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The advertisement banner features three American Express credit cards on the left: a gold card with a portrait, a gold card with a red triangle, and a silver card with a portrait. The text 'AMERICAN EXPRESS® HAS THE RIGHT CARD FOR YOU' is centered in a bold, sans-serif font. To the right is a blue button with white text 'FIND YOUR CARD >>' and the American Express logo.

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# Blears' fears

If anything has fostered the anti-immigrant backlash Hazel Blears warns of, it is Labour's neglect of its core working-class support

Hazel Blears' sudden concern for what she refers to as "the ignored poor" is a little hard to stomach, given that New Labour has continually taken its traditional voters for granted, believing they had nowhere else to go. Now, with a resurgent Conservative party and an election less than 18 months away, they are suddenly in need of core support. The Labour party was founded 100 years ago to represent low-paid workers, and continued to serve that constituency until the 1980s. During its recent period in power, however, New Labour has courted big business in a manner that would disgust the party's founders. As a result, average earners have seen their standard of living remain static, at best, while the incomes of the top 1% have rocketed to unprecedented levels.

Of the 13 million UK citizens who are living below the low-income threshold, just over three million were either unemployed or unavailable for work in 2007. That means there are almost 10 million people out there who are working hard, yet are unable to make ends meet. They are the working poor and Labour, the party that was once their champion, has ignored their plight, leaving them vulnerable to the poisonous racism peddled by the far right. Over the past few years, the British National party has been picking up votes in those places where house prices are lower than average, where local residents have to face a constant influx of people seeking cheap accommodation and casual employment.

While Middle England has felt the benefit of this growing pool of cheap labour, the working poor have faced ever greater competition for scarce resources such as housing and those other vital social services that make it possible, just, to survive on a low income. Is it any surprise that they see immigration as a threat? However, if the vast majority of the working poor are racist, why didn't they vote in greater numbers for the anti-immigrant platform shamefully offered up by the Conservative party in the last two elections?

Could it be they recognise that the real problem is not immigration, but a global market that has no respect for local communities or national borders? That the unimpeded movement of capital is the root cause of their predicament rather than the mass movement of people? That immigrants are merely a convenient scapegoat for the failure of trickle-down economics?

Yes, they do vote for the BNP in worrying numbers, but more out of frustration than in any hope of getting a solution to their problems. Anyone who has seen BNP councillors in action knows that they are an electoral dead end. Yet, at a time when people are fearful of what the future holds, when the ranks of the working poor are about to be swollen as a result of a bafflingly complex breakdown of the free-market system, then the simplicities of bigotry offer an easy explanation for their dire predicament.

If the Labour party wants to combat the BNP, it needs to lay off the anti-immigrant rhetoric and address the real problem that keeps the incomes of working poor below the poverty line – the inequalities that have been created by globalisation.