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This presentation is based around the following themes:

- Traditional perspectives for the analysis of the British extreme right
- Whether, in the light of events since 2000, a new perspective is needed
- The extent and basic features of British National Party [BNP] support in Great Britain
- Opposing the extreme right in the British context
 - Initiatives by the state
 - 'Outcasting' by the legal process
 - Anti-fascism/anti-racism and the effects on the BNP

Traditional perspectives for the analysis of the British extreme right

Until a few years ago, the position of the extreme right in Great Britain was usually analysed within the paradigm of supposed 'British exceptionalism' – that, in contrast to many other countries of Europe, Great Britain [which excludes Northern Ireland] had been largely inured against extreme-right politics. Such parties that were active in the 1930s, the 1950s, and the 1960s and 1970s had some contemporary support and political impact, but they proved evanescent and did not put down any socially rooted base.

The need for a new perspective?

While it is true that the British situation is not that of countries such as France or Belgium, any claim to exceptionalism now needs modification, if not rejection, in the light of the emergence since 2000-01 in some localities of the BNP, albeit the only

British extreme-right party of much present-day importance.¹ It was founded in 1982 but, only with the election in 1999 of Nick Griffin as its Chair to replace the aging John Tyndall (1934-2005), has it achieved a degree of political credibility as well as support. Its voter base, probably disproportionately male and largely but not exclusively white working-class or petit-bourgeois, has been very specifically concentrated in certain locations: towns in Lancashire such as Burnley and Oldham; towns in Yorkshire such as Bradford, Keighley and Dewsbury; Stoke-on-Trent in the northern east Midlands; Birmingham and some towns around it, such as Dudley; certain parts of London, especially inner and outer East London; and parts of neighbouring Essex. Until 2008 this success, in terms of seats won, was limited to victories in lowest-tier local-authority elections and by-elections.

The basic features of BNP support in Great Britain

However, in May 2008 it achieved the election of a member of the London Assembly in an election based upon a proportional-representation principle; this was achieved on the basis of 5.3 per cent of the vote across Greater London as a whole (3.9 per cent of the eligible electorate). In the constituency covering the BNP's London heartland of inner and outer East London, the level of BNP support was 9.8 per cent, with an additional 1.3 per cent for the National Front (3.9 and 0.5 per cent respectively of the eligible electorate).

Then, in June 2009, albeit partly assisted by the lack of popularity of the governing Labour Party and by a general disillusionment with the major parties, the BNP succeeded in the European Parliament elections in electing two MEPs, Nick Griffin himself from the North West constituency and Andrew Brons from the Yorkshire & Humber constituency. This was achieved on the basis of 8.0 and 9.8 per cent

¹ The National Front – its heyday in the 1970s – continues to exist but has been thoroughly eclipsed by the BNP. There are also some niche activities that attract a few who are sympathetic to the extreme right, including some football club support and White Power rock music, but these do not usually obtrude upon the wider society. However, a group calling itself the English Defence League [EDL] (with a small Welsh companion group, the Welsh Defence League) has recently made a public impression with marches since the summer of 2009, usually in cities and towns with large Muslim populations. It has not contested elections but has confined its activities to controversial marches, which have now occurred in Birmingham, London, Leeds and other places. It and the BNP have mutually sought publicly to distance themselves from each other but there is evidence of EDL activists in some locations who have also been active in the BNP, as well as active in football hooliganism. Despite its claim to be against only Islamic extremism, critics accuse it of general Islamophobia. The alleged precipitating event for EDL's formation was a small but vocal demonstration by a few Islamic extremists against the 2nd Battalion the Royal Anglian Regiment when it returned from Iraq and publicly celebrated its return by a march through the town of Luton on 10 March 2009.

respectively of the votes cast (2.6 and 3.2 per cent of the relevant electorates). Rather more worryingly, whereas in the past one would have said that the nationwide support for the extreme right was probably no more than about 1 per cent, the level of BNP electoral support in the 2009 European elections even in the party's weaker locations shows that it has managed to spread from beyond its heartlands. Its overall national support in the 2009 European elections was 6.0 per cent (2.1 per cent of the eligible electorate). In the South East constituency, where it was not a political force, it none the less managed 4.4 per cent of votes cast (1.7 per cent of the eligible electorate).

