

The BNP: A Critical Perspective

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Extreme right nationalism as espoused by the British National Party (BNP) is a divisive and emotive subject. Like many other people, until relatively recently my understanding of their ideology was vague, consisting predominantly of an instinctive antipathy. However, the effect of growing up in Keighley, West Yorkshire, where the BNP has developed a substantial following¹, led me to want to intellectually engage with the subject and attempt to understand their appeal and what their ideology actually involves.

Post-1945, the problematic legacy of the relationship between British nationalism and continental Fascism has hindered the continually mutating and fracturing parties of the extreme right, and helped ensure they remained generally on the periphery of mainstream politics. Now however, the BNP, under Nick Griffin's leadership, is seeking to shed the 'racist thug' image which has, with some justification,² characterised the far-right for decades and take part in the political debate as a serious party. There have been a number of significant modifications to their manifesto and tactics which, allied to a change in presentation, seems to be proving increasingly acceptable to the British electorate. This shift was viewed in 2006 by Councillor Chris Kirby (BNP, Worth Valley)³ as akin to the difference between Old and New Labour; a change which they hope will reap equivalent electoral benefits. Whether this will prove to be the case is uncertain; however, the BNP certainly appear to be gaining in popularity. I will examine why later in this essay, but firstly what does the BNP actually believe?

As with any nationalist movement or organisation, the British National Party believes firstly that "Humanity is divided into nations",⁴ and secondly, that this is a permanent and necessary, even good thing. The ideology of the BNP is based upon this premise in which nations are the fundamental units to which everyone belongs, and are the best, if not only, identification which can satisfy individual needs for communal cultural and political representation and development. In their words: "The human need to belong is best met at a 'tribal' level, and the best way to avoid such tribalism leading in turn to clashes with other tribes is to encourage its realization at the level of a genuine nation-state"⁵. The most recent manifesto espouses "The BNP exists to give the British people ... choice, and thus to restore and defend the basic

¹ There have recently been several BNP local councillors in Keighley and Nick Griffin, the party leader, polled 4,240 votes standing in Keighley in the 2005 general election.

² There are a number of surveys covering the history of the BNP and the far-right such as Sykes, Alan, "The radical right in Britain: social imperialism to the BNP", (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005) which illustrate this.

³ Kirby himself is an ex-Labour supporter who joined the BNP in 1999.

⁴ Tamir, Yael, "Theoretical difficulties in the study of nationalism", in Ed. Beiner, R., *Theorizing nationalism*, (State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, 2000), p 82.

⁵ "BNP general election manifesto 2005", www.bnp.org.uk, consulted 22nd March 2006.

democratic rights we have all been denied.”⁶ This will satisfy a primordial need for communal identity, allowing “the British people of today pride in themselves, their people, their history, their culture and their country,”⁷ necessary for self-esteem and individual development. This, the BNP believe, is eroded in today’s politics “nothing is more important than criminalising any British person who dares to object to the destruction of our country’s heritage.”⁸ Further, they express as an explicit aim, the countering of the “anti-British brainwashing in schools and the media which tries to make our children ashamed of their heritage and identity.”⁹

The BNP defines national identity in a number of ways, the result of which appears to be a hybridised ethno-cultural idea of the nation. At one extreme, there is a biological-ethnic definition discernible in their thinking, which sees nationality primarily as a function of hereditary ethnicity. Science and socio-biology are sometimes used to ‘prove’ innate differences between ‘nations’, which therefore legitimates the nationalist division of the world’s people into races and nations.¹⁰ Despite the echoes of eugenics and ‘white supremacism’ this may conjure up, there also appears to be a fundamental ideological difference between the ‘racial nationalism’ espoused by the BNP and those who divide the world simply into ‘the white race’ and ‘non-white.’ The BNP sees the homogenisation of ‘white’ races, for example through European integration, as almost as much to be feared as integration with ‘non-white’ races. It is this, along with claims that “we don’t ‘hate’ black people, we don’t ‘hate’ Asians, we don’t oppose any ethnic group for what God made them, they have a right to their own identity as much as we do”¹¹ which allows the party to attempt to distance itself ideologically both from allegations of racism, and from other far-right ‘white supremacist’ groups. However, although not overtly ‘racist’ in a traditional sense, it is still a conception of identity that excludes all those not of the true British ethnic ‘nation’. For further evidence of this, see the BNP’s monthly magazine, aptly named ‘Identity’.

Other aspects of the BNP’s definition of nationality appear to be more historical and socio-culturally based, possibly due to modern society’s distaste and mistrust of racial or ethnic

⁶ “BNP general election manifesto 2007”, www.bnp.org.uk, consulted 10th October 2008.

⁷ “Heritage”, from Infopack downloaded from www.bnp.org.uk downloaded 16th March 2006.

