

attack and voters are looking for alternatives. The research shows no relationship between BNP support and low voter turnout.

Our focus group evidence suggested that those who had voted for the BNP had tried different alternatives, such as switching between the three main parties and felt that these mainstream parties had failed them. A vote for the BNP was often seen as a wake-up call. Participants in the groups distrust the major parties, especially on immigration where people said that they failed to tell the truth and 'fudged' the figures. Opinion poll evidence suggests that a majority – some two thirds – of the public nationally believe that immigration is reaching its limits.

On this evidence, local efforts to strengthen community cohesion and to protect ethnic minorities from BNP and far-right propaganda need to address the types of people who vote for such parties. They probably do not have direct contact with non-white people, but gain their views in the media and from direct campaigns from the BNP supporters themselves. This makes challenging the stereotypes in the media an important priority as does campaigning on the ground. Most of all, the main political parties – and especially the Labour Party, for the BNP makes most inroads in traditional Labour heartlands – should seek to re-engage with their former supporters who have deserted them. But the main parties are all in intense competition for the middle England swing vote, not for the votes of white communities that feel neglected.

LOCATION, LOCATION

The research highlights the im-

portance of location above all else. We found great variation at local authority level, rather than regional or ward level; and the variations in the BNP's successes seem to confirm the research. This suggests that it is at this level of government that attitudes towards the far-right are being formed and shaped.

It is at this level that the BNP is most effective. Its strategy is essentially opportunistic. It is ready ruthlessly to exploit and 'racialise' local resentments and fears and to propagate 'myths' that gain widespread currency. Thus in Barking and Dagenham, the party fastened on the shortage of council homes and high prices for private houses with false tales of Africans being given £50,000 grants to move into the borough under secret 'Africans for Essex' policies. In Burnley, it was 'preferential treatment' for Asian areas. In Keighley, it was a vicious spin on the grooming of young white girls for sex. In Oldham, it was fear of crime.

THE ROLE OF COUNCILS

Local authorities could do much more, in co-operation with racial equality and multicultural agencies, voluntary and stake-holder groups, as some have done, to strengthen community cohesion in their areas. As a CRE Information Pack states, strong leadership and effective communication strategies are 'crucial'.² Local authorities need to counter the 'myths' and misunderstandings about their policies at officer as well as council level, at least by explaining the realities of their policies and correcting misleading interpretations of them.

Officers rightly feel inhibited about acting in 'party political' ways, but



ensuring that their authority's policies are understood and command local trust is part of their overall responsibilities. Moreover, the BNP has frequently prospered on the back of myths in ways which seriously damage community relations – relations that local authorities are under a duty to promote good.

FOOTNOTES

1 This report, by Peter John, Helen Margetts, David Rowland and Stuart Weir, is available for £10 (inc p&p) from the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, Garden House, Water End, York YO30 6WQ.

2 Commission for Racial Equality, *Defeating Organised Racial Hatred* (Information Pack), available from www.cre.gov.uk

DEMOCRATIC AUDIT is a research consortium attached to the Human Rights Centre, University of Essex. We publish regular audits of the state of British democracy – the latest being *Not in Our Name*, a joint study with



the Federal and One World trusts of the UK's unaccountable foreign policy (Politico's, 2006). The report on the BNP is based on research carried out at the School of Public Policy, University College London.

The BNP:

the roots of its appeal

Peter John, Helen Margetts, David Rowland and Stuart Weir



No far right party has ever achieved as much success at the ballot box in Britain as today's British National Party. At the general election in May 2005, the BNP won 4.3 per cent of the vote across the 116 seats that they contested. The party polled 16.9 per cent in the Barking constituency, its main target and its highest share of the vote anywhere in the country. In 33 of the seats they contested, it obtained more than 5 per cent of the votes:

The BNP's Results in the 2005 General Election

No. of seats where BNP got more than 5%	33
No. of seats where BNP got more than 6%	21
No. of seats where BNP got more than 7%	10
No. of seats where BNP got more than 9%	7
No. of seats where BNP got more than 10%	3

Currently, the BNP holds 20 seats in local authorities and four places on town or parish councils. The party is said to putting up some 600

candidates in the next local elections. It has proved itself capable of winning places on local authorities with more than half the votes cast in local wards. In May 2004, it was denied a place on the Greater London Assembly only on the basis of spoilt ballots.

