British Labor Party Appears Vulnerable on Immigration; Voters Favor Conservatives on Key Issue in Thursday's Vote

The Washington Post

May 3, 2005 Tuesday, Final Edition

The Washington Post
washingtonpost.com

Section: A Section; A16

Length: 1166 words

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Dateline: DOVER, England May 2

Body

Eight years ago, Gary Glover was part of the electoral tide that swept ***British*** Prime Minister Tony Blair and his ***Labor*** ***Party*** government into power after 18 years in the wilderness, but on Thursday he plans to cast his ***vote*** with the ***Conservative*** ***Party***.

For Glover, the big ***issue*** is ***immigration***, which he and many other Britons contend is out of control. "***British*** people are homeless, and immigrants are living better and better," he said Monday morning as he worked to repair a gas main along one of Dover's main thoroughfares.

The reality is more complex, but if there is anything that could alter the eventual margin in an election in which Blair and ***Labor*** ***appear*** headed for another comfortable majority in Parliament, it is the twin ***issues*** of ***immigration*** and asylum seekers. According to every opinion poll, it is one of the top three or four ***issues*** in the campaign and the only one on which ***voters*** trust the ***Conservatives***, known as the Tories, far more than they trust ***Labor***.

The wave of foreigners that has arrived in Britain in the eight years since ***Labor*** came to power triggers a variety of emotions among the ***British*** electorate, including resentment that newcomers get benefits that longtime citizens do not, and gives rise to the more touchy subjects of race and cultural identity.

The power of the ***issue*** is reminiscent of what California experienced during the economic downturn of the 1990s. But ***Labor*** ***Party*** strategists say the emotions expressed in focus groups in Britain are, if anything, even more raw and resentful than they are in the United States and grow out of a culture in which ***immigration*** has not been as central to national identity.

Labor activists view the ***Conservatives*** as trying to play the race card and say the slogan that the ***Conservatives*** used to kick off their campaign -- "Are you thinking what we're thinking?" -- encouraged racial polarization. One ***Conservative*** candidate for Parliament, Bob Spink, ran a local advertisement that included the line, "What bit of 'send them back' don't you understand, Mr. Blair?"

But the ***party***'s leader, Michael Howard, denies ***Labor***'s charges and says Blair and his ***party*** are trying to stifle an important debate by tarring the opposition rather than addressing an ***issue*** that rankles many ***voters***. At the local

level, ***Conservative*** candidates say the people don't buy ***Labor***'s criticism of the Tory campaign or ***Labor***'s claims that it has the situation under control.

"I don't need to mention asylum or ***immigration*** locally," ***Conservative*** candidate Paul Watkins said Monday afternoon as he took a break from campaigning. "Local people raise it on the doorstep."

The district where he is challenging the ***Labor*** incumbent includes this seacoast city southeast of London that is best known for its celebrated white cliffs. As the entryway to Britain for many foreigners stepping off ferries, it has been touched directly by the ***issue*** of ***immigration***.

Brian Chazzell, who runs a small furniture store in Dover, said he plans to ***vote*** against the two major ***parties*** because both are mired in what he sees as a useless debate about Iraq. But he had strong opinions about the foreign influx.

"We're a little island and we're still trying to be the great empire trying to help out every Tom, Dick and Harry," he said. "The island will sink. You can only open the door so long before the house is full. . . . Mr. Howard is correct. It is about time we spoke about how many people we can hold."

From 1997 to 2002, net migration to Britain topped 1.1 million people, about double what it had been over the previous five years, according to government statistics. Both sides agree that at some time during this period, Britain lost control of its borders. The debate now is over whether the ***Labor*** government has moved effectively to put in place a more rational system for dealing with the wave of newcomers.

Asylum seekers set off a surge of resentment in the late 1990s, with much of it centered in Dover. Conflicts in the former Yugoslavia, the Middle East, Africa and elsewhere brought exiles to Britain's shores seeking a new home, quickly overwhelming the government's capacity to deal with them.

Many piled into Dover to await processing, which sometimes took months or years. Often the government gave them housing and financial assistance. In Dover, roving groups of young male asylum seekers frightened the locals, and in the summer of 1999, street unrest erupted.

Gwyn Prosser, the ***Labor*** member of Parliament from Dover, said the problem caught the government by surprise, but over the following two years, ***Labor*** instituted changes to the system that include stopping potential asylum seekers in France for initial processing, along with measures to speed up the decision-making process.

Statistics from the Home Office show that applications for asylum reached 84,000 in 2002 but by last year had fallen to 34,000, a decline attributed both to a falloff in nearby conflicts and to tighter rules for application. Prosser and his rival, Watkins, agree that local tensions over asylum seekers have diminished since 2001, although they differ on how serious the problem remains. Many citizens see no change.

While the number of applications has decreased, ***immigration*** continues to increase. With the healthiest major economy in Europe, Britain has become a magnet for workers in other countries.

Of late, Poles, Latvians, Lithuanians and others have arrived to fill low-wage or menial jobs in London and other parts of Britain. The numbers, although small by U.S. standards, are about 50 percent above the levels of the late 1990s. ***Labor*** has been trying to institute a more rational system for deciding who can stay.

Immigration and asylum are also ***issues*** in the campaign in Enfield, a north London suburb. Minorities make up only about 9 percent of the district's population, but the area is changing steadily. Joan Ryan, the ***Labor*** member of Parliament in Enfield, hears about that on the campaign trail. "Enfield people are very nice; they're good people," she said. "But change is difficult."

She contends that the Tories are making rational debate impossible by playing on racial and cultural fears. Her opponent, Nick de Bois, disagrees. "People in Enfield felt for years they could not talk sensibly about this ***issue***

without being accused of being racists," he said. "I could point you to many first- and second-generation ***immigrations*** of Asian or African background who feel as strongly about this ***issue*** as I do."

Blair came to Dover recently to deliver a tough speech on ***immigration*** and asylum seekers, one that the polls show helped to reduce the ***Conservatives***' advantage on the ***issue***. But ***Labor*** remains on the defensive, nervous about ***Thursday's*** balloting. People no longer talk about asylum seekers in the pubs the way they did a few years ago, but Watkins and Prosser said it remains a powerful ***issue***. "People's memories are long," Watkins said. Added Prosser, "It's been burned into their psyche."

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: POLITICAL ***PARTIES*** (92%); ***IMMIGRATION*** (91%); ***VOTERS*** & ***VOTING*** (90%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (89%); POLITICAL CANDIDATES (89%); PRIME MINISTERS (78%); CAMPAIGNS & ELECTIONS (78%); HEADS OF STATE & GOVERNMENT (78%); PLATFORMS & ***ISSUES*** (78%); ***BRITISH*** PRIME MINISTERS (78%); MIGRATION ***ISSUES*** (77%); POLITICAL ASYLUM (77%); RACE & ETHNICITY (76%); CUSTOMS & CULTURAL HERITAGE (65%); ECONOMIC CONDITIONS (64%); HOMELESSNESS (56%); POLLS & SURVEYS (55%); EDITORIALS & OPINIONS (50%); ECONOMIC DECLINE (50%); ECONOMIC NEWS (50%)

Industry: MARKETING & ADVERTISING (74%); FOCUS GROUPS (68%)

Person: TONY BLAIR (79%)

Geographic: LONDON, ENGLAND (79%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); UNITED KINGDOM (96%); UNITED STATES (79%)

Load-Date: May 3, 2005