

## IMMIGRATION

### A new, improved race card

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#### **Immigration is under control. The politics of immigration is a different matter**

IF THE Conservatives could choose a single issue on which to fight the 2005 general election, it would be immigration. Over the past eight years, Labour has muscled in on traditional Tory terrain such as economic policy and law and order. When it comes to keeping out foreigners, though, the Conservatives (and only they) are as confident and sure-footed as a champion boxer. "People will face a clear choice at the next election," declared Michael Howard in January: "unlimited immigration under Mr Blair or limited, controlled immigration with the Conservatives."

It is not unusual for politicians to make a fuss about immigration in the months before a general election. The Conservatives have done so on three out of the last four occasions in which they have contested an election from a position of opposition, in 1970, 1979 and 2001. But immigration is more central to this year's campaign than to any before. That is partly because the public seems to be more concerned about the issue, partly because the Tories have distinct proposals, and partly because the charge that Labour has radically altered immigration policy during the past eight years is, for once, true.

Although it looms large as a political issue, immigration into Britain is relatively paltry. In 2003, the nation accepted 140,000 settlers from outside the European Union. That is 0.3% of the adult population of Britain. By contrast, Canada reckons to let in 1% of its total population in new settlers every year. The British remain overwhelmingly home-grown, with about 5% of the population born abroad, compared with 9% of Germans, 12% of Americans and 23% of Australians.

Yet the accusation that the nation's borders have become more porous under Labour is fair. Immigration into Britain may not be high, compared with some other industrialised countries, but it is a lot higher than it was under the last Conservative government. From the early 1980s to the mid-1990s, the number of new settlers held steady at 50,000-60,000 per year. Since 2000, settlement has topped 100,000. Britain has gone from being a nation of low immigration to a nation of medium immigration—by European standards, perhaps even high immigration.

The main reason for that is rising numbers of foreign workers. They have come to Britain partly because there are jobs to be had and partly because the government has set about dismantling many of the barriers to movement erected before 1997. Obtaining a work permit is easier, thanks to a relaxation of rules requiring proof that no British or European citizen can be found to perform a job. Highly skilled workers are actively courted, as they are by Canada and Australia. The effect has been striking. Between 1997 and 2003, the number of work-permit holders and their dependants admitted to Britain each year rose from 63,000 to 119,000.

Had all the new arrivals been white American businessmen, the rising tide would probably have gone unnoticed. Had they come from Commonwealth countries such as Jamaica and India, they might have been tolerated, since the natives are already accustomed to the presence of such migrants. Instead of which, the new arrivals are diverse, ranging from Somalis to Slovaks. They are likely to be Muslim, male, young and travelling alone—four characteristics that Britons find unnerving. Worst of all, migrant workers have been joined

by newcomers clutching not job offers or wedding rings, but false documents and purported evidence of abuse at home.

It has been Labour's misfortune to hold power in an era of persecution. Since 1997, enormities in Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Iraq and Zimbabwe have displaced millions, of whom a small but noticeable fraction found their way to Britain. The number of people claiming asylum rose from 32,500 in 1997 to 84,000 in 2002. Other European countries were similarly burdened, but Britain took more than most. One reason is that, Yugoslavia excepted, all these countries have historical links to Britain (and Kosovans fleeing ex-Yugoslavia will have noted that some of their liberators were British). A report for the Home Office in 2002 found that many refugees had chosen Britain because it was rich and free. As a Yemeni man put it, "Europe is democratic. You can go to Hyde Park and you can shout."

The British regard themselves as kind-hearted folk, and in some senses they are (Britons gave more in private donations to victims of the Asian tsunami than anyone except Americans or Germans). But they are hostile to migrants' tales of woe. A 2000 Eurobarometer poll found that only 12% of Britons would unreservedly accept refugees even if they proved genuine—fewer than any other country in Europe. And the fact that many self-styled refugees are plainly not afflicted makes for harder hearts. Britons can tolerate competition, but they cannot abide queue-jumpers. Public anger over the past eight years has focused more on asylum-seekers than on any other kind of immigrant.

