The Far Right: Rumours about Their Death Are Premature

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The UK's Far Right parties are relatively small in comparison to most of the rest of Europe and in 2010 they failed to live up to their own hype by not capturing the London parliamentary seat of Barking in the General Election. But the collective sigh of relief from all mainstream political parties and the cries of 'crushing BNP defeat' were somewhat premature and complacent. A number of new publications, however, do appear to recognise this and warn of the longer term threat that the Far Right pose.

Matthew Goodwin's (2011a) new book charts the rise of the British National Party (BNP) and by setting this in the context of other fascist parties over the last century, it is easy to see why this particular brand of fascism is now to be regarded as more dangerous than ever.

The figures speak for themselves and despite the BNP's failure to capture the Barking seat, they still gained nearly 15% of the vote and also gained more than 10% of the vote in no fewer than 52 local authority areas. Overall, they won around 560,000 votes and only a year earlier had received 1,000,000 as two BNP candidates were propelled into the European parliament. Goodwin (2011a) suggests that the BNP has become the most successful extreme right party in British history and points out that since 2001, its support in general elections has grown twelve-fold; support in local elections increased by a factor of 100 and membership by seven-fold.

It is very clear that, despite some year on year ups and downs, their overall trajectory has been rapidly upward for the last 10 years or so and, as the Institute of Community Cohesion (iCoCo), which monitors Far Right activities as part of an ongoing concern for tackling community tensions, found in its 2011 report, they have succeeded in broadening their appeal, even into rural and suburban areas (iCoCo, 2011).

Another recent publication (Copsey and Macklin, 2011) also helps to dispel any complacency about the BNP. As Neil Copsey's introductory section points out, despite the obvious rise in electoral support for the BNP, academic research has not been evident and is only now beginning to catch up.

Goodwin *et al.* (2011) has pointed out elsewhere that the BNP are only one part of the UK's growing Right, which has been further boosted by the activities of the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) who also appeal to anti-migrant and xenophobic populism. They have grown as the 'polite alternative' to the BNP and are fast becoming 'a powerful outlet for controversial far-right views'. UKIP garnered over 900,000 votes in the 2010 General Election. Further, when the small but very vociferous English Defence League (EDL) support is added to this, the popular and street level impact of the Far Right as a whole becomes even more significant.

The voting activity, however, is simply symptomatic of an even more worrying trend. And mainstream politicians have generally been very mistaken in their belief that the hostility towards 'others' is in some way confined to extremists, and they have failed to recognise that the resentment towards multicultural policies in general, and migration in particular, goes a lot deeper. Whilst many people are reluctant to vote for the BNP, or even for the 'polite xenophobes' of UKIP, they do confirm their more populist sympathies in opinion polls. The recent *Fear and Hope* Report (SET, 2011), commissioned by the Searchlight Educational Trust, set out to explore the issues of English identity, faith and race. With 5 054 respondents and 91 questions it is one of the largest and most comprehensive surveys into attitude, identity and extremism in the UK to date and came to a rather depressing conclusion:

> there is not a progressive majority in society and . . . there is a deep resentment to immigration, as well as scepticism towards multiculturalism. There is a widespread fear of the 'Other', particularly Muslims, and there is an appetite for a new right-wing political party that has none of the fascist trappings of the British National Party or the violence of the English Defence League. With a clear correlation between economic pessimism and negative views to immigration, the situation is likely to get worse over the next few years.

Further, the Searchlight Education Trust Report identified what they call six 'identity tribes' in modern British society. These are as follows: Confident Multiculturalists (8% of the population); Mainstream Liberals (16%); Identity Ambivalents (28%); Cultural Integrationists (24%); Latent Hostiles (10%) and Active Enmity (13%). Those identified as Identity Ambivalents could easily be pushed further towards the Right, unless mainstream political parties tackle the social and economic insecurity which dominates their attitudes.

This, somewhat alarmingly, also suggests that only one-quarter of the population are comfortable with our present model of multiculturalism.

Goodwin (2011a) appears to confirm this rather depressing attitudinal picture, providing a really useful analysis of the opinion polling on migration and race-related issues over the last 10 years or so. Over this period, the public has generally viewed the Government's performance on immigration in a negative light. The views have not been ambivalent with around 80% supporting suggestions that 'immigration is not under control', that the Government is 'not being open and honest' about the scale of migration and that immigration policies are not sensible or credible. Even more worryingly, when opinion polls have asked which political party has the best policies on immigration, the majority of those polled generally feel that none of them do, or they don't know. These results suggest that the ground is wide open for the Right to cultivate.