Standard published opinion polls have not reported BNP support separately and, in any case, there is evidence that such polls substantially underestimate potential BNP support. One national poll taken (probably by Internet or telephone) in exceptional circumstances on the day immediately after the appearance of the BNP leader on a highly publicized BBC television programme [see below] reported support at 3 per cent, in contrast with the previous month's 2 per cent [*Daily Telegraph*, 24 October 2009]. The same poll also reported that 22 per cent of respondents would 'seriously consider' voting for the BNP in a future local, general or European election. Forty-three (43) per cent shared some of its concerns but 'had no sympathy for the party itself'. A high 12 per cent said that they completely agreed with the BNP, but 38 per cent completely disagreed and two-thirds said that they would under no circumstances vote for it. Some of these figures may seem alarming, but the circumstances of the poll mean that they should probably be regarded with at least some scepticism. The figure for current BNP support in national opinion polls, if measured accurately and at a time without particular sensitivity to the BNP, would probably be between around 4 per cent in Great Britain, and slightly higher in England alone.

The BNP's current overall tally [as of 21 October 2009] of 57 local-authority councillors (all of them in England) is a far more impressive achievement than that by any previous extreme-right party but it is still a minuscule fraction of the more than 22,000 of all such seats. The BNP also has just three councillors at the next highest level, the county – in Lancashire, Leicestershire and Hertfordshire (the last north of London). These elections have all been conducted on the first-past-the-post principle, which works against smaller parties.

The BNP's Euro-victories and the fact that it is now in England clearly the fifth or sixth largest party (after the three traditional parties, plus the United Kingdom Independence Party and the Green Party) have thrown into disarray the usual past policy of political parties and the mainstream media of 'outcasting' the BNP. Amid much controversy the BBC recently invited Griffin on to 'Question Time', its premier weekly television current affairs programme with a studio audience (members of an interested public in a different locality each week ask questions on topical political issues to a panel of celebrities, usually senior politicians from the major parties or other public figures). Griffin duly appeared on Thursday 22 October amid much media controversy and was forced to face some difficult questions from other panel members. Although there were polling reports of increased support for the BNP immediately after the programme and the BNP was variously claiming 3,000 to 4,000 requests for new membership, its website, accessed on 5 November 2009, gives little coverage to Griffin's appearance, suggesting that it is not now seen as helpful for the party's image.

It is the socio-political environment of its areas of support that originally assisted the BNP, which has relied variously on anti-immigrant, anti-asylum-seeker, anti-Muslim and anti-Asian appeals, depending on time and context. The Lancashire and Yorkshire towns where it has made an impact have experiences of white/Asian conflicts, and tend also to have high levels of segregation and little contact between white and other ethnic groups. However, the spread of support has meant that the social determinism of BNP has probably been reduced, as those with these anti-views across wider sections of society are drawn to the BNP.

The danger to democratic politics posed by the extreme right in Great Britain is the risk of the banalization of extreme-right support – the view of a part of the electorate that voting for the extreme right is a normal, but a risqué or 'daring' or unconventional, demonstration of hostility to the political system. It is that sentiment against which some Labour politicians, especially those seeing a strong extreme-right sentiment in their locality, have been warning for some time, although it would be wrong to suggest that the banality of extreme-right support is a national phenomenon. However, it is undoubtedly very much a local phenomenon in those places where the BNP has established a foothold.

Still, the European Parliament has not assisted the process of preventing BNP's views from becoming generalized by allowing Griffin, a self-avowed climate-change

denier, to be a member of its delegation to the forthcoming Copenhagen summit on climate change.

Opposing the extreme right in the British context

Formal political parties of the extreme right seek to mobilize support principally on the basis of ethnic expulsionism or exclusionism (though also adhering to other, traditional, right-wing concerns), and there is a hierarchy of commitment to any such party - ranging from a core of activism to a penumbra of less committed support.²

- Extreme-right activism by individuals who attends meetings, go on marches, assist in elections, and even stand as candidates
- Passive membership by those who sympathize but do not become involved in any actual activism
- Persistent and loyal voters for such parties
- Occasional, intermittent or once-off voters for such parties
- Sympathizers for such parties who do not actually vote for the parties
- Sympathizers for some or all of such parties' policies who do not otherwise support these parties

The first four categories would encompass those 22 per cent who, in the earlier poll, would seriously consider BNP voting. The last category might be the 43 per cent who shared some of the BNP's concerns but would never vote for it.

Those in the core are clearly less numerous – those in the penumbra most numerous. Most activities by the state to combat the extreme right focus on the core alone and have little effect upon the much larger numbers of passive supporters and sympathizers. Actions by anti-fascist activists usually target the core, although also seek to influence supporters who merely vote, or might vote, for the party. The British experience demonstrates the limitations of both these approaches.

² Other categories would be needed to encompass other types of extreme-right movement, besides political parties.

