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The Appeal of the British National Party (BNP)

“Success is infectious. It spreads quickly. And it infuses those dedicated to such a great cause with the enthusiasm to preserve and redouble their efforts. Just one electoral victory, even if not a big one, will demonstrate to millions of people around Britain that the BNP is capable of winning, that a vote for it may well not be wasted. If it can win other wards in the same borough – wards where in the past its votes, while quite good, would have been even better if the voters thought its candidates had a chance of being elected. And if it can establish a pattern of winning seats in Tower Hamlets, it can begin to do so elsewhere in London – and far beyond”.¹

These words were spoken by the Chairman of the BNP, John Tyndall immediately after the party had won its first council seat at Tower Hamlets in September 1993. At the time few public figures appeared to take his pronouncement seriously. A popular view was that the result was a one off and the BNP would be unable to repeat its success. This was certainly the view echoed by many of the leading tabloids including those on the right like the Mail, Express and Sun, and those on the left like the Mirror, Independent and Guardian. Interestingly, this view was not challenge by historians including those whose work had focussed on the far right, such as Kenneth Lunn and Richard Thurlow. Instead, they choose to reserve their judgments, partly because scholarship was problematic with the number of non-white students entering academia rising, and partly because the BNP were a recent phenomena and therefore it had very little history to examine. Eleven years later few historians would find it easy to agree with this view. The BNP have won council seats across the country and are now by far the most popular and successful far right party in British history, having successfully appealed to voters to support their polices on issues like race and immigration. This paper intends to examine the nature of that appeal. Indeed, in this paper I will argue that its appeal lies in its very ability to attract people from different sections of society and from groups as far diverse as pensioners to students, to members of the Labour and Tory parties. Furthermore, I will also argue that it is only because the BNP have successfully convinced many that they are no longer a racist and fascist party that lies at the very heart of this appeal.

When the BNP was formed they made no attempt to hide their racist agenda. Speaking shortly after its formation in April 1982, John Tyndall said his goal was to “create a Nazi dictatorship in Great Britain, as well as a country free of all non whites”.² These polices did little to appeal to the electorate but the BNP was not concerned. Indeed, its rules regarding membership was deliberately designed to appeal to some sections of society and ignore others. Membership for example was denied those who were non-white, Catholic or Jewish. Neither was it allowed if one were white but of mixed decent. Membership, was however permitted to white

¹ Lowles, *White Riot*, P.36

² No Author, <http://www.towerhamlets.gov.uk/templates/news/detail.cfm?newsid=412> (March 3, 2004)

Protestants but even here the BNP's policies did little to appeal to the majority who fell within this group. Pensioners for example having resisted fascism once, found little appeal in embracing it in later life. So too did students who had grown up with non – white children and therefore had no hostility to people from these communities.

The BNP's appeal in this period was not enhanced by its behaviour against those who disagree with its policies. Joe Owens, for example, the BNP's regional organiser for Merseyside was "jailed for sending razor blades by post to members of the Jewish community in Liverpool",³ while in London, Tony Lecomber the BNP's current Director of Group Development was jailed for "planning to blow up the offices of a left wing organisation"⁴ opposed to the BNP. Given this it is hardly surprising that the majority of people who joined the party in this period were young, Protestant, and had links with criminal groups such as football hooligans and Loyalist Para Militaries in Northern Ireland. Men like Warren Bennett for example, the current Chief Steward: neither is it surprising that the number of people who joined was small, and that the party won no seat in any national or local election.

After 1992 however, this began to change as some elements within the BNP began to argue that "the party needed to lose its thuggish image if they were to become electable".⁵ David Bruce, for example, was one, so too was Michael Newland the BNP's national organiser. That this advice was to some degree heeded explains why the BNP began adopting a number of measures that have since helped them widen their appeal and win more seats. The first of these new measures revolved around clothing. Before 1993 the majority of BNP activists tended to campaign wearing jeans or other casual clothing such as tee shirts and Doctor Martin Boots. After 1992 however, the BNP sought to present a more respectable image particularly when knocking on doors and canvassing support, and therefore began to conduct their business wearing suits and ties. Another measure the BNP adopted was to try and make their policies more respectable. For example, instead of saying that they want to rid the country of all non whites, they now say that if elected they would:

"Stop all further mass immigration into Britain and put in place a system of voluntary resettlement whereby those foreigners resident in Britain would be encouraged to return to their lands of origin".⁶

To encourage non- whites to return, the BNP say that they would offer cash incentives which would not only:

"Benefit the native British people, who would secure themselves a homeland, but those of foreign origin who would take invaluable benefits to their own countries by using the skills and money they acquired in Britain to help their lands of native origins develop".⁷

This of course is just another way of saying they will get rid of all non whites, only now they would employ financial rather than other means to achieve it. A third measure was to try and recruit members from those groups from which recruitment had previously proved difficult to recruit from. For example in Burnley the BNP have campaigned against the closing down of old people's homes. This is largely been pursued in order to win the support of pensioners and people vastly approaching

³ Harrison, *Why The BNP Are Not Wanted*, *Liverpool Echo*, April 3, 2003.

⁴ Michaels, <http://www.ict.org.il/articles/articledet.cfm?articleid=118> (March 28, 2004).

⁵ Lowles, *White Riot*, P1.41.

⁶ No Author <http://www.bnp.org.uk/faq.html>, (April 18, 2004).

⁷ *Ibid.*

retirement age. These measures have undoubtedly been successful. Many of those who admitted voting for the party in the 2002 council elections were from this group - including "Maureen Stowe a sixty three year old pensioner from Burnley".⁸ Similarly, many of their policies including those on crime and asylum have been deliberately designed to attract voters from other groups including members of all the main parties. This too has proved successful. Carol Hughes for example is one former member of the Labour Party who has made the move to the BNP, while in the Midlands, Phil Edwards has made a similar switch from the Conservatives. Students are another group who the BNP have been successfully targeting. Indeed, a brief look at the Young BNP's website shows that the BNP claim to have a presence on over thirteen campuses, including those of the "Universities of Salford and Leeds",⁹ though not, I am happy to say, the Universities of Newcastle and Durham.

There is no reason to doubt these figures. (A complete list of which appears on the young BNP's website). Not only is Tony Wentworth the current Chairman of the Young BNP a undergraduate at the University of Salford, but his predecessor Mark Collett was an undergraduate at the University of Leeds. What appears to attract these people to the BNP is the BNP's stance on anti white racism – that is, racism against people simply because they are white. This explains why most of the comments made by people like Wentworth and Collett on campus centre on anti white racism and why the BNP's appeal is felt mostly in those areas where attacks by ethnic minorities on whites is on the increase, such as Oldham, Burnley and Leeds. The BNP's appeal is starting to be felt by those who are still at school. Many of those who attended the young BNP's Red, White and Blue festival for example were under sixteen, including Jennifer Griffin, daughter of Chairman Nick Griffin. Again, the main reason for this appears to be the BNP's stance on anti white racism, and particularly that carried out by Asians on whites. This helps explain not only why "the BNP launch a poster campaign offering cash prizes to any pupil who could design the best poster on this issue",¹⁰ but also why one hundred children took part in this competition.

In this paper I have deliberately avoided comparing and contrasting the views of those historians who have written on this subject – as is normal in the case of presenting such a paper. This is because I believe historians have chosen to deny them the oxygen of publicity, partly because scholarship is problematic – particularly with the number of non – white children entering academia continuing to rise, and partly because the BNP are a recent phenomena and therefore have very little history to examine. Indeed, this explains why historians have written no books, or offer no courses that would enhance knowledge on the party, and why there are no experts in this field. These are some of the reasons why and how the BNP have become more appealing to growing numbers of the British electorate. Some of them such as the issue of anti white racism tends to be particularly appealing to those who are still at school or attending University. Others on the other hand such as those that revolved around the closing of old people's homes have proved particularly successful at winning the support of pensioners and those vastly approaching retirement age. In my view however, the most important reason is because the BNP are increasingly campaigning on issues with which members of the public can identify, as well as the refusal of historians to investigate and inform people about the

⁸ No Author, <http://society.guardian.co.uk/localgovt/story/0,7890,1176156,00.html>, (April 21, 2004)

⁹ No Author, <http://www.youngbnp.com/> (April 21, 2003).

¹⁰ Charlton, *Outrage As Far Right Party Targets Schools*, *Sheffield Today*, February 10, 2003

true nature of the BNP, who exists to remove all none whites from Britain, as well as those who are Jewish or of mixed decent.

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