From national ‘clean hands’ to a local ‘engagement’ approach? UK Members of Parliament experiences in countering the British National Party in their constituencies

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Abstract

After nearly a decade of British National Party electoral ascendance, scant academic attention has been paid to UK policymakers’ anti-BNP responses. While some systematic study has found UK national party leaderships broadly adopting a ‘cleanhands’ exclusionary approach with some moments of policy adoption, little is known about policymaker counterstrategies where the BNP has emerged: the local, constituency level. This study aims to redress this imbalance. Using oral history interviews with five UK Members of Parliament and structured within-case studies of their constituencies, a comparative factor analysis of the particular counterstrategies used by MPs in these former ‘strongholds’, as well as when and why the BNP emerged in the first place, is established. What will be found is striking. While short-term opportunism most accurately characterises counter strategy motivation in the national case, this study finds a more earnest longer-term passion for re-engaging with disaffected white, working-class constituents at the local level. This study argues, however, that more needs to be done before the UK can restore its reputation of extreme right resistance. Only by supplementing existing local engagement with meaningful intercommunity interaction as well as strengthening civil society and educational controls nationally, can the UK approach Ami Pedahzur’s ideal of an ‘immunised’ democracy.

Keywords BNP; Mainstream Policy-maker Responses
Introduction

The study of defending democracies against insurgent anti-system threats has historically preoccupied such pre-eminent philosophical minds as John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Alexis de Tocqueville, and John Rawls (Pedahzur 2001: 339). The question of how a nation’s state, mainstream parties and civil society seeks to combat fringe extreme right parties whose core policy programme both denies the system of liberal democracy and the principles on which it is based (Carter 2005: 202) without resorting to similarly illiberal and anti-plural tactics is therefore a weighty one and has been variously described as the ‘paradox of tolerance’. It comes as no surprise then that this theoretical question has, therefore, recently come under fresh empirical scrutiny. As a new wave of anti-immigration, populist radical right parties has swept Western European democracies, so a budding, though in places underdeveloped (Mudde 2007: 277), comparative literature has sought to answer questions of what lessons can be learnt about attempts to accommodate and repudiate the extreme right threat in the case of such established examples of breakthrough as Jean-Marie Le Pen’s Front National (Kestel and Godmer 2004) and Jörg Haider’s Austrian Freedom Party (FPÖ) (Art 2007).

Possibly symptomatic of a belief in the inherent resistance of the UK’s ‘rational’ political culture to right-wing extremism (Eatwell 2000: 179) and its relatively recent electoral rise (Goodwin 2011a: 3), little academic attention (Eatwell 2010; Goodwin 2011b) has, however, been devoted to the question of effective mainstream party-political responses to Nick Griffin’s ‘modernised’ British National Party (BNP). In what has been previously seen by experts as a case of exceptionalism (Eatwell 2000) and conspicuous failure (Kitschelt 1995), much more has been written about whose support, on an actual (Borisyuk et al 2007; Bowyer 2008; Ford and Goodwin 2010) and potential basis (Ford 2010; John and Margetts 2009; Margetts et al 2006), and what supply-side ideological and tactical overhaul (Copsey 2007 and 2008; Goodwin 2011a) has enabled a party that has proposed, amongst other policies, voluntary repatriation of ‘non-indigenous’ citizens (BNP 2005: 14) to record the best far right result in British political history (Goodwin 2011a: 3).

Where it does exist, the main focus of the response literature has been so general as to fixate on the ‘high politics’ of rhetorically exclusionary but practically adoptive, national mainstream BNP responses by party leaderships (Eatwell 2010). This national imbalance in the fledgling UK extreme right response literature remains problematic for two reasons. First (and the focus of this study), precious little in-depth academic study and evidence gathering
of successful strategies by more moderate political elites has been attempted where we know the BNP has emerged\(^1\): the local, constituency level. Moreover, as the BNP’s rise led to similarly dramatic electoral fall in 2010, a lack of first hand investigation into UK micro responses impoverishes both the academic and policy debate on the matter. Until more is known through interviews or otherwise about the short or medium term tactics parties have used to see off the BNP locally, then we have little or no hope trying to access and assess the more crucial question of what would comprise a longer-term UK response nationally.

In order to address this local-level lacuna then, this study will therefore examine: to what extent have UK Members of Parliament’s local experiences in countering the BNP over the last decade represented a significant shift from the national ‘clean hands’ party political orthodoxy? The way we intend to answer this is through oral history interviews with five MPs whose constituencies coincide with former BNP ‘strongholds’ in North East London, West Yorkshire, and East Lancashire (Goodwin 2011a: 95). This will be assessed against the context of in-depth constituency case study analyses, thus establishing a comparative factor analysis of when and why the BNP emerged and the particular counterstrategies MPs used compared to the national case. Finally, what will be argued is that, while the promotion of meaningful interaction tactics between different ethnic groups still remains the path less well trodden locally, a shift toward this second ‘ideal type’ must be accompanied by a strengthened civil society and enhanced educational controls nationally in order to ensure the tentative realisation of Pedahzur’s (2001; 2004) vision of an ‘immunised’ democracy. Only by actively responding in this preventative way can the UK reclaim its status as a case of right-wing extremist exceptionalism.

**Structure**

Before detailing our findings and discussing their implications, however, the first chapter will be spent reviewing the national mainstream’s political reaction to the BNP threat. What we will find, in the UK literature, is that, while rare in the national case, it is more worryingly under-systematised when examined locally. In order to address this lacuna, we first set about establishing what has also so far been missing from the UK response literature: six short and medium term response strategy ‘ideal’ types extracted from the already established

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\(^1\) And in some cases normalised (Rhodes 2009a).
comparative response and expert panel study literature. This will allow us to quantify and qualify the MP’s responses locally in comparison to the ‘clean hands’ approach nationally. It also leads us into methodological considerations surrounding the interviews and case studies used substantively to address the literatures’ existing national bias.

The second, third and fourth chapters will be spent establishing the findings from MPs interviews on response strategy in the cases of Burnley, West Yorkshire, and Barking and Dagenham. These cases will first be set against the backdrops of the local context and existing counter strategies that enabled or hindered the BNP. What will be found is that, though the majority of MPs look at an engagement strategy as the most effective in principle, so a dissensus existed among respondents as to the use of other short term strategies in one’s arsenal with only a few championing ‘clean hands’ exclusion. What will also be argued is that circumstance is as much, or more, important as context in explaining BNP breakthrough. For example, though a local context of Labour inertia and severe poverty existed in more than one of the cases, so specific ‘enabling’ events around elections, such as the racialisation of public resources being taken advantage of by the BNP through spreading or seizing upon local myths, were also important.

Finally, the study will conclude by reflecting on the extent to which party political responses outlined by the case studies at the local level differ from national party responses and any recommendations that can be made with regard to more system-level defences of UK democracy against the extreme right. While it is important to recognise that this sample of UK policymakers largely confounds the nationally accepted exclusionary consensus, it will also be recommended that interaction can build on these existing engagement attempts as a step towards a more distant preventative goal, the UK as an immunised democracy. First, however, we need to establish the state of the UK response and counter strategy literature nationally.
1. The British response to the extreme right

1.1. Literature review

i) Britain’s national and local response

A thorough academic treatment of effective responses in general and party-political focused studies in particular has been both rare when focussed nationally and fragmentary when focussed locally. In one sense this is understandable. The BNP’s rise is a fairly recent phenomena compared to other European nations, which has afforded Britain’s extreme right experts less time to draw on the various lessons from current UK extreme right responses. This does not wholly explain its fledgling status, however, given that study of the conditions and actions that have contributed to BNP success has already been comprehensively mapped and subjected to intense discussion.

