together."

Immigration, especially from central Europe, is blamed for depressing wages. "There are no unions anymore because there are too many foreigners in the country now: They work for pennies. It's killing the British workforce," is offered as a distillation of this view.

Working-class participants in the focus groups described politicians as "middle-class rich kids". Labour MPs are "champagne socialists" and the Conservatives are "just the same but in a different colour suit." The Liberal Democrats would "say anything to get into power"—no confusion expressed here.

The *Independent* remarks, "One thing that comes through the BritainThinks survey most clearly is that the uncertain and defensive rump of the working class feels that it has been abandoned by conventional politics."

The nature of this all-too-real abandonment is defined in the most reactionary terms imaginable: "In retrospect, the Labour Party, and perhaps even newspapers such as The *Independent on Sunday*, had lost touch with what life was like in poor areas. Some people who pointed out the negative impact of immigration or the EU on some people in Britain were unfairly brushed aside as racists or extremists…."

Yet the concerns of the working class and "squeezed middle class" were similar, and could not be ignored, the newspaper continued. The coalition government's assault on welfare is "a bold attempt to get to grips with the benefits system's failings." The *Independent* similarly praised Labour leader Ed Miliband's appeal to open the party up to "Charities, pressure groups and community organisations."

These then are the themes: the "negative impact of immigration," the "brave" politicians who highlight this fact, the "squeezed middle class" and its concerns, striving for "national unity" based upon restricting social housing and other welfare measures to those who have "paid in", and targeting the "work-shy".

The forces driving the *Independent's* campaign for a new right-wing party are the deepening social antagonisms in Britain and the gathering pace of world revolution—the struggles that have been sweeping the Middle East that are now moving on to Europe and threatening the economic institutions of world capitalism.

It is notable that the newspaper praised Labour figures such as Margaret Hodge and Jon Cruddas. Leading personnel in Tony Blair's New Labour, they are now among a layer of Labour apparatchiks who are leading the call for the party to adopt a more overtly nationalist and racist policy, under the guise of reaching out to the working class.

Cruddas, who stood in Labour's deputy leadership campaign in 2007, is interviewed. He congratulated the Labour government for devolving power to Scotland and Wales, both of which have seen "a renewed sense of nationhood and modern patriotism developing". But there was no equivalent mood in England. "Labour should have an 'English Labour'. It should embrace a modern, radical Englishness, or else England and patriotism will simply be a right-wing politics of loss and sourness," he said.

Cruddas is identified as "a key thinker in the Blue Labour movement championed by Lord Glasman, an adviser to Ed Miliband." For an appraisal of this movement, readers can refer to "What does Britain's 'Blue Labour' represent?"

The *Independent* opines that Cruddas "laments how Labour has allowed right-wingers to 'reframe all of the debates around nationhood, the family, the public services, the deficit, the state and hostility to it'."

The *Independent* once gave the impression of being a left-leaning newspaper, but it was lurching to the right even before it was acquired by Russian oligarch and billionaire, Alexander Lebedev. He had earlier bought the *London Evening Standard* and this gives him political influence and powerful friends in high places. When Lebedev was asked about his past in the KGB at a 2009 press conference in London, he replied by appealing to the press "to refrain from calling him a KGB agent as it gave misleading outdated impression of his background."

In May 2008 *Forbes* magazine put his personal wealth at $3.1 billion.

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