We must therefore begin to think more long-term and develop wider strategies which are not simply reactive and based around specific localised issues which the BNP or EDL have stirred up.

The traditional approach to the Far Right has been one of trying to starve the Far Right of the 'oxygen of publicity'. This is completely outdated. The attempt to keep Griffin off *Question Time* reflected this approach and was wrong. This just plays into the extremists' agenda of presenting themselves as 'victims' and being prevented from 'telling the truth'. We have to be prepared to take on their arguments and show how ridiculous they are—as happened on the programme when Griffin's views about true Brits being able to prove roots back to the Ice Age were exposed! The fact is that the traditional racist views have been largely defeated over the last 40 years or so—as Matt Goodwin (2011a) points out—and hostility towards immigration is the most powerful predictor of support for the Far Right, rather than ideas about biological white superiority. And BNP voters are also driven by their dissatisfaction with existing political options: they are far more distrustful than other voters of national and local politicians, and they are more likely to say there are no real differences between Labour and the Conservatives.

A more honest and open approach is therefore essential, one which takes on the arguments, does not attempt to appease concerns (and thereby reinforces them) and one which tries to help majority populations in particular to come to terms with the modern day reality of globalisation. We have little to fear from the naked racist appeals of the past, which were so dangerous they will not gain support.

The UK is not alone in the battle against the Far Right and our response needs to reflect the common concerns of majority populations in all European countries where a hostility towards settled and new migrants is manifest. Messina (2011) has provided a comparative European perspective offering a distinction

between 'generic groups' that are exclusively obsessed by animus towards settled and new migrants; 'neo-fascist groups' who are inspired by an over-arching ideology, embracing the core tenets of pre-Second World War fascism; the 'opportunistic right' who are driven by a calculated desire to win votes rather than an obsessive race-centred ideology; the 'new radical right' who aspire to govern and have more formal membership and regular electoral activity and the 'ethno national right' who are primarily single issue parties, placing ethno-nationalism centre stage, with anti-migrant appeals in second place. The BNP are placed in the Neo-Fascist camp.

What they all share, however, is hostility towards settled and new migrants, which has inspired 'fascism's adaptation to the transformed historical conditions' and the growth of 'neo-populism', which Nick Griffin took up, possibly inspired by France's *Front National* (Griffin, 2011). This exploits concerns about the threat to the perceived loss of national identity and cultural markers and begins to explain the more general success of the Far Right. Indeed, the Far Right appear to understand the impact of globalisation on fears about identity and to exploit this in a way that centrist politicians have not yet got to grips with. Marine Le Pen, the new *Front National* leader, sums this up as 'now the real divide is between nationalism and globalisation', and complains that 'France's sovereignty has been "sucked dry by the EU", with "cultural identity under attack through massive immigration"' (Le Pen, 2011, March 22).

In common with all other Far Right parties Le Pen calls for 'immigration to be stopped and cultural identities to be preserved', as though it is possible to halt any, or even one, aspect of the process of globalisation that has been gathering pace for many decades. But her kind of political leadership also depends upon appealing to one section of the population over another and building a power base to represent their 'difference'. Le Pen unfortunately seems only too well aware of the 'paradox of diversity' whereby people see and hear diversity in every part of their daily lives and in the media and have therefore grown accustomed to it, yet, at the same time, apparently feel threatened by it and retreat or 'hunker down' into their own tribal group.

On the Left, a few people like Gary Younge (2010) are also recognising this trend and asking some of the more profound questions about the impact of diversity on identity, as in his book, *Who Are We?* He points out that when it comes to identity, the global and the parochial have a symbiotic relationship— the smaller the world becomes and the less control we have over it, the more likely we are to retreat into the local spheres where we might have influence.

Community cohesion has been a good framework around which to help people to understand the impact of globalisation on their local community and to build better community relations. In many local authority areas, the number of people reporting that they 'get on well with people from other

backgrounds' has increased over the last few years to around 80%, despite the gains of the Far Right. The Far Right have also lost out in a number of areas where they traditionally had support, for example in Oldham where riots occurred in 2001. The cohesion programmes, widely adopted in the UK, may also partly explain why the Far Right has made less headway than in other European countries.