The most comprehensive account of state, party-political and civil society responses to the UK third wave of right-wing extremism, then, comes from Roger Eatwell (2010). In it, Eatwell describes the UK mainstream approaches to the BNP as a mix between excluding the party from national discourse, or a ‘clean hands’ approach, whilst also slipping into some adoption of the BNP’s more restrictive stance on immigration, as this became a hot electoral topic earlier in the decade. Moreover, Eatwell also finds that major party response has been mostly typified by Austria’s ‘frog-in-boiling-water’ scenario that has unwittingly, or not, corroborated with the more populist side of the BNP’s agenda. Prior to the 2010 General Election, for example, Labour and Conservative leaderships under Brown and Cameron rarely referred to the BNP, giving the party as little oxygen or platform as possible in order to legitimate its ethno-nationalist message (2010: 219). Policy-wise, this noble effort gave way to a very different set of tactics. Both parties have entertained the ‘dog whistle’ politics of the BNP. For example, in 2007 then Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, promised ‘British Jobs for British Workers’ (Summers 2009). Moreover, in 2011 Cameron threw red meat to Conservative supporters thinking about defecting to the BNP by announcing the ‘failure of [UK] state multiculturalism’ (BBC News 2011). Unfortunately, this politicisation of race was also primed, and given a wider positive pre-text, by UK tabloid newspapers for the better part of two decades. Their depiction of the threat of migrants and the ubiquitous ‘bogus’ asylum seeker since the 1990s as well as similarly diversity-phobic coverage of the fundamental cultural differences between Muslim and non-Muslim communities since 9/11, has arguably
set the political agenda in the BNP’s favour (Eatwell 2010: 223-4). As we shall see, other members of UK civil society, by which we mean the set of intermediate organisations that are neither the state nor the family (McCLean and McMillan 2003: 82), have both been a help and hindrance in combating the rise of the BNP. Eatwell, for example, is also critical of self-styled antifascist groups (such as Unite Against Fascism, Hope not Hate and Searchlight) whose actions from time-to-time, he believes, have converged on ‘rally confrontations’ and ‘name calling’ as opposed to principled counter arguments (McCLean and McMillan 2003: 226).

Moving away from the more academic picture, we can see evidence also of official party political responses of how best to organise against the BNP. The first considered response by party elites to the BNP was from the Labour party who electorally have the most to lose from BNP success. In 2007, a Fabian Society pamphlet ‘Stopping the Far Right’ called for a more organised and integrated campaign within the Labour movement (Lowles and Meszaras 2007: 29). This would be aimed at re-engaging the apathetic and re-energising important, local relationships between mainstream parties and the disaffected (Buonfino 2007: 12). In addition, news of other mainstream party political discussions on how to respond to the BNP has filtered through. Notable examples are ‘Stop the BNP’ training days for West Yorkshire and Burnley Liberal Democrat MPs at their spring conference in 2007 (Copey 2008: 173) as well as an increasingly comprehensive local Conservative approach of connecting the BNP locally with criminality, falling house prices and nationally with socialist policies in 2009 (Montgomerie 2009).

The UK national response has not been entirely hopeless, opportunistic or lacking coherent, systematic approach. Whilst the UK does not hold an outright constitutional ban on extremist parties, as is the case in German Basic Law, the UK state has become more intolerant toward the most egregious acts of racial discrimination toward minority groups (Eatwell 2010: 214). Though populist in terms of immigration, the previous Labour government deserves some credit for its development of race-relations legislation. The Equality and Human Rights Commission, for example, was able to use the 2006 Racial and Religious Hatred Act in 2009 to bring legal action against the BNP such as to change membership restrictions contained in the BNP’s constitution (Taylor 2009). This has had the unintentional, but welcome, effect of plunging the party into financial difficulties through associated legal expenses (Gamble 2010: 10).
The only limitation, one could argue, of Eatwell’s study, is its general nature and over-broad conceptualisation of possible national BNP responses. He stipulates, for example, that they can be sorted crudely into intensity of high (direct attacks on BNP nativist policies), low (myth-busting and ensuring media non-far right agenda setting), or no profile (BNP will fade away without oxygen of publicity) without considerations of scope or timing (Eatwell 2010: 227). Otherwise his description of the need for a ‘macro-meso-micro approach’ to the UK extreme right response (Eatwell 2010: 212) is deftly accurate and something one hopes is tentatively addressed by the national-local comparison conducted during the course of this study.

Fortunately for this study, this national focus has not wholly been the norm. There are some examples of local party political responses. These litter the monographs of the BNP’s rise (Copsey 2008 and Goodwin 2011a), but are never picked up upon in a systematic fashion. The only attempt one can find is in Copsey’s (2005) chapter comparing ‘old’ Labour with ‘new’ Labour responses to the far right. Due to the timing and limited scope of Copsey’s study however, only Burnley is used with no attempt to draw on lessons from other current wave strongholds.

ii) Lacuna

Most UK-case response studies have therefore been culpable of either giving local mainstream party’s responses to the BNP little systematic attention (Copsey 2005; 2008) as a result of a wholly national focus (Eatwell 2010). This is peculiar for two reasons. Firstly, while important lessons can be learnt of local party-political reactions-as they currently have been-second hand, oral history interviews with Members of Parliament affords richer access to ‘immense amounts of information’ about the attitudes and views of those political actors who have been significant stakeholders in their constituencies usually for several years and have practical experience tackling the BNP (Lilleker 2003: 208). This lack of such local short and medium term counter strategy investigations has therefore stymied the UK response from furnishing a longer-term preventative medicine to the extreme right threat.

Secondly, as we know in the case of the British far right compared to other European extreme right parties, all BNP politics has been local. This is largely a function of the high, institutional barrier set by Westminster’s Single Member Simple Plurality electoral system
(Usherwood 2008: 257) but is also a part of Griffin’s ladder strategy to dominate council chambers before aiming to win parliamentary seats (Goodwin 2009: 39). Thus while the national rubric of analysis may be important in mapping rhetorical exclusion and policy adoption from right-wing extremists, surely the focus of response analysis by the mainstream is more validly set at the constituency and local levels where we know the BNP has been encountered on a daily basis (Rhodes 2009a).

1.2. Response strategy ‘ideal’ types

Before we can demonstrate the methodology we will be using to address this lacuna, so the possible counterstrategies at an MP’s disposal need to be established. This is both because an explicit stipulation of the range of possible strategies in an MP’s (and country’s) arsenal is largely absent from the fledgling UK response literature, but also to aid us in our categorisation and comparison of the UK national and local cases. Fortunately for us and as demonstrated in the introduction, however, counter strategy to the extreme right weighs heavily on the minds of comparative European scholars. A sign of its maturity, this canon has separated into two discrete areas.

i) Short term party-political responses

The first of these areas employed in this study are shorter-term ‘sticking plaster’ responses to the extreme right. These are primarily reactive and typical of the UK national case where the extreme right threat has by all intents and purposes crept up on mainstream elites. David Art’s (2007) qualitative study into contemporary extremist waves in Germany and Austria typifies advocacy for a so-called exclusionary strategy that grants extreme right parties ‘no platform’ (Goodwin 2011b: 23). In it, Art argues that immediate exclusion is the most effective way for the state, mainstream political parties, and civil society to shut out the right wing extremist threat. The reason why, for example, Germany saw the collapse of the Republikaner party (REP) in the three years after its breakthrough and Austria the rise of the FPÖ in 1989, he argues, was precisely due to the speed and coherence of the mainstream executing a cordon sanitaire against the REP before it had a chance to break through into national government.
What remains clear, however, is that exclusion is not unanimously endorsed both at the empirical and expert panel level of the literature. Those who abide by inclusion state that it actually re-enforces the extreme right’s outsider status (Goodwin 2011b: 23). Exclusion has also been proven as being less successful than cooperation (Downs 2002: 33) and more likely to prevent ideological moderation (Van Spanje and Van Der Brug 2007: 1035). Instead of taking the moral high ground then, an inclusivist would argue that an adoption strategy of more restrictive policies on multiculturalism and immigration should be sought until the far right voter base is co-opted by the mainstream (Bale et al 2010: 413). As has been shown in the UK national case, this latter short-term strategy is not entirely unproblematic. Adoption’s most commonly cited criticism is ‘get it wrong and a party political actor runs the risk of looking opportunistic’ (Bale et al 2010: 413).

