

UK: Tony Blair calls for anti-immigration policies to stop Brexit

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Former British Labour prime minister, Tony Blair, has called for the introduction of draconian anti-immigration measures, to pave the way for the reversal of last year's referendum vote to leave the European Union (EU).

Blair is the de facto leader of the faction of the ruling elite that favours remaining in the EU and its Single Market.

In a concerted intervention over the weekend, Blair was joined by his Labour peer acolyte, Baron Andrew Adonis. Their remarks were timed to coincide with the second reading of the Tories' European Union (Withdrawal) Bill—the first step in legally removing the UK from the EU in March 2019.

Blair authored a *Sunday Times* article, “Only a hard Brexit is on offer—and that will do Britain immense damage,” and has issued a paper setting out his anti-immigration policies via the “Tony Blair Institute for Global Change.”

When he was in office in 2004, “the economy was strong, the workers [were] needed,” he wrote. “The times were different; the sentiment was different; and intelligent politics takes account of such change.”

Those who support remaining in the EU, writes Blair, must now make “uncomfortable choices.” He declares, “There is no diversion possible from Brexit without addressing the grievances which gave rise to it. Paradoxically, we have to respect the referendum vote to change it.”

It is a lie that referendum result was primarily the product of anti-immigrant sentiment. A more critical factor was disaffection with the political establishment and anger over social inequality—both of which Blair and his Labour government were instrumental in creating.

But Blair now utilises the same argument as the

xenophobic UK Independence Party to justify adopting its policies. His paper, “EU Migration: Examining the evidence and policy choices,” was authored by Harvey Redgrave, a former Labour government advisor under Blair and his successor Gordon Brown.

The paper's introduction states that politicians have to set out “how to reform the current system of free movement of people *in a way that responds to public anxiety, whilst leaving open the option of remaining within the EU, or, should that not be possible, ensuring Britain retains its membership of the Single Market*” (emphasis added).

This means that while visa-free travel should be maintained at the UK's borders, EU nationals must be quizzed and refused entry if they are thought to be looking for work. “All EU nationals would be required to register on arrival,” it states.

Those EU nationals wanting to work “would need to show evidence of a job offer to be given permission to reside (and employers would be required to provide confirmation). EU nationals without permission to reside would be ineligible to rent, open a bank account, or access welfare benefits and would be subject to removal. Employers would also be required to check whether EU job applicants were illegally residing in the UK.”

Blair advocates “new, discriminatory (relative to UK nationals) terms and conditions for EU nationals taking up residence in the UK. That could include going further to restrict access to public resources (e.g., free health care) for EU migrants that are economically inactive; indexing of child benefit payments sent abroad; or enabling UK businesses and universities to give preference to UK citizens over EU nationals, for example, with respect to apprenticeship schemes and/or the charging of tuition fees for study.”

Negotiations with the EU could agree to “retain free movement but include safeguard provisions to restrict flows for a temporary period ... either on the labour market or on public services.”

Blair’s demands confirm that there was nothing progressive about the Remain campaign, as the Socialist Equality Party explained at the time. It was shaped entirely by the demands of big business and the security-military apparatus. Concern for freedom of movement applies only to the freedom of capital to exploit workers internationally.

Significantly, Blair’s paper proposes finding “common cause with [French] President Macron who has expressed a desire to tackle the undercutting of wages and conditions, by amending the Posted Workers Directive ...”

Macron, a former leader of the French Socialist Party, is tying his attacks on the French Labour Code and the removal of workers’ rights to changes in the Posted Workers Directive (PWD). Under PWD, European companies can send employees to work in another EU member country while continuing to pay benefits and taxes in their own country. Macron is calling for restrictions on PWD, including limiting posted workers contracts to one year.

In his *Guardian* article, Adonis wrote, “The EU withdrawal bill, which started in the House of Commons last week, is the mechanism by which a referendum [over the final EU/UK deal resulting from the ongoing negotiations over the terms of Brexit] can be secured. When the bill reaches the House of Lords early next year, there will almost certainly be a majority of peers prepared to insert a requirement for a referendum before withdrawal takes effect.”

On this basis, “[T]he crucial political event of 2018 will be the vote in the House of Commons next summer on a proposed referendum on May’s proposed withdrawal treaty.” In order not to be seen to overturning vote to leave, Adonis writes, “It is vital this is not conceived as a rerun of last year’s poll, but rather a referendum on May’s deal.”

German Chancellor Angela Merkel and Macron could look favourably on such a referendum, calculated Adonis, “Partly because—in Macron’s case—he (rightly) doesn’t believe that unrestricted free movement of labour is integral to the single market. Partly because many other EU leaders agree with him.”

Adonis was explicit as regards the pro-imperialist considerations animating his and Blair’s strategy. His proposed policy could win support in the EU, “[P]artly for the big strategic reason—which weighs on strategic thinkers in Berlin—that, if Britain leaves the EU, 80 percent of NATO resources will then be outside the EU, which is hardly a recipe for European security and stability if you are looking across at the Russian and Chinese bears.”

It should be noted that Jeremy Corbyn has made no statement on the anti-immigrant and militarist agenda outlined by these two leading Labourites, who continue to dictate party policy. In fact, Corbyn has agreed that free movement must be curtailed.

The sinister and far-reaching measures proposed by leading Remain figures vindicate the SEP’s call for an active boycott of the referendum.

The ballot had nothing to do with democracy, let alone genuine political debate on the issues facing workers in Britain and Europe. It was a manoeuvre, engineered by then Prime Minister David Cameron, in an attempt to settle a faction fight between two equally right-wing factions of his party.

Warning that “whichever side wins, working people will pay the price,” the SEP stressed what was needed was for the working class to “advance its own internationalist programme to unify the struggles of workers throughout Europe in defence of living standards and democratic rights. The alternative for workers to the Europe of the transnational corporations is the struggle for the United Socialist States of Europe.”



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