

Trying to stem tide of African migrants is futile, says Blair

By Paul Eastham, Deputy Political Editor, Daily Mail - December 31, 2004

Tony Blair has admitted that trying to shut Britain's borders to mass immigration from Africa is 'utterly futile'. Nine months after promising to tighten up the immigration system, he conceded that migrants cannot be kept out,

The Premier said: "We must now all accept the utter futility of trying to shut our borders to problems abroad. Famine in Africa will affect our countries because it will be a trigger for mass migration."

Mr Blair's extraordinary declaration came in a four-page article he contributed to the Economist magazine in advance of Britain taking the presidency of the G8 group of the world's richest countries. A major drawback to mass immigration from Africa could be the Aids crisis the continent is facing.

This year's report on AIDs in Britain, issued by the Health Protection Agency, shows that hetero-sexually-acquired HIV has taken off. It is growing by a factor of five in the past decade to reach 3,800 new cases last year. And of those infections, 90% are believed to have been acquired overseas, mostly in Africa.

Despite the figures, the Government has decided against compulsory HIV tests for people coming into the country from AIDS hotspots.

Last night, critics were saying that Mr Blair's article is an admission that the immigration and asylum system is out of control. Sir Andrew Green, director of the Migrationwatch think-tank, said: "We certainly need to provide more effective help for Africa. But it is extraordinary to suggest that we should weaken our own border controls, as 80% want to see them strengthened."

The official forecasts for population growth in regions of England were published last month by the Office for National Statistics. These said that of the projected 6.1million increase in population by 2031, 3.6million will be migrants. Migrationwatch believes that if migrants' subsequent children are added, the increase from migration will be 5.1million, and that Mr Blair's latest admission indicates the total will be even higher.

The Premier's controversial remark came as he explained how he intended to use the G8 presidency to encourage other rich countries to help Africa. He argued that democratic governments give millions of dollars to help Africa and voters demand they do more to tackle poverty there.

But then Mr Blair suggested that nations such as Britain have no choice but to accept that a wave of new migrants to these shores is inevitable. It was 'hopeless and probably heartless' to try to keep them out.

He wrote: "The state of Africa is also a case, unusual in politics, where heart and head are pushing us in the same direction. We must now all accept the utter futility of trying

to shut our borders to problems abroad. Famine in Africa will affect our countries because it will be a trigger for mass migration. Conflict, too, drives millions to flee. Both create the conditions for terrorism and fanaticism to take root and spread directly to Europe, to North America and to Asia. We spend billions on humanitarian aid to help pick up the pieces. A prosperous Africa, where its people have the chance to fulfill their talents, is in all our interests."

It was an extraordinary change of tone from Mr Blair's statement in April. Then, in an attempt to calm fears of a new wave of migrants arriving when ten mainly Eastern European countries were about to join the EU, the Premier insisted the Government was tightening controls. He said Britain had reached a crunch point on immigration. At times using language barely distinguishable from that of anti-immigration campaigners, Mr Blair said concerns about abuse of asylum procedures were legitimate. He said scams were 'real and not imagined' and caused a genuine sense of unfairness. He added that such feelings of unease could not be dismissed as figments of racist imagination.

The last major exodus from Africa to reach Britain was in 1968 when Kenya gained independence and 200,000 Kenyans were forced to choose British or Kenyan nationality. More than 80,000 took up residence in Britain. Four years later a further 80,000 fled here from Idi Amin's brutal regime in Uganda.