In order to avoid this pitfall, other more noble but no less flawed short-term strategies or ‘ideal types’ have therefore been placated. One of the most notable is where parties seek to play down or defuse the salience of issues associated with immigration (Goodwin 2011b: 23). As will become clear later, the key downfall of these slightly less inclusive approaches is that by not confronting the underlying issues that drive immigration scepticism you are at danger of ignoring an issue of salience (Bale et al 2010: 413). Instead, one could adopt a more principled, hold strategy by facing down the challenger by communicating more clearly the reasons and values that have led them to a more permissive position on immigration (Bale et al 2010: 413). A key weakness of a more principled stand is, however, that the weight rests on you to explain the benefits of rising immigration and diversity against an openly hostile electorate (Goodwin 2011b: 26).

ii) Medium to long-term responses

Medium term party political and longer-term system responses comprise the second of these two discrete areas recommended as needed in order to keep the extreme right at bay. Turning to the former, two ‘ideal’ types that will become part of our analysis stand out. The first of these is for mainstream parties to re-engage with the concerns of voters face-to-face at a grass roots level (Goodwin 2011b: 28). The key strength of this approach is that it attempts to resolve the crisis of local democracy that has seen BNP community-based politics become so effective, defusing underlying concerns which gave rise to the extreme right in the first place.
The only downside is that engagement is both an organisation and time-intensive activity that, as we will see, requires innovative practical solutions in order for it to work successfully. A more easily achievable medium term party political counter strategy may be promoting meaningful interaction between ethnic groups (Goodwin 2011b: 27). The main weakness here, however, is that it is incredibly hard to execute without a well-funded voluntary sector. This is especially difficult in the recent UK context of local authority cutbacks and reductions in public funding.

While this study will actively employ these four short term and two medium term responses, what will not be included in questions and our case study analysis but could potentially revolutionise the way we respond to the extreme right in the UK is to look toward system-level methods in counteracting its influence. Ami Pedahzur’s (2001; 2004) political-institutional analysis of German, US and Israeli systems of democratic protection arguably provides so far the most sophisticated account of what ingredients are needed in order to do this. In his analysis of legal, judicial, intelligence and social controls on right-wing extremism, Pedahzur finds America’s democratic system (prior to 9/11) closest to his idealised concept an immunised democracy. Characterized by low-level threats and a limited, well-defined approach to tackling extremist violence (2001: 346), America’s social controls of a strong civil society, where organisations challenge racism and xenophobia at the local and national level (2004: 127), and high civic educational barriers, whose content stresses the complexity of societal groups (Pedahzur 2004: 113), have been set from below by society and above by the state in order to inoculate the party-political sphere from right wing extremism.

As we will see in this study’s concluding recommendations, this longer-term social-level approach has the potential to turn the UK’s response on its head through attacking, in a preventative way, the structured social causes that give rise to extremism in the first place.

1.3. Methodology

i) Oral History Interviews and Question Design

In order to substantively address the above British case lacuna and national response literature bias, therefore, five oral history interviews, where the respondent is asked to reflect upon specific events or a period in the past (Bryman 2012: 491), with UK Members of Parliament whose constituencies have either seen high profile parliamentary contests or had a notable clutch of BNP councillors at some point over the past decade were conducted from
mid July to mid August 2012 via telephone and email. Those interviewed included: Gordon Birtwistle (MP for Burnley), Mike Wood (MP for Batley and Spen), Hilary Benn (MP for Leeds Central), David Ward (MP for Bradford East), and Jon Cruddas (MP for Dagenham). Whilst Margaret Hodge MP was also approached, a convenient time for interview could not be secured. Her ‘battle’ against Nick Griffin in 2010 remains important, however, and so other primary sources as well as an interview with her office manager, Mike Haywood, will be used to paint a similarly vivid picture.

Turning to the questions themselves, the main body of the question script used were drawn from recent European expert opinion panel studies of effective anti-right-wing extremist counter strategy (Langanbacher and Schellenberg 2011 and Goodwin 2011b). In accordance with our research objectives, these were designed so as to explore an interviewee’s unique interpretation of events and contexts that helped shape their anti-BNP responses. To this end, interviewees were asked to reflect on the local context in their constituency around time of emergence, other counterstrategy used, the effectiveness of both the six ideal types listed above and other extra-local party organisations, the role of the media more generally, immunisation strategies sought after BNP removal, the publicisation of the counterstrategy sought, and the macro policy failures that have lead to the rise of the extreme right in the first place. In turn, this has aided the study in creating a more systematic picture of local level context and policymaker responses.

ii) Structured within-case study

As a supplement to primary source data collected in interview, structured within case studies will also be used. As suggested by George and Bennett (2005), this particular research method has the advantage of allowing us to ‘[make] systematic comparisons and [an ac]umulation of...findings’ that we have simply not seen so far in the UK local-level response academic literature (p. 67). This will also enable us to ask ‘general questions that reflect the research objective’ (George and Bennett 2005: 67) such as what specific contextual drivers gave rise to BNP representation and support? What characterised existing responses? And how both of these shaped incumbent MPs counter strategies? In turn this allows us to target our analysis in a structured way, which will then make it easier to discuss how all these different individual responses compare as a whole in comparison to the national level later. Case studies now proceed in a chronological order in terms of BNP emergence.
2. ‘Burnley: BNP Capital of the World’ (Gordon Birtwistle MP)

‘You should fight them on the ground and show them for who they are because they have no policies at all. The only policy that they do have are around racist policies and they don’t deliver anything. In Burnley it took us five or six years [from 2002] to get shut of them but we got shut of them. Now they’re gone. Completely.’ Gordon Birtwistle (2012), MP for Burnley

Context

The East Lancashire town of Burnley has been cited as the area of conspicuous BNP breakthrough after having the misfortune of being the place where, in 2002, three of the party’s councillors were first elected under Nick Griffin’s chairmanship. As one study puts it, the ex-mill town had offered ‘fertile soil’ for the sort of popular racism the BNP espoused (Copsey 2008: 131). In June 2001, for example, Burnley had been the site of race riots during the previous summer where up to 200 white and Asian youths attacked pubs, shops and restaurants (BBC News 2001). The Cantle Review set up by the Home Office to look into the ‘particular circumstances’, which gave rise to disturbances that summer in Burnley, Oldham, and Bradford found that while they had been set in the context of gang warfare and grinding poverty, these clashes had been exploited by ‘white racists’ (Cantle 2001: 21).

More central to the rise of the BNP in Burnley’s case, however, were issues surrounding perceived misallocation of public resources interacting with anti-Labour disaffection. As Burnley MP, Gordon Birtwistle comments: there was ‘a lot of money coming into the town which was being spent in one area with a very high[ly concentrated] Asian community and basically people were fed up [of the Labour-controlled Borough council]’ (Birtwistle 2012). The potential bearing of these two factors on how disaffected white working class communities voted was demonstrated in Burnley’s 2001 Parliamentary contest. BNP candidate, Harry Brooks, successfully polled 11% of the vote, for example, by latching onto the perceived ‘positive discrimination’ in the allocation of public regeneration funds to the town’s homogenously South Asian Danehouse and Stoneyholme ward (Ward 2003). This built on existing local perceptions that the local Labour party remained insensitive to, and complacent about, inter-community competition for resources that could be readily seized upon by an insurgent party. In the late 1990s, for example, some Labour Councillors had applied pressure on local housing officers to make sure that ethnic minorities were not
housed in their wards (Copsey 2005: 192). Voting BNP therefore was a protest vote but also based on a structured, local-level politicisation of race, by which we mean the process by which race becomes a politically salient issue or political cleavage, that had been pervasive in Burnley local politics long before the 2001 riots took place.