⁸ BNP News, ““No More Mosques” Slogan on Letter Lands British Man with Criminal Record after Muslim Objects” www.bnp.org.uk, October 19th 2008

⁹ BNP Information Pack “Britain First!” pp 17, downloaded from www.bnp.org.uk 19th October 2008

¹⁰ Barnes, Lee, “The new era of nationalism”, (4/3/2005) taken from www.bnp.org.uk, consulted 22nd March 2008. The science referred to is research on genetics and ethnicity by the American Society of Human Genetics, which appears to prove that ethnically different people are also genetically different. Whilst this is by a columnist, and there is a caveat disclaiming it as being agreed BNP ideology, the same view is repeated elsewhere, including in the 2005 and 2007 general election manifestos

¹¹ “FAQs” from the 2006 Infopack, www.bnp.org.uk, downloaded October 2008

categorisations. The statement that “the British people have walked the hills and valleys of this country for at least ten thousand years, their blood, sweat and toil has transformed this island into our home”¹² crystallises the territorial-historical idea of the nation as a distinct group, geographically and historically. The party literature emphasising the ‘unique’ historical experience of the British, and the culture and values which this produced tallies, I would argue, with Briouly’s explanation of the “historicist” view of the nation. He states that in this approach, history “is the only way to apprehend the spirit of a community; it is the principal way of learning the language of a particular society”.¹³ In the BNP’s ideology, this translates into an exclusivity whereby if your ancestors have not been part of the nation’s history, you cannot be a part of the nation as you cannot understand the “language” of British culture. In effect though, this still translates into a fairly ethnically based concept of identity, due to the long time-scale, illustrated in the quote above, which they perceive as necessary to develop “Britishness.”

But how does this excess of national pride manifest itself as a political movement, rather than a cultural phenomenon? The BNP, as I stated earlier, believe the nation is the only real unit of identification. Therefore, nationalism is the natural prism through which to view the world, and is the only logical political ideology. For example “all economic and social structures, institutions and legislation must be built or developed around the fundamentals of ensuring the freedom and security of our people and maintaining our unique cultural and ethnic identity.”¹⁴ It is furthermore an exclusive far-right form of nationalism because it sees the ‘non-British’ element present in Britain as the root cause of many of the problems the United Kingdom currently seems to face. This brings us to what I believe is central to the appeal of the BNP, and a significant factor in their renaissance: the nationalism of fear.

Firstly, there is racial fear. The party states “on current demographic trends, we, the native British people, will be an ethnic minority in our own country within sixty years.”¹⁵ This is obviously an issue which the BNP feels is important not only to its members, but, by implication, also considers most ‘British’ people are concerned about. The same is true of the related fear of a swamping of ‘British’ culture; the nationalist belief in “the irreplaceability, of

¹² “Heritage”, from the Infopack, www.bnp.org.uk, downloaded October 2008

¹³ Briouly, John “The sources of nationalist ideology”, in Ed. Hutchinson, John & Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, (OUP, Oxford, 1994) p 106.

¹⁴ “BNP general election manifesto 2005”, www.bnp.org.uk, consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008.

¹⁵ “Our stance: immigration”, www.bnp.org.uk, consulted 14th October 2008.

the culture values that are to be preserved and developed only through the cultivation of the peculiarity of the group”¹⁶ means only a nationalistic agenda can preserve the unique and endangered culture of the native British peoples.

The assertion of the distinctiveness and importance of a culture is a common, almost ubiquitous feature of nationalism, but I would argue that the representation of it as being under threat is more prevalent in far-right nationalism. This is particularly noticeable, especially in recent years with the rise of the twin “enemies” of globalisation and multiculturalism, compounding people’s fear of losing their identity. Statements such as “the British peoples are embroiled in a long term cultural war being waged by a ruling regime which has abandoned the concept of ‘Britain’ in pursuit of globalisation”¹⁷ illustrate the rhetoric of fear characteristic of this “reactionary culturalism”¹⁸ prevalent in BNP ideology. Curiously, however individual the party stresses each nation is, this phenomenon is far from unique to Britain and has been theorised in a wider context by Puri as a reaction to the twin perceived threats of “jihad” and “McWorld.”¹⁹ It is also a theme which will be depressingly familiar to any regular reader of the British press, particularly the tabloid and right-wing papers. Whether there is any genuine “threat” to “Britishness” is a subject for another essay; however, the constant media speculation on this reflects the climate of uncertainty and fear in which we currently appear to live.

Secondly, the BNP exploits more general social fears such as fear of crime. The party manifesto details a traditional far-right stance on law and order, including the reintroduction of capital punishment in some cases,²⁰ but also links nationality and ethnicity to this; for example in a propaganda postcard headed “give us back our girls; arrest anti-white racist paedophiles.”²¹ Terrorism, and the fear thereof, is also prevalent in BNP literature, continuing the nationalist linkage between issues of fear and ethnicity. So too is the issue of job security, with jobs apparently threatened by economic globalisation, immigration and asylum seekers.²²

The solutions proposed by the BNP to current economic problems all have an extremely insular nationalistic basis. They include the voluntary repatriation of immigrants and refusal of any

¹⁶ Weber, Max in Ed. Hutchinson, John & Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, (OUP, Oxford, 1994) p 25.

¹⁷ “BNP general election manifesto 2005”, www.bnp.org.uk, first consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008.

