

# Immigration is one of the few key policies left for the right

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Why has Michael Howard decided to shift the focus of the campaign towards the issue of refugees, travellers, and immigration?

The success of the economy during recent years means that Gordon Brown has deprived opposition critics of the bread-and-butter issues of unemployment, inflation and interest rates. And public understanding of the link between raising and spending public revenues limits how far the Tories can emphasise tax cuts. There is always Iraq, but the Conservatives supported the war.

The Conservatives usually have an advantage over other parties on Britain's relationship with Europe, but this issue continues to split the party in ways that damage its credibility.

So what is left for the right? The only real issues where the Conservatives continue to have a substantial advantage over Labour are those of cultural conservatism: law and order, plus the melange of asylum, refugees, immigration and race.

In the past a liberal consensus has been shared among main-stream politicians in all the main parties not to "play the race card", because of the sensitivity and inflammatory nature of the issue. During the 2004 local elections, Mr Howard was at pains to emphasise the distance between the Conservative party and racist extremists on the far right. Nevertheless, immigration has emerged in the Conservative campaign, in part because discussion of the issue has been legitimated by the recent success of the radical right in Britain, and elsewhere in western Europe.

In the past, the National Front and the British National party have failed to make the sort of breakthrough evident in the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, France or Switzerland. Their failure has been all the more striking given substantial evidence of weakening Labour and Conservative party loyalties in the electorate and the growth of more floating voters.

The erosion of national borders, caused by membership of the European Union, and the influx of refugees and asylum seekers, has also been conducive to the advance of the radical right.

But one reason why the far right parties have always been marginalised in general elections is that when they have made some modest gains, the Conservatives have usually quickly moved towards a more hardline stance on immigration, defusing their popular support.

The National Front made repeated attempts to win Westminster seats during the 1970s. But even at the peak of its popularity, during the mid-1970s, it achieved less than 1 per cent of the national vote.

The liberal consensus in British politics agreed not to play the race card during the 1970s, although in January 1978 Margaret Thatcher came out with a widely publicised television comment in which she claimed that she understood the fears of the British people of being "swamped by people with a different culture".

This coded message about Conservative policy towards immigration in the run-up to the 1979 general election, and a shift rightwards symbolised by Thatcherism, coupled with the steep vote threshold required at Westminster first-past-the-post elections, constituted an insurmountable barrier for the NF. It had a poor result in the 1979 election despite contesting almost half the available seats.

During the 1980s, the extremist fringe in the National Front transferred their energies to the British National party, formed in 1983. Yet the BNP also failed to achieve more than a negligible share of the vote at Westminster elections. In 2001, it contested 34 out of 659 parliamentary seats, achieving 3.7 per cent of the vote in these constituencies. The BNP won 47,000 votes in total - 0.2 per cent of the national vote. It has performed best at local level, in northern councils such as Burnley and Oldham with substantial Asian populations, although there remain fewer than two dozen BNP councillors out of almost 22,000 seats in Britain.

The BNP fielded a record number of candidates - 309 - in the 2004 local government elections in England and Wales, with a controversial party political broadcast on national TV, and they hosted a high profile visit by France's Jean-Marie Le Pen. But with an average 16.1 per cent of the vote in the wards it fought, the party picked up only four additional council seats.

In the simultaneous British elections to the European parliament, held under proportional representation rules, the BNP won 4.9 per cent of the vote and no seats. The protest vote mainly benefited the UK Independence party, which doubled its share of the vote to 14.9 per cent in June 2004, returning a dozen MEPs.

The long-term erosion of traditional party loyalties, and the closure of the gap between the main parties on the social and economic agenda, should facilitate the growth of protest voting and support for the minor parties. Under these conditions the circumstances should be ripe for the radical right.

Nevertheless, the growth of the NF, BNP and the UKIP has been curtailed by their extremist image, their narrow single-issue agenda and the reactions of the main parties. In this context, it makes perfect sense for Mr Howard to focus on immigration and refugees. It is one issue where there is "clear blue water" between the Conservatives and the other leading parties.

It is also the issue where, according to polls, the Con-servatives have the greatest edge over Labour. And, in the absence of public concern about the economy, it resonates with public opinion, including many working-class Labour areas.

Mori has regularly monitored "the most important problem" facing Britain since the early 1970s, using open-ended questions. In the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, race and immigration scarcely featured among the top three issues in these polls. But from 2000, the issue climbed in importance until in February and March this year it was mentioned as one of the three most important issues by more than a third of the public.

The Conservatives' strategy is similar to that used by many other European centre-right parties when confronted by a popular threat from their xenophobic rivals. In France, President Jacques Chirac adopted tougher talk on immigration and crime when the socialist prime minister Lionel Jospin was defeated in the presidential election by Jean-Marie Le Pen. In the subsequent elections, the Front National was sent back to the political fringe.

A popular surge in votes for minor parties on the radical right is often followed by centre-right attempts to regain support by stealing their clothes.

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