Cohesion programmes have attempted to build respect for people and communities that are 'different' and crucially begin to change the collective mindset so that people are prepared to embrace diversity as positive, rather than see it as a threat. Community cohesion has probably been most associated with 'cross-cultural interaction' which was one of the four key principles of the formal definition[1] adopted in 2002 (LGA *et al.*, 2002), and this referred specifically to the need for interaction programmes in schools, workplaces and neighbourhoods.

Whilst some doubts were expressed about the impact of interaction programmes at the time, the academic support for programmes based upon 'contact theory'[2] has become more and more evident, with real and measured changes in attitudes and behaviour. Other studies, notably by Paul Thomas (2011), have now produced clear evidence of the success of cohesion programmes.

A recent review of the apparent contradiction between threat and contact theories has been set in the context of the membership of the BNP (Biggs, 2011). This comes to the very clear conclusion that:

> The BNP thrives where the non white (particularly South Asian or Muslim) population is large, but only if this population is also highly segregated. Segregation means that white British people are likely less to have contact with non whites beyond the immediate neighbourhood. It also creates a greater sense of cultural or even political threat. Whatever the precise mechanism, segregation aids the BNP.

This means that contact and interaction in local communities at an individual level have to be reinforced by wider measures and experiences—and in the longer term by helping these to occur naturally by tackling segregation at least to the extent that it has created 'parallel lives', with little or no contact between members of different communities[3]. It also means that more positive messages

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[1]The formal definition included the tackling of inequalities, pro-active support for diversity and building a common sense of belonging, as well as interaction programmes.

[2]For a discussion of contact theory in the context of community cohesion see Cantle (2008).

[3]The concept of 'parallel lives' was set out in the Report of the Independent Community Cohesion Review Team (the Cantle Report), Home Office 2001.

need to be communicated through other channels, outside the immediate local context, especially through schools, neighbourhood settings and workplaces.

People need to feel an 'inclusive' sense of belonging, whether it be based upon a small town, a city or a local neighbourhood—where everyone can identify with and recognise the shared interests and benefits that everyone brings to 'their' communities. Many local authorities up and down the country have developed this, for example by 'branding' their town or city as a cohesive 'one community' in some way and by indicating the value they place on diversity at every opportunity. This branding has taken various shapes and forms, from high-profile, city-wide campaigns promoting the diverse nature of their communities, to more subtle and localised approaches. This has often been linked with a 'counter narrative' against Far Right extremist arguments by producing 'myth-busting' materials and articles, and demonstrating the benefits that have resulted from a more open and diverse society.

iCoCo has developed an action programme (iCoCo, 2011) for helping communities to respond to the Far Right and to avoid tensions building up. These measures need to be set into a strategic approach which deals with the more fundamental issues of identity and recognises the need to build social capital by investing in civil society organisations which can become trusted local advocates in a sustainable and longer term process; and by tackling real grievances. Similarly, at a national level the Far Right must be challenged in a more open way and one which helps to build more cultural confidence and a better understanding of the wider issues of globalisation. But people also need the time and shared spaces to come to terms with change.

In preparing a strategic response, however, there is a danger that we begin to pathologise BNP supporters. Goodwin (2011b) is right to suggest that, at present, BNP are:

> Like their continental neighbours, these 'angry white men' share a distinct social profile: they are drawn from the working classes, especially the skilled working classes who have more to lose from rising diversity; they are poorly educated, after leaving school with no formal qualifications; they gather their information from xenophobic tabloid papers, such as The Sun, Daily Express or Daily Mail; and reflecting their economic insecurity, they are deeply pessimistic about their financial prospects.

But their support and appeal is potentially much wider. A poll conducted by the research company YouGov prior to the elections in May 2009 found that 87% of respondents felt that the BNP was the only party willing to engage with the controversial subject of immigration. They believed that, because traditional parties like Labour and Conservative had refused to engage with them on this

key topic, they were forced to switch allegiance. Further, whilst 77% of BNP supporters believe that the people who suffer the most discrimination in modern Britain are 'white people' as many as 40% of all voters shared this view. As Peter Kellner of YouGov explained

> BNP voters occupy one end of a broad social [and political] spectrum . . . in some ways their views are like those of many other voters, only more intense, rather than having utterly different views. Their support is the visible bit of a much larger iceberg of public alienation. Kellner (2009)

Support for the BNP's stance on immigration is not confined to a fringe group of radicals. Instead it can be seen as the extreme outpourings of a much wider concern amongst the British public on the issue—and a feeling of the loss of cultural certainties and the challenge to identity that the process of globalisation appears to create.

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