

Britain: Labour government whips up anti-immigrant sentiment

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Prime Minister Tony Blair used discussions with his Spanish counterpart, Jose Maria Aznar, in London on May 20 to demand tougher asylum controls across Europe. Urging Aznar, who will host June's Seville summit of the European Union, to speed up the implementation of asylum controls, Blair proposed a three-point plan to be adopted by the EU. It includes:

- * Strengthening Europe's borders through special EU-wide intelligence gathering teams.

- * Threatening "third countries", such as Turkey and those in the Balkans, with loss of economic and financial assistance unless they agree to act as strong-arm gatekeepers for the EU against those seeking asylum in the West. The EU should wield its "economic and political muscle" against those countries that asylum seekers have passed through on their way to the continent and which refuse to take them back, Blair said.

- * Financial inducements to countries such as Greece to tighten up their border controls.

Blair claims that the enacting of ever more restrictive measures on asylum is necessary in order to "regain the initiative" from far-right anti-immigrant parties that increased their support in the recent French and Dutch elections. His remedy is not to launch a political campaign against anti-immigrant hysteria and xenophobia, but to kowtow before it by insisting that the traditional mainstream parties adopt much of the right's agenda.

In this he has the backing of other social democratic parties in Europe. Blair has reportedly been asked by the French Socialist Party to help defuse the so-called "Battle of Sangatte", in advance of the June 9 and 16 elections. The Boulogne constituency is home to a Calais transit camp, which holds some 1,500 immigrants. Both the British and French media have run sensationalist accounts of immigrants, awaiting deportation back to their country of origin, escaping from the camp and attempting to smuggle their way into Britain, via the Channel Tunnel. Britain has accused the French authorities of deliberately allowing the detainees to escape. In France Jean Marie Le Pen's National

Front has turned the camp into an election issue, using protests against Sangatte to support its anti-immigrant proposals. According to reports, Blair and the Socialist Party are working out a deal that will placate anti-immigrant sentiment in both countries. It has been suggested that 750 refugees could be sent to Britain, in return for France closing the Sangatte camp. The British government is said to be happy with such a solution, as all the refugees sent over would more than likely be deported back to their home countries.

The social democrats response is not simply a knee-jerk reaction to "public opinion". In the first instance, anti-immigrant sentiment has in large part been manufactured by a generally right-wing press and the major parties, both Labour and Conservative, who routinely scapegoat asylum seekers for all the social ills produced by their own pro-business policies.

Just 0.3 percent of global refugees ever get anywhere near the EU, due to the restrictive measures already in place. Most immigrants and asylum seekers are instead held in camps in generally poor countries neighbouring those they are fleeing. A desperate few, deprived of legitimate access to the West, pay traffickers to smuggle them in or attempt to stowaway on trains, lorries or even airplane undercarriages.

Those that manage to make it through are kept in dire circumstances—usually imprisoned in detention centres, whilst their claims are accessed. Most are deported.

State assistance to those awaiting processing is minimal. Those with any money or possessions must sell them first. Only the destitute are provided with any support, and then at the lowest level. In Britain, assistance is set at approximately 70 percent of state benefit, which is itself already set at the poverty line. This means a lone asylum seeker receives just £37.77 a week. Yet, due to malicious reporting, a *Reader's Digest* Mori poll in 2000 found that many people think asylum seekers receive more money than any one else, believing it to be on average £113 a week per person.

The official parties have positively encouraged such gross distortions of reality, with the social democratic parties

playing a particularly venal role. Only five years ago, the election of centre-left parties across much of Europe was said to mark an end to the type of social impoverishment that had characterised the previous decade. Instead these nominally left-wing government largely took up where their conservative predecessors left off. In France, the Netherlands, Britain and Germany for example, the social democrats abandoned social reforms and implemented measures in line with consolidating a European single market built in the interests of big capital.

As living standards have fallen, and public services been put under ever greater strain due to cuts in government spending and privatisation, the social democrats have been only too content for anti-immigrant prejudice to be whipped up as a distraction from their own responsibility for the social crisis.

In the more recent period, faced with a vocal right-wing opposition, they have played a more active role in stoking up such sentiments. Only last month, as the French presidential elections were underway, Britain's Secretary of State David Blunkett launched a vicious attack on asylum seekers, who he blamed for "swamping" inner-city schools and doctors surgeries.

This already noxious mix has been further poisoned by Europe's leaders support for the US-initiated "war against terror". The Bush administration, staffed by Christian fundamentalists, has dressed its warmongering up as a quasi-religious crusade. The war against Afghanistan accordingly was not only a battle between "good" and "evil", but between enlightened Christianity and the backward Muslim hordes.

Such imagery is designed not only to disguise the imperialist character of the West's interventions, and to prepare the ideological ground for further attacks, particularly in the Middle East and Asia. It is also aimed at sanctioning further punitive measures against the millions of people whose countries have been laid waste either by Western bombs, stringent economic sanctions, or both. Whilst the Western powers are free to scour the globe in pursuit of profits and colonial domination, those left destitute in its wake are not allowed to seek any kind of sanctuary.

With the majority of migrants to Europe coming from the Balkans, South Asia and North Africa, similar anti-Muslim rhetoric has been employed by the likes of Italian Premier Silvio Berlusconi, Austria's Jorg Haider, Pia Kjaersgaard in Denmark, Le Pen in France and Pym Fortuyn in the Netherlands.

Now, Blair's Labour Party is employing the spurious demagogy of the right. Following Fortuyn's assassination on May 9, in an interview on the BBC's *Breakfast with*

Frost programme, May 12, Labour Minister Peter Hain blamed, "isolationist" tendencies amongst Muslims for the growth of extremist organisations such as Osama bin Laden's on the one hand, and fascist parties on the other.

Hain's remarks had been clearly sanctioned by Blair, and the following day, in an interview with the *Guardian* newspaper, the minister, a founder member of Britain's Anti-Nazi League and a former anti-Apartheid campaigner, defended his statement. He was simply calling for an "honest dialogue" about Muslim "isolationists, fundamentalists and fanatics who open the door to exploitation and who provide fertile ground for Al Qaeda extremists," he said.

Labour's supportive noises have only served to reinforce anti-immigrant prejudice. According to an opinion poll by BBC News Online, almost two-thirds of those interviewed believe immigrants "do not make a positive contribution to Britain". The right of asylum has become redefined as the right of the host country to sift applications based on its own requirements, rather than the right of the applicant to a place of safety. This underscores the perilous state of democratic rights in general, which are no longer considered to be the automatic property of all peoples but a privilege conferred only on the discretion of the state to those deemed worthy enough.

Blair claims his measures will enable the official parties to defeat right-wing extremists by playing them at their own game, but Labour has no automatic monopoly over anti-immigrant prejudice. In recent weeks government plans to build several new detention centres in the UK have run foul of anti-immigrant sentiment. Although proposed as part of tightening up immigration procedures, residents in the largely rural areas marked down as locations for the camps are up in arms. Residents of the village of Piddington, for example, are claiming that their community will be "swamped" by the proposed development. Their "Stop Open Asylum Plan" campaign claims that it will lead to increased crime, lower house prices and result in a "threat to your way of life and culture". Similar protests have been mounted in other villages, supported by the press and minor celebrities, such as former punk singer turned religious television programme presenter Toyah Wilcox.



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