Initiatives by the state

Initiatives against the extreme right by the state have been principally by statute or based upon the criminal law. State surveillance and monitoring has, at least until relatively recently, been largely incident-driven and not proactive, unlike the state's longer-term interest in potential Islamist terrorists. Legislative provision against incitement to racial hatred (and, since October 2007, incitement of hatred based on religious belief) is the principal means used by the state against the more overt expressions taken by extreme-right sentiment. However, prosecutions have been few, limited to the most notorious examples and taken only against individual offenders. There have been no proscriptive actions against extreme-right parties or organizations *per se*, although a substantial number of organizations alleged to support Islamic terror have been banned.

Members of the police are explicitly banned from being members of the BNP and similar right-wing groups. A leak of the BNP membership list on to the Internet none the less revealed the odd policeman who was a member. The ban may have deterred some police from joining, or perhaps even deterred the odd person sympathetic to the BNP from joining the police. Prison officers are also forbidden from membership, although there has often been strong suspicion of extreme right-wing support among this group. There has been some discussion among teachers as to whether membership of the BNP should be forbidden. However, these issues are scarcely even an irritant to the appeals of the BNP, and for some may increase its appeal.

The Equality and Human Rights Commission recently announced its intention to prosecute the BNP under race-relations legislation unless it altered the racial exclusionary criteria for its membership. The BNP initially resisted, but later acceded to, this threat by a conference decision that called for an appropriate change in the party's constitution; the matter is now out to a vote of the full membership. There was much publicity about this but there is no evidence that it has significantly hurt the BNP, which is never going to become a racially diverse organization. The change was reluctantly accepted and its only effect seems likely to be that one or two older and embittered anti-Muslim Asian Britons, still upset around the massacres associated with the partition of India in 1947, will become members, to be merely tolerated by the general membership. This publicity-laden event will have done nothing to depress sympathy for the BNP and, among some, may even have strengthened it.

'Outcasting' by the legal process

In 2007 the trade union, the Association of Locomotive Engineers and Firemen [ASLEF] successfully sought a decision from the European Court of Human Rights that Article 11 of the European Convention did not oblige it to accept into membership those who belonged to extreme-right parties that publicly espoused policies and views that were hostile to its own union policies and positions on multicultural issues. The British government responded to this by changing the legislation inherited from the era of previous Conservative government that prohibited the use of political-party membership or affiliation as a criterion by which a trade union might determine who was allowed to join it. However, the manner in which this decision was transposed into English law by s19 of the Employment Act 2008 was so circumscribed by exceptions and derogations that critics argue it is effectively inoperable. In any case, this measure will hardly have significant impact.

This is a matter in which both trade unions and some employers have had an interest.

The civil law has been conditionally willing to support trade unions who wish to exclude BNP activists on the ground that their political beliefs oppose the declared aims and policies of the trade union.

Also, in particular specified circumstances the law upholds the right of employers to dismiss extreme-right employees whose political beliefs or activities interfere with the full and proper execution of their job. The most significant case concerned a local authority that successfully dismissed a publicly known BNP activist who had been employed as a bus driver often driving ethnic-minority children to and from school.

However, 'outcasting' of the BNP by organs and agents of the state cannot always be effectively done, especially in local authorities where BNP councillors have been elected. Having been legally elected, such councillors are entitled to certain prerogatives from the state in order to do their job. They are expected to present the interests of those who did not vote for them as well as those who did. A policy to deny them access to the facilities needed to act as councillors would be counter-productive and almost certainly illegal.

Anti-fascism/anti-racism and the effects on the BNP

There are strong anti-fascist/anti-racist initiatives that are especially active in discouraging people from voting for the BNP. However, the evidence is weak as to whether it is especially these sorts of activities that have occasioned setbacks for the BNP where these have occurred. Whilst these activities have intensified in recent years, that has coincided with the greater emergence of the BNP. On the other hand, it would be difficult to demonstrate without a carefully designed quasi-experiment that such initiatives have been wholly ineffective. Perhaps they have contributed to restricting the success of the BNP, whether in its strongholds or generally.

Conclusion

Great Britain may seem likely to have a pattern of future longer-term extreme-right support continuing the historical ebb and flow of the phenomenon over past decades. Or the BNP may succumb to the factionalism that has been the fate to some of its predecessors. However, there are indications that the BNP may be longer-lasting than previous examples. Since 2000 it has survived much opposition and has suffered no serious setbacks. The issues that have assisted its rise are as likely to persist and intensify as to mitigate – the long-term prognosis for the economy is not greatly optimistic and anti-Islam feeling and general Islamophobia are likely to remain powerful mobilizing factors for the foreseeable future.