**Existing counter strategy**

As far as Burnley is a case of conspicuous extreme right breakthrough (becoming the official opposition by 2003 with seven councillors), so the local state and political parties have to some extent therefore been at the vanguard of anti-BNP response strategies. In a November 2001 by-election, for example, Liberal Democrats told voters in two wards to vote for Labour in order to block BNP chances whilst local community cohesion officer, Mark White, engaged in principled ‘myth-busting’ to counter BNP propaganda. In 2002, all incumbent BNP councillors were also asked to commit themselves to a code of conduct that ensured they were committed to the values of equality and democracy (Burnley Council 2002). This superseded an open letter by the Council in April 2000 that warned Burnley voters that the BNP was dedicated to ‘spreading the values of Hitler’ (Copsey 2008: 131).

As the party who had left a conspicuous vacuum of perceived incompetency and presided over the rise of racialisation on the council, Labour-led initiatives were particularly low profile, however, and have been openly criticised as being not anti-racist enough. Taking Burnley as a case in point of similarities and differences with ‘Old’ Labour approaches to the extreme right, Nigel Copsey argues that ‘New’ Labour’s response nationally and locally to the BNP has been characterised by a reheated, 1970s-style Thatcherite response to the National Front that privileges ‘ever tougher language and policies on immigration’ (2005: 198). Ironically, Copsey argues ‘New’ Labour has failed to appreciate a new approach to immigration and community politics needed to combat the new extreme right threat. This, he says, contrasts strongly with ‘Old’ Labour’s post-1976 strategy that, while based on the same stimuli of securing seats, responded to the far right through educative and anti-racist initiatives (Copsey 2005: 186). According to Copsey, New Labour’s inadequacy in confronting BNP conceptions of nationalism and racism has filtered through to the local Burnley Labour party. Prior to the 2004 local elections, for example, its leaders appeared indifferent to the thorny issue of racism with the council’s Labour group leader, Stuart Caddy, even understating the malicious intent of the BNP by labelling them as ‘naïve
independents’ (Vasager 2001). This changed slightly in 2004 when a more cohesive anti-racist approach was sought that tried to present a more accurate picture of funding in the area (Copsey 2005: 196). This, however, did not have the effect of completely dissipating racialisation, by which we mean the process by which race becomes the main cleavage in inter-community political competition, around regeneration funding (Rhodes 2009b: 42).

This contrasted heavily with the Liberal Democrats, whose anti-BNP and anti-racist campaigns in the 2003 local by-election prepared the ground for it to take control of the council in 2006 and then Burnley’s parliamentary seat in 2010. As opposed to ignoring the problem, it confronted the BNP with several leaflets drawing attention to BNP criminality (Copsey 2005: 196). As former mayor and leader of Burnley Borough Council, Gordon Birtwistle MP, hints: ‘… most of them got rid of themselves. One of them... got [arrested] for selling drink to underage kids’ (Birtwistle 2012). Moreover, in 2003, Liberal Democrat Councillor, Margaret Lishman, also tabled a motion in October to make sure that more money would be freed up in the 2004/2005 budget in areas which were not already benefiting from regeneration funding (Lancashire Telegraph 2003). The fair and equal distribution of funds was aimed at putting to rest the cleavage of race competition between largely homogenous ‘white’ and ‘Asian’ wards.

This move forward in campaigning techniques, both during elections and in the council chamber, must however be qualified by BNP successes. In the 2006 local elections, for example, two more BNP councillors were elected to the Borough Council. As heightened media coverage increasingly mobilised and legitimised people voting BNP nationally (Copsey 2008: 168), so the Burnley result can be seen as part of a wider drive that saw fifty-three BNP councillors elected nationally. This, however, galvanised the local Liberal Democrat party to redouble its campaigning efforts for the 2007 local elections. The national party, for example, hosted a ‘Stop the BNP’ training day as part of its spring conference in Scarborough to equip Burnley and West Yorkshire Liberal Democrats with the electoral tools to combat the party (Copsey 2008: 173). It worked. Three of the seven incumbent BNP councillors lost their seats at that May’s election (BBC News 2007).
Gordon Birtwistle MP on anti-BNP strategy

Gordon Birtwistle’s strategy at Burnley’s 2010 General Election contest when running against Sharon Wilkinson, then head of Burnley’s BNP, can be best characterised as being one of principled engagement. In order to allay the inter-ethnic tensions that led to and characterised much of Burnley local politics for the best part of a decade, Birtwistle thought it best to build on the Liberal Democrat’s success whilst making sure in the Council that regeneration funding continued to be spread fairly across Burnley’s wards. As Birtwistle remarks, ‘The BNP were more or less destroyed by the Liberal Democrats in Burnley as [re-allocation of regeneration funding interfered with] their core strategy of saying that, ‘the Asian community gets more than anybody else’.’ This therefore gradually defused popular racist attitudes that had built over almost two decades. Meanwhile, Birtwistle also ran a campaign based on the ‘the usual things that we thought would win and what we had to offer’ plus an anti-Labour strategy that read: ‘vote for BNP … and you will ensure that Labour will get back in’ (Birtwistle 2012).

When asked how he interacted with the BNP candidate, a default ‘no platform’ strategy with regards to debates and other election events was used by Birtwistle. This was not intentional. As he comments, ‘[I] never came across [BNP candidate, Sharon Wilkinson]. It wasn’t that I never wanted to share a platform with her it was that she never turned up. She was not visible. [The local BNP] just went around and put leaflets out’ (Birtwistle 2012). With the BNP at bay, Birtwistle could concentrate on creating a positive campaign that was steadfastly based on traditional social and economic issues: ‘we took the view that we would put forward Liberal Democrat policies... the biggest thing we had going was our hospital campaign’ after casualty services were moved from Burnley to Blackburn later in that decade (Birtwistle 2012). This strategy of principled engagement worked. It led to a historic low score for the extreme right in the Parliamentary seat (only mustering 9% of the vote). Despite being called to step down earlier in the campaign by the Labour incumbent (Burnley Express 2010), Gordon Birtwistle also became Burnley’s first Liberal MP for seventy-five years (Mosley 2010).

Though Birtwistle (2012) praised Hope not Hate and Burnley Express as doing a ‘good job’, little help came in the form of outside organisations such as the anti-fascist organisations and national party. Turning to the former, the police, for example, investigated Pendle Unite Against Fascism (PUAF) earlier in 2010 after removing a BNP wreath from the war
memorial site (Burnley Express 2010). As one local councillor commented, ‘The PUAF have [taken the wreath] without any explanation, so who is the fascist [organisation, now]?’ Turning to the national Liberal Democrat party, Birtwistle comments, ‘We got a bit of support from outside [but] not a lot. We got a minimum amount of stuff from the national party. Obviously it was new to them.’ Like many of the five MPs, Gordon Birtwistle did not therefore view the idea of an official party strategy as persuasive: ‘You can’t have [one]. You’ve got to destroy them on the ground where they’re working because that’s the only way you can do it…’ (Birtwistle 2012).

Conclusion

To conclude, the successful (largely Liberal Democrat) response utilised in Burnley against the BNP, which sported eight councillors at its 2008 peak, was engaging with deeper, structural local funding issues that had given rise to the extreme right in the first place. This pragmatic engagement strategy was supplemented further by Gordon Birtwistle’s default ‘no platform’, principled stand that suggested some efforts to defuse issues of inter-ethnic tension. We have to bear in mind that, though he was largely active at a senior level in Burnley politics when BNP representation was at its highest point, Birtwistle’s 2010 strategy was largely formed without an existential extreme right threat. His strategy of principled engagement still differs greatly, however, from the national approach of rhetorical no ‘oxygen’ whilst also adopting a more restrictive line on immigration.

