

Britain's Conservative Party exposes its racist underbelly

By Mike Ingram
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Much to the embarrassment of Conservative Party leader William Hague, retiring Tory MP, John Townend last month made a speech on immigration in which he said Britain's "homogenous Anglo-Saxon society has been seriously undermined by the massive immigration—particularly Commonwealth immigration—that has taken place since the war." Townend admitted to BBC News that the original draft of his speech had used the term "coloured immigrants."

Townend cited favourably the notorious "rivers of blood" speech delivered in 1968 by Conservative politician Enoch Powell. Warning that Labour's immigration policies meant Britain was "busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre," Powell then quoted Virgil and declared, "As I look ahead, I am filled with foreboding. Like the Roman, 'I am to see the river Tiber foaming with much blood.'"

Powell's speech was made at a time when the Labour government was actively encouraging skilled immigration from the Commonwealth to overcome labour shortages in the UK—particularly in the health and transport services. Powell was dismissed from the shadow cabinet for his remarks by the then Tory leader, Edward Heath and later resigned from the Conservative Party in 1974 to become MP for the Official Unionist Party in Northern Ireland.

In his speech Townend claimed that Powell would have been prime minister if people had appreciated the accuracy of his forecasts.

Attempting to distance his party from such open race baiting, Hague condemned Townend's speech, though he stopped short of dismissing the backbench MP who is due to stand down at the next election.

Hague's condemnations notwithstanding, though his impending retirement may make Townend less cautious in expressing his views, he is hardly an isolated figure in the Conservative Party. The Tories have spent the past months attacking the Blair government for making Britain

the favoured location for what it terms "bogus asylum seekers" due to the supposed laxity of its immigration policies.

This campaign is indicative of the party's increasingly racist trajectory. It is common knowledge that the fascist National Front virtually liquidated itself into the Conservative Party following Margaret Thatcher's election as prime minister in 1979, attracted by her assertions that Britain was being "swamped" by immigrants.

Thatcher's removal as party leader in 1990 barely changed matters. In 1992 a decision by Conservative Central Office to select black barrister John Taylor as the candidate for Cheltenham and Gloucester resulted in a racist backlash in the local party and allegations of racist attacks against Taylor. Conservative Party workers cheered when Taylor lost the election.

Former Tory chairman Norman Tebbit earned himself the nickname "the Chingford skinhead" for his repeatedly racist remarks. Hague was forced to rebuke the veteran Tory after he had attacked Britain's transformation into a "multi-cultural" society. Tebbit had previously called for a "cricket test" on nationality i.e. those from ethnic minorities not prepared to cheer for the England cricket team in test matches should not be allowed to live in the country.

Following its virtual wipe out in the 1997 General Election, Hague was eager to rid the Tory party of its xenophobic image and had admonished Tebbit, "I have my own cricket test now—if you don't want to be part of the team then get off the field."

Whatever Hague's claims of inclusiveness, with the Labour Party now occupying much of what was once considered Tory territory in economic and social policies, the Conservative Party is moving even further to the right. In 1998, Conservative MP Teresa Gorman suggested unemployed Bangladeshis in Britain should look harder

for jobs in Indian restaurants. Last August Tory health spokesman Dr Liam Fox complained patient's lives were being put at risk by the poor language skills of foreign doctors.

Indeed Townend's remarks came just after the Conservative leader had made a particularly insidious speech aimed at encouraging racist sentiment. At the party's spring conference earlier in March, Hague spoke of Britain being turned into a foreign country by Labour, and declared, "Elect a Conservative government and we will give you back your country."

Along with other party leaders, Hague had signed a pledge drawn up by the Campaign for Racial Equality not to "play the race card" in the expected general election. (Townend had refused to sign the anti-race-card pact when asked). Following his own speech Hague was accused of breaking the pact but the fact that such a pledge was considered necessary is indicative.

The Labour government has gone further than its predecessors in undermining immigration and asylum rights. The Asylum and Immigration Act has introduced "fast-track" procedures to speed up deportations and replaced cash benefits payable to asylum-seekers with vouchers. Asylum seekers are repeatedly denounced as "bogus" and scapegoated by the government and the media, often in racist terms, in order to divert attention from the impact of welfare cuts on working people. Now Labour is demanding changes to the 1951 United Nations Convention on Refugees that would drastically curtail the right of asylum. Home Secretary Jack Straw wants only those applying for asylum *before* they leave their country of origin—and only from countries internationally condemned for severe human rights abuses—to be eligible.

Even this is not enough for those on the Tory right, however. The *Guardian* newspaper reported March 29 that "Conservative election leaflets... show that general election candidates are exploiting the asylum issue in highly emotive language." According to the report, Tory leaflets in Dagenham, Essex complain of "floods of bogus asylum seekers coming into Britain" and attack the government for "importing foreign nurses with HIV", asking: "Is this Labour's way of cutting the waiting list, by scaring people not to go to hospital?"

In the marginal seat of Medway in the southeast, local Conservatives claim that Labour is hoping to admit increasing numbers of asylum seekers. They claim that "the £915 million spent on asylum seekers was 100 times the amount needed for a local hospital." A question and answer session on the back of the leaflet asks:

"Do you think it is right to accept a moderate number of immigrants so long as they are skilled and do not claim welfare benefits?"

Having drawn the attention of its readers to this development, however, the *Guardian* immediately seeks to dismiss it. Speculating on the connection between Hague's warnings that Britain was being turned into a "foreign land" and such racist leaflets, the article states, "Despite Mr Hague's questionable speech, there is not doubt that the Tory party at Westminster has changed since the 1980s when activists and some MPs were members of the racist Monday Club.

"As a member of the Monday Club in the 1980s, the young right winger Jon Bercow called for the voluntary repatriation of black and Asian people, repeal of the Race Relations Act and abolition of the commission for racial equality. Mr Bercow, now a member of the Tory frontbench, has impressed MPs with the way in which he has abandoned his racist views." The paper quoted a "reformed" Bercow saying, "I believe that in a fair society if you start identifying volunteers to leave that can turn nasty."

A more accurate picture of what has taken place since the 1980s is that policies once associated with the lunatic fringe of right wing politics have become part of the so-called "mainstream", and their proponents elevated into leading political positions. Townend would have been more accurate if he had said that, had he lived, Enoch Powell would now be leading the Conservative Party.

See also:

Britain calls for revision of Geneva Convention on asylum
[15 February 2001]

Britain's Conservatives spout racist law and order rhetoric
[21 December 2000]

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