As far right parties like France's *Front National* rose across western Europe over the past quarter century, we in Britain could perhaps congratulate ourselves on living in a tolerant country immune to

such extremism. But the time for complacency is past. The BNP has in its last seven years grown into a national phenomenon, significant and widespread across several English regions. Its appeal is no longer restricted to a few localities such as the East End of London or parts of Yorkshire. It is increasingly a sophisticated party with developing electoral strategies and a money-raising website that stands comparison with those of any other political party.

FOCUS ON LABOUR

The breakthrough derives from the decision of its new leader, Nick Griffin, in 1999 to give the party a new respectable image and to rid it of the 'careless extremism' and violence that had made it virtually unelectable. Griffin also proclaimed that the BNP would become 'the focus... of the neglected and oppressed white working class'. His followers now claim that it is 'more Labour than Labour'. New Labour's electoral strategy, focused as it is on middle England's swing voters in swing constituencies, has given substance to the BNP claim that Labour has abandoned the working class. And it is in Labour's traditional heartlands that the BNP has made most inroads

ATTITUDES TO THE BNP?

Our report, *The British National Party: the Roots of its Appeal*,¹ examines opinion poll evidence that suggests that between 18 and 24 per cent of the electorate could consider voting for the BNP in the future. There are tensions here. For opinion poll and focus group

evidence also shows that the BNP is far and away the most unpopular party in British politics. Even in areas where it makes progress and wins seats, the BNP is disliked and distrusted as a racist, anti-immigrant and deceitful party and voting for it is regarded as an aberrant or embarrassing act.

The distaste for the BNP is reflected in these remarks from focus groups: 'If we actually let those jokers in, we'd be in a worse state than we are now'; 'If you say BNP to me, I think National Front'; 'It's just how close they can get to the British nerve as possible without being racist'.

So why vote BNP at all? For participants in focus groups, voting for the BNP was seen as a 'kick up the backside', or a wake-up call, for the major parties which were also regarded as opportunist parties who were difficult to distinguish, willing to say what pleased, to tell lies and to make promises on which they did not deliver. People felt it was 'safe' to vote BNP as they 'knew' that the BNP could only win a few seats, not a majority.

NO LONGER 'MARGINAL'

However, it is not 'safe' to continue to regard the BNP as a far-right marginal presence, especially in the volatile conditions of British party politics and the depth of disillusion and frustration felt about the established political parties – and expressed vividly in our focus groups. Both its electoral successes, especially at local level, and the potential vote for the party found in the opinion poll evidence, suggest that the party is no longer merely

marginal, as conventional thinking has it.

At the same time, it is not a 'mainstream' party, not least because it is not able to contest more than about one in six seats at a general election. But it is at least capable of achieving a 'mainstream presence' in localities across England; and wherever it is present, it pollutes political life, divides communities and spreads prejudice and discord. The BNP openly seeks to encourage and exploit anti-Muslim feeling and there are signs from our research that the party gains electoral support in areas with Muslim communities of Pakistani or Bangladeshi origin.

WHO VOTES BNP?