3. The ‘new’ battle for West Yorkshire (Mike Wood MP, Hilary Benn MP and David Ward MP)

Context

In Husband et al’s (1980) authoritative study of National Front (NF) support, it was found that the BNP’s spiritual predecessor simply could not rely on the UK’s Northern towns and cities to shore up the extreme right vote. They discovered that ‘with the exception of [Greater London, the West Midlands] and the Southwest’ all other regions (particularly the North) provided a lower share of weakly structured support for the NF (Husband et al 1980: 276). Whilst we would expect some path-dependency or ‘legacy effects’ related to cycles of
activism in Barking and Dagenham then (Goodwin et al 2012: 4), what came to be largely a surprise in the current wave of extreme right support was, however, the BNP’s ability to create the opposite: a structured, Northern extreme right support base (Ford and Goodwin 2010: 3).

As Burnley pioneered the BNP’s breakthrough in East Lancashire, so Bradford and to a lesser extent Kirklees and Leeds have dominated this geographical shift out of traditional extreme right heartlands. Like Burnley, Bradford became the second notable area of breakthrough in 2004 with the BNP claiming four council seats on the City’s Metropolitan District Council (BBC News 2004). Like Burnley also, this was not unexpected. Three summers previous, Bradford also saw civil unrest as an Anti-Nazi League counter demonstration clashed with the NF (BBC News 2001). Whilst Kirklees did not experience rioting, so Leeds also had a tendency of such brewing racial tensions. In June 2001, for example, the Harehill area of the City saw six hours of rioting against police by a hundred youths after an Asian man was allegedly pulled from his vehicle (BBC News 2001). While increases in racial violence and long-standing mistrust of the police were cited as the main causes of Bradford and Leeds’s ‘race riots’ that summer, so the ‘overt’ and ‘taunting’ presence of extreme right groups was also noted by experts as key contextual drivers (Ray and Smith 2002).

Moreover, as in Burnley, the Cantle Report found an endemic public policy failure in grasping the competitive and sensitive nature of regeneration funding between white and non-white communities as well as a continual mistreatment of persistent poverty (Athwal et al 2011 and Cantle 2001: 24). Not surprisingly then, when quizzed about the rise of the BNP in Parliamentary and council chamber contests locally, the West Yorkshire MPs interviewed suggested that the BNP has exploited sources of tension, created by ‘more assertive’ Muslim communities (Wood 2012), unemployment (David Ward MP and Hilary Benn MP) and a break down in working class political trust generated by New Labour, to great effect in their constituencies (Mike Wood MP and David Ward MP).

**Circumstance and Existing Counter Strategies**

A caveat must, however, be sounded not to overplay these contextual factors when discussing BNP success in Bradford, Kirklees and Leeds. Firstly, we know that there were distinct time lags and therefore dubious causality between rioting and BNP representation. Secondly, in a
notable case of an area without a history of rioting (Kirklees), the BNP was still able to elect two councillors to Leeds’ solitary Morley representative. As these structural factors might be necessary to explain the contemporary geographical shift in BNP support then, they are not, as demonstrated by Burnley as well as later in Barking and Dagenham, sufficient in light of circumstantial issues shaping key contests in West Yorkshire from 2003 to 2006.

The election of Kirklees Council’s first BNP councillor in 2003, for example, was based on coincidental party political factors. In the local town of Heckmondwike, the resignation of Labour councillor, Tim Crowther, earlier that year had forced an August by-election for the seat (Humphries 2003). One of the major reasons for the BNP gaining a ‘toehold’ in Kirklees, then, was in this instance the lack of a cohesive, defusing campaign between centre-left parties to see off the far right challenge. While high turnout for the BNP especially in the more deprived areas of Heckmondwike suggested the Labour challenge was all but defeated (Atkinson 2003), so the posting of a Muslim candidate by the Liberal Democrats effectively ‘…split Labour support and [saw] the BNP come up the middle’ (Wood 2012). This laid the basis of legitimacy and credibility needed for the party to gain additional councillors at Heckmondwike and Dewsbury East in the 2006 local elections. As stated in interview with local incumbent Labour MP, Mike Wood, ‘once you get the far right in constituencies it’s harder to get them out than prevent it in first place’ (Wood 2012).

In 2004, Bradford’s BNP breakthroughs in Queensbury and Wyke wards, for example, bucked national trends of party embarrassment and campaign mismanagement that saw a temporary stagnation in a year of expected growth. The leadership had pushed the issue of campaign funding for its European election effort such that little attention and canvassing had been conducted at local election contests (Copsey 2008: 151-2). What was, however, particularly potent in Bradford, and led to significant local successes, was the existence of local rumours that Asian men were grooming young white girls for sex (Copsey 2008: 151-2). These were ignited by the airing of a trailer for a Channel Four documentary, entitled Edge of the City, that was meant to depict the ‘bleak realities of life in the most deprived parts of Bradford’ (Milnes 2004). Its broadcast was delayed, however, as the BNP advertised it as party political propaganda. Aping the Rochdale grooming case eight years later, this led to a restorative campaign after the election by members of the Muslim community to counter BNP invective that unfortunately was not sufficient enough to stop the local party bucking
the national trend and gaining a four seats on the Metropolitan District Council (Milnes 2004).

In the South Leeds market town of Morley, unique circumstantial factors were also at play. Two years previous, Nick Griffin was famously arrested for delivering a speech in Morley’s town hall, in which he condemned Islam as a “vicious, wicked faith” (The Telegraph 2004). He was later tried, but not found guilty, for incitement of racial hatred in the run up to the 2006 local elections at Leeds Crown Court (BBC News 2006). This no doubt gifted a large amount of publicity to the local party’s agenda through alleged victimisation by the mainstream elite and duly led to the election of BNP candidate, Chris Beverley, to Morley in that May’s Metropolitan Council elections.

**Effective anti-BNP strategy**

i) **Mike Wood MP and Kirklees Labour’s response strategy**

With the election of two more BNP councillors in 2006, Mike Wood and his Constituency Labour party devised a more sophisticated strategy in order to combat the BNP. In the case of Kirklees, a ‘twin-track’ exclusionary and principled stand against the far right was taken in anticipation of the 2008 local elections. According to Mike Wood, the first prong of this strategy involved establishing the Labour Party clearly as the anti-racist party locally. This was based on the rejection of the belief that you should avoid ‘...upsetting those voters inclined to support BNP’ (Wood 2012). The second prong was mobilising the ‘Muslim vote in their own interest...[by pointing out that] ‘these people are after and you need to stop it’ (Wood 2012). This, as Mike suggests, was particularly important due to a sensed increasing withdrawal and segregation of Batley and Spen’s, 9.2% Muslim community (predominantly of Indian descent) after September 11th 2001. In addition, as proof of lessons learnt from the breakthrough August 2003 BNP by-election an understanding grew up on the part of both the local Labour and Liberal Democrat parties that beating the BNP was to be the priority in each seat rather than simply trying to secure that seat for their own party. As with other MPs, Mike Wood is sceptical of a one-size-fits-all, official strategy: ‘The party in Parliament has certainly had a lot of speeches on handling the BNP... but often these haven’t centred on the reality of individual, local areas’ (Wood 2012).
This two-pronged cross-party exclusionary strategy worked well. In the May 2008 local elections, a concerted campaign by Labour, trade unionists and Hope not Hate (praised by Wood (2012) as ‘extremely important’ due to having ‘a stake beyond the campaign’) saw trade unionist Steve Hall take a Heckmondwike seat from the BNP, for Labour (Edwards 2008). Moreover, it proved that a ‘cordon sanitaire’ style approach to local extremism works. In September of that year, BNP incumbent for Dewsbury East, Colin Auty, resigned after leading an unsuccessful leadership challenge against Nick Griffin (Edwards 2008). He hinted, however, that the social pressure he had received from fellow councillors also figured largely in his decision to stand down. In a statement, he opined: ‘I can't get involved in projects because of my BNP badge. I get shot down by the establishment’ (Edwards 2008).