¹⁸ Puri, Jyoti, “Encountering nationalism”, (Blackwell, Oxford, 2004), p 230.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p 230.

²⁰ “Our stance: law and order” www.bnp.org.uk, first consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008.

²¹ Postcard published for “Mothers against paedophiles” by the BNP.

²² “BNPbooklet” from Infopack downloaded from www.bnp.org.uk downloaded 14th October 2008.

asylum seekers unless this was their nearest safe country;²³ “as much national self sufficiency as is practicably possible”²⁴ with the promise of intervention from any BNP government, where necessary, to run the economy for the benefit of the British. A form of Hilaire Belloc’s “Distributism” is advocated as the “Third Way and the alternative to the failed ideologies of socialism and capitalism”.²⁵ This is one of the more radical or surprising aspects of the BNP’s manifesto, along with ‘green’ ideas such as ending “all intrusions of new development into Green Belt areas,”²⁶ and debate and discussion of the implications of a possible “Peak Oil” crisis. However, all these ideas are still a function of nationalism, and in the literature at least, are specifically linked to a fear: that of over-population caused by immigration, and the social and economic costs of this allied to globalisation.

What then are the longer-term aims of the BNP? Nick Griffin states that “nationalism is, by its very nature, a long-termist creed”²⁷ and as such, their aim is the sustainable development of Great Britain for those they define as the British nation. There would be a withdrawal from the European Union and NATO, voluntary repatriation of immigrants funded by money currently used for international aid, and a stop to future immigration to ease the overcrowding that they see as the root of many problems. There are many other policies on everything from crime to housing and the BNP are trying hard to promote these, to remove their “one issue image.”²⁸ However, as I have detailed above, ideas of race and national identity permeate the whole manifesto. Cllr. Chris Kirby told me he believes the BNP will be an important political force within the next ten to fifteen years, possibly even in government. Whilst this seems unlikely, there is no doubt the number of their supporters is growing and though they might not have reached the levels claimed by the sub-heading of a local party leaflet “The Keighley Patriot: The voice of the silent majority,” they are drifting from the periphery to the mainstream of British politics.

²³ “BNP general election manifesto 2005”, www.bnp.org.uk, first consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ “Those who inspire our ideology: no. 2 Hilaire Belloc”, *Voice of Freedom*, iss. 63 (August 2005)p 10.

²⁶ “BNP general election manifesto 2005”, www.bnp.org.uk, first consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008..

²⁷ Griffin, Nick, “Another BNP first”(3.7.05) taken from *Chairman’s column* on www.bnp.org.uk, first consulted 22nd March 2006, updated with 2007 manifesto, October 2008.

²⁸ Sykes, Alan, “The radical right in Britain: social imperialism to the BNP”, (Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2005) p 137.

Why this is so, in Ignazi's words, could be because they give "an answer to those demands and needs generated by post-industrial society which traditional parties have failed to address."²⁹ The seeming failure of political parties to listen to the electorate is a recurrent theme both of BNP literature and much of the regular British media, another uneasy correlation like the parallels mentioned earlier on issues of "Britishness" and culture. In such a situation, where public opinion and the BNP seem to agree on many issues, it is not surprising that they are increasing in popularity. Future economic difficulties can surely only exacerbate the problem as in financial hardship, people look for new and possibly simplistic solutions. This may partially explain why the ex-manufacturing towns of northern England and areas of Greater London used to be the BNP's sole constituencies, but also why this is no longer the case.

There is also of course the significant phenomenon of the protest vote, particularly in apparently unimportant local elections³⁰. When people believe they are not being heard, it seems they feel that borrowing the megaphone of an extreme party to shout their frustration will cause more mainstream politicians to listen. This may show that however much the BNP believe they have become a modern, relevant and electable party, to much of the British electorate, they remain a bogeyman with which to scare the "respectable" parties. Thus, while their steady increase in local councillors may prove their increasing popularity, this may not translate to the larger arena of Westminster.

Indeed, the one note of brightness in what to me is a depressing spiral of fear-mongering and intolerance, is the regularity with which BNP councillors fail to retain their seats: "they do not know what is going on; they look bored and confused"³¹ is one description of them in council meetings. This ignorance of the day-to-day business of politics, combined with the internecine squabbling which appears prevalent in the party may more effectively limit their success than political opposition. There will probably always be some people who wish to turn back the clock to a mythical golden age, a modern sanitised version of the early 1950's, where children could play safely in the streets and men worked hard and came home to the wife and family, where political correctness had not replaced common knowledge and people were proud of being British. There are probably a proportion of these people who believe that the BNP can make this happen; this is not necessarily a reliable electoral prediction.

²⁹ Ignazi, Piero, "Extreme right parties in Western Europe", (OUP, Oxford, 2003) p 2.

³⁰ See for example "The battle for Bradford", H el ene Mulholland, guardian.co.uk, Wednesday April 26 2006

³¹ The battle for Bradford", H el ene Mulholland, guardian.co.uk, Wednesday April 26 2006.