Poll evidence from the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust *State of the Nation* surveys, plus opinion and widespread exit poll evidence from the European, London and local elections of 2004 reveal a significant minority of people, as many as 18 to 25 per cent of the population, who would consider voting for the British National Party even if they do not do so currently. Within this group of potential voters for the BNP is a solid and long-standing sub-section of people who have strong views on immigration and asylum. It was a claim not back by evidence

The full report analyses the socio-demographic origins of support for the BNP, based largely on aggregate local authority and ward level data with supporting evidence from eight exit polls following the



BEHIND GRIFFIN'S WINDOW DRESSING

The BNP is no longer 'careless' about revealing the racism and neo-Nazi sympathies of core members. Its leaders are utterly unapologetic about demonising Muslim communities, as Nick Griffin's defiant defence of his vicious speech against Muslims filmed by the BBC in July 2004 made evident. The BNP's case – as was Griffin's in the court case against him – is that the BNP has a legitimate concern about 'the creeping Islamification of Britain' and that they are 'telling a truth' that the liberal establishment denies. Thus the BNP portrays itself as the party of free speech.

It is this stance that allows them to campaign so

viciously on race and especially against Muslims while retaining an outward air of respectability. The party maintains strict discipline in most public situations and vigorously denies allegations of violence. Perhaps thanks to their discipline, it has typically been undercover journalists who have exposed violence, racist conduct and speech and even overt signs of Nazi sympathies within their ranks – for example in the BBC's documentary, *The Secret Agent*. Another undercover journalist exposed anti-semitic and racist remarks and expressions of Nazi sympathies for the Hitler youth, 'our fellas', among BNP canvassers and a high-ranking party

member in the London *Evening Standard* on 6 October 2004. One of these men had a string of criminal convictions, including a three-year prison sentence for unlawful wounding for his part in an attack on a Jewish school teacher who he caught trying to peel off a BNP sticker at an underground station.

But the BNP also scored a spectacular own goal. One of its members filmed a BNP party at which members and supporters sang neo-Nazi songs, praised Adolf Hitler's Third Reich, exchanged Sieg Heil salutes and set fire to a Pagan cross – traditionally burned by Nazis at Volk festivals – 'whooping and throwing petrol onto the flames'.

Several copies were made of the film and one found its way to the *Yorkshire Evening Post* which published the story on 4 May 2005.

There are further reports from a variety of sources. They are naturally sporadic, but they appear to reveal a British National Party that is far from throwing off the violence, racism and fascist sympathies that Griffin seeks to disown. Nor is it unusual for convicted criminals to play major roles in the party. The man chosen as body guard to Jean-Marie Le Pen, on his high profile visit for a BNP conference and dinner in 2004, was a violent football hooligan with convictions for public disorder.

2004 European elections and four focus groups (in Dagenham and Northampton). The local aggregate data are drawn from a sample of 158 wards in 26 local authorities in England where the BNP stood two or more candidates in the 2003 local elections (this was one of the main breakthrough points for the BNP). The report also examines the relationship between votes for the BNP and both turnout and the performance of Labour, the Conservatives and Lib Dems.

SO WHAT DID IT FIND?

● Support for the far right does not come from places where the poorest and most deprived people in British society live. It seems that the BNP draws its support from areas with skilled or semi-skilled workers.

● The BNP also finds support where there are more people with

few educational qualifications, supporting the idea that lack of education may be a more important route to far right support than poverty or deprivation.

● There is no simple relationship between far-right support and racially mixed areas. The BNP do well largely in wards where white people live rather than where there are people from the ethnic minorities. Nor does it do well in places with high numbers of asylum seekers.

● Focus group evidence and testimony from places where the BNP have prospered suggests that the BNP gets its support from areas that have experienced change nearby rather than in their own immediate neighbourhoods and where people fear that their area, and indeed the country, is 'being taken over'.

● The focus groups also show how

immigration and asylum seekers have become symbols for the frustrations and fears of everyday life in largely working class areas. It is among people like the participants in the groups who feel that they and their neighbourhoods are being neglected that the potential for growth for the BNP lies.

PARTY AND ELECTORAL FACTORS

Do the far right do well in places where there is no effective competition between the parties and where there is voter apathy? Does the BNP foster support where there are large majorities for one party, particularly the Labour party? Our research only shows very limited support for this view outside London. The far right seems to do well in places where competition between the parties occurs, perhaps where the main parties are already under