Meanwhile, the last extremist domino to tumble did not come for another two years when the other BNP incumbent for Hedmondwike, Roger Roberts, came third in the 2010 local elections. This was mainly due to Conservative resurgence in the area however (Gibson 2010), and marked the last of the BNP presence at Kirklees Council (Gibson 2012). Whether this party political strategic response was part of a larger shift to attack and engage with the underlying drivers of support is, however, still open to question.

ii) Hilary Benn MP and David Ward MP on Leeds and Bradford

In both Bradford and Leeds, the demise of the BNP can, however, be more readily characterised as a mixture of actively holding off the extreme right threat at the Parliamentary level as internal party tensions lead to electoral implosion locally. Hilary Benn, for example, believes that what was key to him combating the BNP on two successive occasions in May 2005 and 2010 parliamentary elections was more about taking on the party’s arguments in a principled manner whilst also being ‘…seen to be working hard [and engaging] in the [local] community’ (Benn 2012). When interviewed, he praised the work of Hope not Hate as doing a ‘great job’ without which both the anti-BNP vote would not be mobilised and myth-busting leaflets would not have been circulated.

David Ward, who successfully fought off the BNP at his election to Bradford East in May 2010, believed slightly different methods are needed to hold off the extreme right Parliamentary threat. Formerly responsible for Bradford football club’s community activities programme, what he perceives as key in fighting the BNP is interaction - fostering ‘great British values of moderation and tolerance’ through educational programmes in schools.
(Ward 2012). He now aims to develop longer-term defusion and engagement strategies in order to better ‘listen [to the anxieties] and…interests [of his constituents]’ (Ward 2012). He believes, for example, that ‘guiding young people into early employment is [also] vital’ to attack the material ‘insecurities’ on which the BNP preys (Ward 2012).

Whilst active response strategies have been sought in Parliamentary contests, so internal party tensions have been more salient in explaining BNP depletion locally. For example, animosity between Wyke councillor and BNP group leader, James Lewthwaite, and Queensbury councillor and local party chair, Paul Cromie, underscored the type of fraught relationship that existed within the Bradford party (Lancaster Unity 2007). Moreover, in June 2011 Queensbury councillors, Paul and Lynda Cromie, also stood down from the BNP becoming independents instead (O’Rourke 2011). Meanwhile, after being successfully defeated through a concerted campaign by Morley Borough Independents in Leeds (BBC News 2010), Chris Beverley also severed ties with the party to become a candidate for the English Democrats (Lipman 2011).

Conclusion

While shift North by the BNP has been seminal in historic representational terms, so it was circumstance rather than context that laid the conditions for extreme right representation in Bradford, Burnley and Kirklees. Certainly histories of rioting seen in Burnley had been largely replicated in Bradford and to a lesser extent Leeds, but what was more causally salient in West Yorkshire were high profile events, as well as follies by the mainstream, that were taken advantage of by the BNP. Ironically then, the most galvanised area with regards to a comprehensive counterstrategy, Kirklees, was also the one that had shown the least historical preponderance towards racial violence. As BNP councillors were left by the mainstream to succumb to infighting and resignation in Bradford and Leeds, so Kirklees pioneered a successful two-pronged and cohesive cross-party exclusionary strategy that marked the start of the BNP demise in that area. As explained in interview, Wood’s strategy is now being sustained by immunising work to promote interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim communities (Wood 2012).
4. ‘The Battle for Barking [and Dagenham]’ (Margaret Hodge MP and Jon Cruddas MP)

‘The lesson from Barking to the BNP is clear: “Get out and stay out, you're not wanted here and your vile politics have no place in British democracy”’ Margaret Hodge, MP for Barking (2010 Post-Election speech)

‘...Take the threat seriously. The BNP are at their most dangerous when the major political parties attempt to pretend that they don’t exist. Only by accepting that there is a problem can you begin to find some solutions.’ Jon Cruddas (2012), MP for Dagenham and Rainham

Context

If Burnley was unfortunate enough to bare the moniker of BNP capital of the North West, so the North East London Borough of Barking and Dagenham similarly set its own record for BNP representation and notoriety in 2006. That summer’s elections saw the party seize eleven of the thirteen council seats it contested (BBC News 2006) as Barking and Dagenham became subject to ‘an all or nothing strategy’ by the BNP (Lowles 2010: 5). This culminated in the infamous 2010 General Election contest between leader, Nick Griffin, and sixteen-year Labour incumbent, Margaret Hodge MP.

As in Burnley, perceived inertia over a local social housing crisis by the Labour-dominated council, high-levels of socio-economic deprivation and rapid demographic transformation meant that the BNP was met with ‘a fertile bed’ of pro-extreme right sentiment (Cruddas 2012, emphasis added). For example, with the closure of Dagenham’s Ford factory in 2002, the area became one of post-industrial decline with average income the lowest in London, numeracy levels one of the lowest in the country, and more than a third of children born into poverty (Wolfreys 2010). This lack of social and economic capital was set against and exacerbated by inward migration of ethnic ‘outgroups’ from other London Boroughs. Over the last ten years or so, Barking and Dagenham’s overall population was one of the fastest growing in the country whilst, as a consequence of Margaret Thatcher’s 1980 Right to Buy initiative, council housing stock fell well below 50% with no resulting activism by the Labour-led Council to counteract this squeeze. As Mike Haywood, Margaret Hodge’s office manager, comments: ‘Right-to-buy is key to understanding the causes of the BNP. It really
had a profound effect in Barking and Dagenham…’ (Haywood 2012). Much of Barking’s 80% white (and largely working class) community therefore perceived the Labour-held council as complacent to its concerns and committed to a multiculturalism such that it would place the material and cultural needs of inward migrants above and over its traditional voting base (Rhodes 2009a: 39). As one resident complained: ‘In Ilford, the ethnic minority is the indigenous people now…I think it is frightening when you think that whole wads of your country are being taken up by an entirely different culture… It’s schools and everything’ (Margetts et al 2006: 20).

As regeneration funding became racialised in Burnley then, so the issue of social housing became the ‘hot topic’ that could be used by the BNP to channel Labour’s perceived national mishandling of immigration. For example, in the BNP’s 2004 local election campaign for Barking and Dagenham’s Goresbrook ward, the party potently claimed that the local council was implementing an ‘Africans for Essex’ policy, whereby the council had given £50,000 grants to African families to move into the Borough. Dubbed by observers as ‘easily the BNP’s best election effort [to date]’ (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2005: 6) and polling at an eye-watering 52%, the party recorded its best percentile win in its short electoral history as the local council failed to bust this local myth (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2005: 8). As Mike Haywood comments: ‘[The ‘Africans for Essex’ propaganda campaign]... was explosive… By that point the secret was out [that there was an alternative party that would listen to your concerns and act on them.]’ Encouragingly, such campaigns also often backfired. In the 2005 by-election contest on Barking and Dagenham’s Becontree estate, the party’s superimposition of the words ‘If only they had listened to the BNP’ on a picture of London bus bombed during 7/7 saw the BNP rightly scoring only 378 votes (Mulholland 2005).

**Existing counter strategies**

In the wake of the BNP’s shock polling success at the Borough’s 2004 local elections, so the local council embarked on a set of comprehensive community cohesion strategies to hastily defuse the appeal of the right-wing extremism. For example, the Borough set about designing a three-year, ‘One Community’ programme based on restoring ‘fair access to [public] services’. The programme also aimed to ensure that peaceful and respectful coexistence between white British and Black and Ethnic Minority (BME) residents by creating opportunities for communities to come together (LBBDD 2007: 1). The fruits of such a
strategy were limited however. ‘Much, much more needs to be done…to create a stronger sense of community cohesion’, says Mike Haywood (2012). ‘The council I believe has a target of building about 800 homes in the next five years which is frankly the tip of the iceberg compared to what is needed…’(Haywood 2012).

