

Boris Johnson's attack on EU citizens shows the Tories don't think migrants belong here

The Conservatives have no desire for the UK to be a diverse country.



EU citizens who witnessed the European referendum will not be surprised that Boris Johnson is again turning his fire on us. As a leading figure in Vote Leave, Johnson oversaw a campaign grounded in dog-whistle xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment. Now in the final week of the election campaign, the Conservatives have reverted straight back to the old playbook.

The European referendum was a low point for many EU nationals in Britain. Dishonest and misleading claims – a Johnson signature in this general election – were already a key feature of Vote Leave back then. Shamelessly they declared that the whole of Turkey would flood the UK should we vote to Remain. This was blatantly obvious Islamophobia.

The British tabloid press aggressively propagated against Europeans, particularly Eastern Europeans. We were simultaneously denounced as benefit scroungers and job stealers, to be held responsible for crumbling public services and an overstretched NHS. To top it off, we were probably all dangerous criminals too. Just existing in this climate of hostility felt deflating.

After Leave won the referendum, the demand to end the free movement of people quickly became the red line for negotiations, locking us out of the single market. It seemed ludicrous that politicians happily advocated for is economically the worst possible Leave option, just to be able to pull up the drawbridge for British and European citizens wanting to live in each other's countries. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the party that oversaw austerity wreaking havoc across the country for nearly a decade is more concerned with appeasing its hard-right elements than doing what is best for the British people.

The ongoing hostility makes it hard for many of the other Europeans I know in

Britain to feel happy and at home, even if they have lived here for most of their adult lives. To add insult to injury, Johnson now proclaims that Europeans have treated the UK too much as though it were “their own country”. This claim is so outrageously offensive because it moves the goalposts of immigration discourse in the UK even further into the gutter. The Tory mask is clearly slipping: whilst they claim to have “sensible” policies on immigration that mean Britain is open to migrants who “contribute”, Johnson is now telling us that the fundamental problem lies in us feeling like we belong.

Framing the argument in this way makes clear that it does not matter to Johnson and the Conservative Party whether someone has come here with a job, is (in their narrow definition) skilled or has a family life to attend to. Being able to “feel at home” in a country means to have rights. It is these rights that a Conservative government will strip away from us.

Despite promises from Priti Patel to the British Asian community that the ending of free movement and the preferential treatment for Europeans will result in leveling up access to the country at the time of the referendum, we are now seeing the opposite. Conditions will not improve for non-European migrants who have long been subject to a form of points and skills-based system. Rather we are heading towards a future that creates a group of second-class citizens, migrant laborers on short term “low-skilled” guest worker visas with no route to permanent settlement, purely here to serve the needs of businesses.

This is a future in which the government will do its utmost to ensure that immigrant communities cannot and will not feel at home here. They have no desire for the UK to be a diverse country. They will not treat those workers – whether they are from the EU or elsewhere – with the dignity and respect they deserve.

The danger of where this will lead is clear. Those who came here as part of the Windrush generation were asked to supply the labor Britain needed, including in the NHS. They are a part of the fabric of this country, but the British state denied their rights. Boris Johnson’s comments make clear that this is how the Conservative Party views all migrant communities.

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Source:

<https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/brexit/2019/12/boris-johnson-s-attack-eu-citizens-shows-tories-dont-think-migrants-belong>

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