The government has responded in two ways. First, it tried to accelerate the processing of asylum claims so people are not condemned to idleness for months or even years. That reform began catastrophically, with technological failure and lost paperwork on a vast scale. By 1999, the backlog of cases reached 125,000, which meant that the immigration service was utterly unable to cope with unprecedented numbers of asylum claimants in the following three years. Since then, the situation has gradually improved. Amnesties and bureaucratic reform have helped cut the backlog to less than 10,000.

The second strategy has been to make life difficult for asylum-seekers. Egged on by conservative newspapers, and believing that tough policies would restore confidence, the government has done what it can within the law. Cash handouts to asylum-seekers were set at indigent levels—£31.15 per week for a young single person; £39.34 for a lone parent. Support to failed claimants was cut off. Borders were tightened, partly by investing in scanning systems (to spot people hidden in trucks) but mostly by demanding visas of migrants from hotspots such as Zimbabwe.

When the law has obstructed change, the government has tried to undermine the law. In 2004, the-then home secretary, David Blunkett, tried to curtail judges' powers to review asylum decisions. Such reviews had exposed shabbiness in the immigration service and laid down more liberal precedents for judging claims. Mr Blunkett's move was stymied following an extraordinary outburst from the Lord Chief Justice. But efforts to curtail legal aid for asylum cases were successful, as were new laws that allowed the police to raid the offices of immigration solicitors.

The tough stuff worked, in the sense that fewer people applied for asylum in 2004 than in any year since 1998 (whether the system had got any better at sifting genuine claims from false ones is less certain). Reduced numbers, in turn, meant a calmer electorate. Polls by MORI, a pollster, show that the proportion of Britons citing immigration and race as one of the two most important issues facing the nation declined gradually from a pre-campaign

peak of 39% in May 2002 to 26% in January 2005. It then shot up again when Labour and the Tories unveiled their policies.

The question facing the parties now is whether Britons are hostile to asylum-seekers or to immigrants in general. If they are worried only about asylum-seekers (and, perhaps, illegal immigrants) it is good news for Labour. Numbers are convincingly down, so the issue is likely to shift few votes. If, on the other hand, voters dislike the lot of them, Labour may be in trouble. When it comes to economic migrants, the charge that Labour has allowed more people in is irrefutable. Not surprisingly, the Tories have therefore made a determined effort to fudge the distinction between asylum-seekers and the rest.

Michael Howard's pitch is simple: immigration is out of control. He insists, first, that there are a lot more foreigners coming into Britain; and, second, that the processing of refugees has been incompetent. Both claims are true, but the implicit charge—that immigration has risen because of government incompetence—is off target. Immigration has risen because of foreign wars and work permits. The former are, by their nature, beyond control, while the number of work permits has increased as a result of deliberate policy.

The Tories want to set a quota for the total number of migrant workers—a quota which, they hint, will be much lower than the numbers allowed in under Labour. Would-be immigrants will be judged according to a points system, with permits given only to those who possess skills that the government deems to be in short supply. As for asylum-seekers, they will no longer be allowed to travel to Britain. If they make it past toughened border controls, they will be packed off to overseas processing centres while their claims are heard. They, too, will be subject to quotas.

Labour's response to these proposals has been less critical than defensive. Rather than attack the Tories' plans as illiberal, it questioned the cost. In February, it published a "five-year plan" that featured similar proposals for a points system for economic migrants, along with more tough language about asylum-seekers. In some ways, Labour's proposals consolidated its liberal immigration policy. Highly skilled migrants will now be known as Tier 1 applicants, but will be assessed in much the same way as before; skilled migrants will now be known as Tier 2 applicants and will be able to apply for settlement after five years. And so on. But Labour also hinted that unskilled workers would no longer be able to work their way towards citizenship. The Liberal Democrats stayed out of the fray, loftily declaring that politicians should not engage in a "bidding war" over immigration. Yet they, like the Conservatives, want an annual immigration quota.

For those who support immigration, there are just two points of light. The first is that the immigration debate is taking place in Parliament and the media rather than on the streets. With the exception of one incident in Glasgow, there have been no large-scale marches or organised attacks against immigrants to match those of the 1970s. The second reason for optimism is that the political discussion has been dominated by the three main parties. In many areas, voters in next month's election will be able to cast their ballot for the UK Independence Party (which opposes immigration and European integration) or the British National Party (which opposes immigration and everything non-white). Neither party is expected to do well.