As the BNP threat emerged, so Barking and Dagenham also became a site of much anti-fascist organisational activity. The 2005 General Election, for example, saw Searchlight attempt to match the fifty-five person, intensive canvassing tactics used by BNP the previous year by producing two newspaper editions addressing local issues that reached some 480,000 homes. They also effectively mobilized the anti-BNP vote by using 9000 ‘eve-of-poll’ cards and 8000 direct mail letters to reach members of the BME community. The effect of this mobilisation was stark. With expectations riding high of the BNP taking a 25% share of the vote (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2005: 6), the actual result was some ten-points lower, at 16.9%.

Both these public policy and civil society attempts at best practice were not, however, enough to counteract large BNP gains in 2006. The BNP recorded its most comprehensive control of a local council chamber to date, making eleven gains and becoming the official opposition on Barking and Dagenham’s Council. This impressive fringe party performance has to be placed in its proper context. As mentioned before, 2006 marked a local elections ‘high point’ for the party as it elected fifty-three councillors nationally. This was down to its ability to spread its support geographically. Moreover, nationally it was able to ‘normalise’ its ‘modernised’ message as both Sky and the BBC gave generous amounts of airtime to the party (Copsey 2008: 168). This was in contrast to Barking and Dagenham Post’s last minute election day headline article ‘Gotcha’ that honourably tried to debunk several myths about immigration and crime, with little effect (Eatwell 2006: 212).

Much criticism and responsibility for the BNP’s local gains were however levelled largely at another local actor: Barking MP, Margaret Hodge. In the run up to the 2006 local elections, Hodge was famously quoted in a Sunday Telegraph interview (Kite 2006) suggesting eight out of ten of her constituents were tempted by the BNP ‘…because of the change demographically in the Borough and the reason they had not seen their councillors for forty years’ (Haywood 2012). Whilst some took this as a Government Minister rightly speaking out about her fears regarding voter alienation (Brown 2006), local Labour councillors found it as grist for the BNP’s mill (Woodward et al 2006). Hodge met this resistance by redoubling this nascent strategy of re-engagement. In a 2010 ITV appearance, she contested that ‘[she
and the local Labour party] became complacent’ and needed to ‘reconnect with the constituency’ (Fairrie 2010). Up until January of that year, Mike Haywood admits the practical inroads into this were ‘very limited’ and ‘naïve’. Re-engagement involved ‘roving surgeries’ where a drop of leaflets would ask those residents who had concerns to display them, with Hodge paying them a visit the following Friday (Haywood 2012).

Effective anti-BNP strategy

i) The ‘Battle for Barking’ and Margaret Hodge MP

Whilst the BNP’s leader announced his intention to target Barking and Dagenham as early as 2005, it was not until late 2009 that Nick Griffin officially announced his candidacy for the seat (Walker 2009). Now a newly elected MEP, Griffin’s party had symbolically and controversially broken into the mainstream by appearing on a BBC Question Time panel that October alongside other household faces that acted as a legitimating device for the party. At the announcement of his 2010 candidature, he confidently told the assembled reporters that ‘the chickens [i.e. Britain’s ailing economy were] going to come home to roost in a monstrous way very soon’ (Walker 2009).

Burnt at the 2006 local elections by criticism of ‘fighting the BNP’s fire with fire’, Margaret Hodge’s response strategy of engagement prior to, and during, the 2010 General Election campaign therefore became more sophisticated. The key reason why she helped relegate Griffin to third and rid the council of the BNP’s presence was, therefore, less down to public policy or rhetorical factors but more banal efforts such as meeting constituents’ in order to address their needs face-to-face. From January 2006, for example, Hodge’s team started door knocking ‘with a serious intent… [to listen] to what [disaffected constituents] had to say and acting on that…’ (Haywood 2012). This also included coffee mornings where Hodge would invite the residents of a ward and listen to their concerns as well as street meetings where she would appear in person with all residents to deal with street-level problems (Haywood 2012). Most important to the success of this new ‘serious’ re-engagement, however, was the ‘lacklustre’ nature of the BNP campaign more generally (Lowles 2010: 6). Whilst Griffin himself blamed his defeat on Hope not Hate’s use of powerful electioneering software used by Barack Obama in 2008 to bombard anti-BNP voters with tens of thousands of leaflets (Asthana 2010), reports show that he appeared in the constituency only a handful of times up
to the May elections. As Mike Haywood comments, ‘suddenly [the BNP] were not the ones doing the work. We were the ones keeping in touch with those thousands of disaffected residents...You’ve got to engage. If you stop knocking on peoples doors [as the BNP did] you will lose people’ (Haywood 2012).

As part of her candid and frank approach to the BNP, Hodge’s strategy still, however, included what appeared moments of adoption. Rhetorically, this was typified in a 2010 post-Election opinion column. The best way to beat the BNP, according to Hodge, was the creation of ‘better’ and ‘fair’ benefits and housing policy system that gave priority to those in an area for longest (Hodge 2010). Earlier in the year, this was echoed in Hodge’s suggestions that benefits should be allocated on a point system based on length of residency, citizenship and national insurance contributions (Reid 2010). In light her 2010 victory over the BNP as well as an interview with her office manager, one can argue, however, that this latter side of Hodge’s strategy flowed less from naked opportunism and more from her central re-engagement strategy. As she stipulated in the autumn before the election, ‘...If I weren’t to engage with them directly in my own constituency, I would lose credibility with my electorate’ (Channel 4 News 2009). In her opinion, then, the key to unlocking the debate on immigration was not to argue about ‘quotas’ and ‘caps’, as other mainstream politicians had done, but being more pragmatic about issues of fairness and entitlement that surround the allocation of public resources. The nub of the problem in Barking was that settled white residents ‘...didn’t feel they were being treated fairly [according to their sense of public resource entitlement]...’ says Mike Haywood (2012). Even if one is left unconvinced of the merit of the strategy then, adoption flowed from a more principled desire to earnestly re-engage with the concerns of her constituents.

ii) Convergence or divergence? Jon Cruddas MP and the case of Dagenham

The constituency of Dagenham and Rainham—boasting at least one BNP councillor in its Village ward, suffering from the same social deprivation and demographic as Barking, and formerly a Parliamentary target for Nick Griffin (O’Keefe 2009)—also benefitted from large-scale engagement tactics. In the eighteen months leading up to the 2010 General Election, for example, the Dagenham Labour Party sent some 200,000 targeted and personalised letters with four canvassing sessions per week (Greenshields 2010). Hope Not Hate action days also boosted the anti-BNP presence with a ten percent increase in turnout achieved as part of more intensive anti-fascist mobilisation techniques in neighbouring Barking (Greenshields 2010).
The tone and style of rhetoric used by Jon Cruddas in his engagement strategy was, however, very different from that of his neighbouring MP. Unlike the more inclusive adoptive parts of Hodge’s strategy, so Cruddas’ was based on a thorough-going critique of New Labour’s abandonment of its working class base that has led to ‘…a profound feeling of disenfranchisement amongst sections of the electorate. Feeling like no one listens or cares, they turn to extreme alternatives’ (Cruddas 2012). In a 2005 epilogue to The Far Right in London: a challenge to local democracy?, he describes how New Labour’s scientific analysis of key votes in Middle England has acted as a qualitative barrier to a ‘radical emancipatory programme of economic and social change’ for its traditional base as well as a quantitative, funding barrier to the ‘burning’ Dagenham issue of social housing (Joseph Rowntree Trust 2005: 26). Such a technique of triangulating around immigration, he states, colludes in the demonisation of the migrant, the self same people making the UK labour markets more flexible (Margetts et al 2005: 26). Strangely, but also unsurprisingly, such a critique led Cruddas to the same conclusion as Hodge. Cruddas stipulates in a later paper that Labour’s response to BNP boasts that they were ‘more Labour than New Labour’ must be to reconnect with its traditional communities and get to grips with ‘complex issues of demography, class, race, housing and public services’ (Cruddas 2007: X).

This was reiterated within Cruddas’ interview for this study. His thesis for 2010 was an effective response based around ‘…re-engaging with communities and offering a positive message...’ (Cruddas 2012). He explains: ‘... it’s only through engaging with communities on a day-to-day basis that you can start to heal the wounds which the BNP feed off’ (Cruddas 2012). When asked to rank the effectiveness of his own response in Dagenham and Rainham, it is no surprise therefore that he ranks engagement with voters face-to-face and interaction between different ethnic and cultural groups as key priorities to sustained constituency-level immunisation against right-wing extremism. Again, and in accordance with Gordon Birtwistle, he is sceptical of a national official anti-BNP party strategy. He believes that ‘…the fight against extremism has to start from a local-level’ (Cruddas 2012).
Conclusion

To conclude, similar to Burnley and West Yorkshire, Barking and Dagenham was also targeted by the BNP due to the structural nature of Labour complacency toward the issue of social housing that, rightly or wrongly, could be viewed through a racialised prism of recent and rapid demographic change in the largely white British Borough. Though the essential premise of both Hodge and Cruddas’ strategies was engagement with this problem, the values and arguments used to arrive at this approach were clearly divergent. Hodge’s sometimes-adoptive approach can be superficially, but not wholly, allied with New Labour’s pragmatic, populist tone on immigration. What can be shown here, however, is that the more adoptive side of Hodge’s overall engagement strategy was not simply opportune but based on principle. On the other hand, Cruddas came to a similar conclusion through different means. As a backbencher ‘radicalised’ (O’Keefe 2009) by ‘the feeling of injustice and neglect experienced by thousands in [his] constituency’ (Cruddas 2012), Cruddas’ self-same strategy flowed from a more intellectual critique of the New Labour project - ignoring its working class base in pursuit of ‘Middle England’ and electability.

Concluding remarks

The decline of the BNP, after its 2010 electoral implosion left it with just three councillors and two MEPs at the May 2012 local elections (Taylor 2012), makes it a very appropriate time to consider how to respond to the continuing UK extreme right threat. As the English Defence League joins forces with the British Freedom party (Townsend 2012) and English Democrats absorb political exiles from the crumbling BNP (Kalmus 2011), this temporary calm in the extreme right electoral storm allows academics and policymakers alike to assess what tactics and people have been best placed over the last decade to take on the thorny ethical questions of ‘tolerating the intolerant’ in British democracy. Despite this opportunity however, little academic attention has been spent exploiting this. No systematic attempt has been made to map the state of the UK responses locally. This study has therefore tried to address this lacuna by expanding our empirical knowledge of both local context and response strategies through five oral history interviews with UK policymakers experientially trained in extinguishing the far right threat.
i) Discussion of results

What has been found is no less striking. To answer the question posited at the start of this study, UK local-level responses to the BNP over the last decade largely confound the national level, short termist ‘clean hands’ orthodoxy. Instead, as demonstrated by the table below, there was an evident bias among respondents towards medium term engagement tactics with sophisticated attempts to reconnect with constituents through defusing underlying concerns around scarce resources and meeting them face-to-face. There were exceptions. Two out of the six MPs interviewed (Gordon Birtwistle and Mike Wood) adopted exclusion as a key prong of their anti-BNP strategy. It must be stressed however that, while this occurred in Gordon Birtwistle’s case by default, this only worked successfully in Kirklees as a result of certain preconditions. Both cohesive mainstream cross-party electoral and social pressure tactics within local council chambers ensured two of three councillors were unseated.

Summary of MPs Response Strategies

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<tr>
<th>Policy-maker</th>
<th>Exclusion</th>
<th>Defusing</th>
<th>Adoption</th>
<th>Principled/Hold</th>
<th>Engagement</th>
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*(P)= Principal response strategies

Encouragingly, the stimuli behind these MP’s responses were also, on the whole, drastically different to the national case. Those interviewed were largely untouched by the same opportunism demonstrated by national party leaderships’ subordinate policy of co-opting extreme right rhetoric. Instead, despite being time and financially intensive, a more earnest passion for reconnecting with disaffected white, working-class constituents are in evidence at the local level. Interestingly, only one Parliamentarian (Margaret Hodge) championed the
second prong of the national strategy, adoption, as a means of extinguishing far right support while only a further three (Jon Cruddas, David Ward and Mike Wood) recommended what Goodwin (2011b: 28) describes as the other more successful medium term response strategy, interaction. Whether interaction has been fully exploited and the extent to which Hodge’s strategy was solely based on adoption, however, is a moot point.

While discovering, discerning and explaining macro-micro differences in a systematic way was the key objective of this study, so the objective of unearthing the local conditions that gave rise to the BNP, has also been successfully met. What was found is that, while the set of sociological factors and public policy failures that led to BNP breakthroughs were diverse, so they drew on a similar set of structured and racialised malcontentment to do with (perceived) scarce public resources. Also worrying was that in nearly all cases a political vacuum had been created by a complacent Labour incumbent either at the local and constituency level: while a history of rioting also featured highly amongst the sample as a secondary causal factor. Certain, ‘enabling’ events call the causal significance of background factors into question, however. Rumours in West Yorkshire, for example about the grooming of vulnerable white girls by the Muslim community, a lack of cohesive mainstream cross-party electoral tactics against the BNP, and a high profile court battle all conspired to ignite the BNP’s electoral touch paper such as to create an extreme right breakthrough in an area with no historical legacy of far right activism.

While the focus of this study was local party political responses and how they compare to the national level, so the sizeable role of antifascist and media organisations could not be ignored. Compared to Eatwell’s (2010) derogatory national analysis of self-styled antifascist organisations, most were seen by MPs as doing an invaluable, ‘crucial’ (Wood 2012) and ‘great’ job (Benn 2012). Interviewees, however, had more mixed views on local media reporting of topics of racial tension and the BNP. Mike Wood, for example, points out the publication of an inflammatory tirade against Islam by a local media outlet as future grist for the BNP mill.
ii) Reclaiming the UK’s extreme right exceptional status: Towards a longer-term preventative response?

So what can one recommend from these findings? Frustratingly, when asked their attitudes, most MPs perceived a ‘one-size-fits-all’ or universal UK counter strategy as a blunt instrument. Though there is a general acceptance of longer-term engagement with local issues, most agreed that no panacea exists in ridding different locales of BNP representatives. This is understandable. Opinions of other expert panel studies corroborate this (Langenbacher and Schllenberg 2011: 317). Moreover, it makes perfect sense that in the light of the varying contexts discussed that policymakers recommend others should seek to tailor responses to local circumstances. If no ‘golden path’ exists, however, where are political actors bent on resisting future extreme right advances to go next?

Returning to chapter one’s ‘ideal’ types, what can be argued is that British political elites can look more fruitfully toward developing a more sophisticated, preventative response that moves the UK political system toward what Ami Pedahzur’s (2001; 2004) calls a democracy ‘immunised’ against the extreme-right cancer. A first step toward achieving this could be supplementing further engagement of disaffected communities with a secondary interaction counter strategy between Muslim and non-Muslim communities locally. This medium-term strategy attacks the sort of animosity and prejudice that gives rise to the extreme right in the first place and comes highly recommended by Goodwin (2011b) as a successful form of counterstrategy. Encouragingly therefore, we have already seen green shoots of this approach in our sample. Mike Wood, David Ward and Jon Cruddas all stated that they either believed in the effectiveness of the strategy or had already organised activities to this end.

More needs to be done, however, until we can rank ourselves among Pedahzur’s (pre-9/11) American ideal. As the throes of extreme right ideology largely crept up on the UK in the early 2000s, so policymakers cannot afford to be so complacent for the next wave of extremism. While medium term strategies become embedded locally, so proper social-level safe guards of civil society organisations that challenge racism and xenophobia (2004: 127) and educational programmes that teach values of toleration and democracy need to be erected at the national level in order to inoculate successive generations from the BNP’s own ‘chopped logic’ (Wood 2012) and ‘bigotry’ (Ward 2012). Then, and only then, will we find an actively preventative response that will fully restore the UK’s reputation of historical resistance to extreme right electoral breakthrough.
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